

## College Football: Ranking The Conferences

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Ranking the eleven major college football conferences is, to say the least, an inexact science. There is no way of really controlling the comparison other than with small-sample-size, individual games between the leagues and bowl games which take place a month after the regular season, when the health and mindset of a team can be drastically different than during the autumn. With those caveats, Jesse Lamovsky takes a stab at a NCAAF conference power rankings of sort as we get set for college football season to get here.



Ranking the eleven FBS conferences is, to say the least, an inexact science. There is no way of really controlling the comparison other than with small-sample-size, individual games between the leagues and bowl games which take place a month after the regular season, when the health and mindset of a team can be drastically different than during the autumn. There's only so much we can take from either. Wake Forest beat Ole Miss, Duke beat Vanderbilt, and Georgia Tech beat Georgia during the 2008 regular season; did those results make the ACC better than the SEC? Did the Mountain West's regular-season domination of the Pac-10 mean anything when comparing the two conferences? In 1986, Mid-American Conference champion O.G. Miami defeated Southeastern Champion LSU in Baton Rouge. Did that make the MAC better than the SEC that year?

What we're left with is perception- and in no other sport is perception as important or as fluid as college football, where the pundits hold sway *and* fall headlong in and headlong out of love from month to month and week to week. Take last season. In September all the talk was about how the Big 12 was quite possibly the

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equal of the SEC and that the Pac-10, in the wake of some unsightly out-of-conference pratfalls, was downright feeble outside of USC. By the end of the bowl season, however, the Big 12 was overrated and bereft of defense, and the Pac-10, in the wake of a postseason clean sweep, wasn't so terrible after all.

Ranking the conferences in high summer is especially foolhardy. All there is to go on in that case is last year's results and last year's reputations, and a lot can change from year to year in college football, what with graduations, transfers, flunk-outs, injuries and coaching changes. At this time last year, Auburn, Tennessee, and Illinois were all ranked in the [AP Top 25](#), while Ole Miss and Iowa didn't even get a solitary vote in the poll. You saw how well that worked out. September's sad-sack can become January's juggernaut and vice-versa. It happens every year. Remember how good Clemson was supposed to be going into last season? Or Ohio State, for that matter?

So, in short, take these rankings with a Lot's wife-sized grain of salt. And the same goes for [my other predictions](#).

**1.) Southeastern Conference:** I'm a little reluctant to sing *too* many hosannas for the SEC, because the league really wasn't all that good last season. Other than Florida, Georgia, and Ole Miss, God's Conference was pretty pedestrian, riddled with underachieving teams, bad offenses and quarterbacks that set the game back to the Single Wing era. When ninety-pound weakling Vanderbilt wins four conference games, you know it's a down year. But the defenses are always second-to-none, the conference generally cleans up at bowl season, and the last three BCS crystal footballs have been won by SEC members. The league has dominated the best of the Big Ten and Big 12 in crunch time, although we're still waiting for that titanic death-match with USC.

**2.) Big 12 Conference:** Yeah, I know; they don't play any defense in the Big 12, and the conference's overall performance in the postseason last year wasn't anything to write home about either. Oklahoma and Texas Tech were both beaten by SEC opponents, Oklahoma State was knocked off by Oregon, and Texas and

Missouri were fortunate to escape against lower-ranked teams from the supposedly inferior Big Ten. Still, the Big 12 beats both the Pac-10 and Big Ten for overall depth, although as last bowl season again proved, the conference isn't on par with the SEC. This league gets the runner-up spot almost by default.

**3.) Pacific Ten Conference:** It's been derided as the "Pac-One"; thanks to Southern California's overarching dominance this decade, but with the notable exception of the twin landfills of Washington and Washington State, the rest of the Pac-10 actually isn't too shabby at all. Oregon and Cal have been perennial top-25 teams over the last few years, Oregon State is generally tough behind the leadership of Mike Riley- perhaps the most underrated coach in college football- and Arizona and Stanford seem to be on their way back to respectability. If underachievers UCLA and Arizona State, not to mention former heavyweight Washington, get it turned around, this will be as good a league as there is in America.

**4.) Big Ten Conference:** It's become trendy to bash the Big Ten, and for good reason. The conference hasn't won a BCS game since the end of the 2005 season, hasn't won a Rose Bowl since the end of the 1999 season, went 1-6 in bowls last season, and several of its usual stalwarts- most notably Michigan, Wisconsin, and Purdue- have fallen on hard times. At this point it isn't even a dead certainty that the Big Ten as a whole is better than the ACC, although Ohio State is superior to anyone the latter conference has to offer. What this league really needs is a signature out-of-conference win that stands the test of time- something it hasn't had since the Buckeyes knocked off Miami in the 2003 Fiesta Bowl.

