



As the college football regular season nears the end, motivation is a big factor in handicapping games. Motivation is generally built into the line, but even still, it's hard to put a value on how much a team's mindset and effort level are worth. Just like late season NFL when the chase is on for the division title or the wild card, college teams are scrambling to reach the six-win plateau to guarantee bowl eligibility.

Keep in mind that bowl eligibility comes with a stipulation. They must be six wins over Division-1 FBS opponents. Wins over Division 1-AA (FCS) opponents do not count. Teams that end the season with six wins, including one over a FCS opponent, are required to submit a waiver exemption and leave it in the hands of a committee. Obviously, for coaches, boosters, trustees, and the school, getting to a bowl game is critically important. It gives the school needed exposure for recruits and transfers. Not to mention, for coaches, it is one of the most important ways to safeguard your employment.

Finding teams who are playing desperate is never a bad way to go. They are playing with extra pressure, which can be difficult for kids who are 18-23 years old, but they are also playing with extra focus, something that kids in that age group can sometimes lack. Bowl eligibility isn't the only thing at stake. Some teams are fighting for berths in the conference championship game, bowl placement, or style points for the voters in the human polls that comprise part of the BCS formula.

As a result, there are several spots this week where these playoff scenarios will come into play. Isolating these spots can be really helpful in cutting down the card. Last week's column discussed how the oddsmakers have a good feel for all of these teams now and know what to expect. The numbers are tighter and there are fewer edges. Being able to narrow your focus should help. Also, with college basketball in the fray this weekend, oddsmakers are going to be spread thin with a lot of games to line. More on college hoops later.

Will a team like USC quit on the season now that they have three losses, will play a bowl game that they won't be very excited to play in, and just roll over and die? One would think so. But, take a closer look. If USC beats UCLA on the road on November 18, they could very easily get another crack at Oregon in the Pac-12 championship game. With USC's game against Arizona State, there are a lot of angles to look at. That may be a game to avoid.

On the other side, how about LSU? LSU spent all that they had in losing to Alabama on the late touchdown in that emotional clash last week. Their preseason goals of winning the national championship are long gone. With that loss, they cannot win the SEC or the SEC West Division. How do they get off the mat to play Mississippi State, a team coming off back-to-back blowout losses? Mississippi State would like to prove something to somebody, having been crushed by Alabama and Texas A&M, respectively. With Mississippi State having to fight all the other SEC schools for recruits, they'd love a good showing in a night game in Baton Rouge. They're a 14.5-point underdog. They don't even have to win the game to cover, and LSU should be a sluggish, unenthusiastic bunch.

The Utah Utes are starting to put it together. They have scored 49 points in consecutive weeks against California and Washington State. Why? Because they have to win out to be assured a spot in a bowl game. The Utes are 4-5, with one win being over Northern Colorado of the FCS. With a win over BYU and a game they should have won against Oregon State, they probably would be granted an exemption and be sent to a bowl game. But, the players and the coaches don't want to take that chance.

With confidence in tow, the Utes head to the northwest to take on the Washington Huskies, a team that has a great shot at bowl eligibility with two of the worst teams in the country left to play after this week. With wins over Stanford and Oregon State, Washington will definitely be granted the six-win exemption. This week's game doesn't mean as much to the Huskies as it does to Utah. As a result, Utah opened an underdog, but the betting market has bet them into a favorite.

Spots like these are important later in the college football season because they can be games that don't require a whole lot of research, analysis, and thought. Backing a team that you know will play hard against one that could give a partial effort is never a bad play.

College basketball starts this weekend and the feelings are mixed within the betting community about how to attack the early season. Some people consider early season CBB to have some of the softest lines of the year. Others are concerned because of college basketball's high turnover rate and the sheer number of teams and players that bettors have to keep up with.

One of the hardest parts about early season CBB is ascertaining if a team can cover a huge number. Obviously, in basketball, points are scored no more than three at a time. That makes covering 20 and 30-point spreads more difficult than in football. It's a difference of 8-15 possessions rather than 3-4 possessions in football. In those games, things like tempo and efficiency are real keys. One great resource, though a somewhat pricey one, is [www.kenpom.com](http://www.kenpom.com). Ken Pomeroy keeps a lot of great statistics and does some fantastic analysis.

Unfortunately, another thing to keep up with regarding CBB is who teams lost and who is coming in. Some of the freshmen making their collegiate debuts are absolute freaks. See guys like Anthony Davis as an example. Those players tend to make an immediate impact. Other teams are losing three and four-year starters. Early on, when teams are playing their major out-of-conference games to help their strength of schedule for March Madness, it can be very hard to gauge how good a team is.

Since they're local, we'll take Ohio State as an example. The Buckeyes lost William Buford and Jared Sullinger. Sullinger certainly made an impact, while Buford had his fair share of impressive games. Deshaun Thomas remains and he's a player of the year candidate. Aaron Craft still runs the point and is a top five defender in the country. Lenzelle Smith Jr. should replace most of Buford's offensive output. That still leaves the hole where Sullinger was. Amir Williams and Evan Ravenel played sparingly last year. Coach Thad Matta isn't big on substitutions or rotations. We have next to no idea how those guys will fill the void. Situations like that are commonplace in college hoops and a lot of research is required to keep up with everything.

My suggestion regarding college basketball is to stick to what you follow closely. Don't step out and play the Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference if you don't even know who Siena and Iona are. Don't play the Missouri Valley if you live in Ohio. If you follow the Big Ten, bet the Big Ten. If you are familiar with the MAC, bet the MAC. Too many people try to do too much with college hoops, trying to bet the Big East powerhouses when they don't even know what they lost. A lot of these programs do reload year after year, but continuity takes times. Teams have to gel. You can get discouraged very early on betting CBB. Keep yourself in perspective.

Good luck and pick winners.