**5.) Atlantic Coast Conference:** There aren't any outstanding teams in the ACC, and haven't been since Florida State fell out of the elite early this decade, but when it comes to depth, not many conferences can match this one. There are a lot of good, solid football teams in the ACC, and other than Duke, there aren't any perennial chumps. Parity is often a euphemism for mediocrity- and to a certain extent it is in the case of the ACC- but there's something to be said for a conference in which 75 percent of the members annually have a shot at winning the championship.

**6.) Mountain West Conference:** The bottom of the MWC- Wyoming and San Diego State in particular- is nowhere near BCS-caliber, but it's the top three of Utah, Texas Christian and Brigham Young that noses this conference past the Big East. Every one of the Mountain West's Big Three would have won the Big East in 2008, and Utah in particular really made the league look good by dominating Alabama in the Sugar Bowl. (Yes, the Tide was flat and missing Andre Smith, but beating an SEC power in its own backyard is still an accomplishment of note.)

Mountain West partisans believe their league

[deserves an automatic BCS bid](#)

, and I'm inclined to agree with them; at the very least, the sixth auto-bid should rotate between the MWC and Big East, depending on which league champion is ranked higher.

**7.) Big East Conference:** With Louisville in a flat spin and West Virginia no longer a national power, the Big East's overall Q-rating has taken a hit. None of the league's eight schools seem capable of contending for a National Championship at this point. What the Big East really needs is for ancient power Syracuse to return from the dead and for South Florida to take advantage of all that local talent and quit nose-diving in November. USF in particular has to pick it up; with Miami and Florida State struggling, there isn't a better time for the Bulls to establish themselves as the *nouveau* powerhouse in the Sunshine State. Of course, the best way to beef up the Big East would be to have Penn State hop over from the Big Ten, but alas, that isn't happening.

**8.) Conference USA:** Sort of a junior version of the Big 12, this league features a sharp imbalance between its two divisions, explosive offenses, and big-time quarterbacks. Unlike the Big 12, however, C-USA has no unified identity. East Carolina and Southern Miss are stolid, meat-and-potatoes programs, while Tulsa, Houston, Rice, SMU and UTEP fill the skies with footballs and put up basketball-like scores on a weekly basis. It's hard to say where C-USA fits in the landscape; it's definitely better than the MAC and Sun Belt, far deeper than the WAC, but a cut below the big boys at the top. It's the most stylistically and geographically diverse conference in major-college football and as such, it's tough to characterize.

**9.) Western Athletic Conference:** Boise State has been outstanding, Fresno State fearless, Nevada innovative with its Pistol attack, and Hawaii has had its moments, but the rest of the conference smells like a wet dog. Utah State hasn't had a winning season since 1996, New Mexico State is perennially one of the worst programs in the FBS, San Jose State and Louisiana Tech has been mediocre at best, and the less said about Idaho, the better. Outside of Boise, Fresno, Honolulu and Reno, the WAC is little more than a slightly upscale version of the Big Sky Conference. If Boise ever decamps for the Mountain West-  
[as has been rumored](#)

- this league is  
*really*  
in trouble.

**10.) Sun Belt Conference:** Thank God for Troy. The Trojans have carried the Sun Belt banner proudly, especially in non-conference tilts against the big boys, where in recent years they have beaten Oklahoma State and Missouri, hung with Florida State and Ohio State, and led LSU 31-3 in Baton Rouge before falling apart in the last quarter-and-a-half. Troy's prowess puts the Sun Belt ahead of the MAC, as does Florida Atlantic, which whipped Central Michigan in last year's Motor City Bowl. That having been said, last-place North Texas might have been the worst team in America last year.

**11.) Mid-American Conference:** In the first half of the decade, the MAC, powered by flagship Marshall and a host of great quarterbacks, was well ahead of the Sun Belt and probably on par with the WAC and Conference USA. But the league hasn't recovered from Marshall's defection to C-USA, nor can it stop its top-flight coaches- Urban Meyer, the late Terry Hoepfner, and now Brady Hoke- from bolting at the first opportunity. Symbolizing the downfall of the MAC is its recent performances in the annual GMAC Bowl hook-up with a Conference USA opponent. Up through the 2005 season the MAC had prevailed in five straight GMAC Bowls, but it has lost the last three by an average score of 45-9. Let's face it; when *Temple* can join up and become competitive overnight, your league is weak.