

## Let's Go Bowling, Part I

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Once again its bowl season, the time of year in which college football entertains us with a variety of games, some eagerly anticipated... others not so much. 34 bowl games are on the slate this December and January, starting December 19th in Albuquerque and climaxing in Pasadena on January 7th with the BCS Championship Game. Here for your perusal are Jesse's capsules and predictions for every bowl game to be played before the ball drops on midnight of December 31st.



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with the BCS Championship Game. From the finest teams in the land to the epitomes of mediocrity and everything in between- almost all will be represented in the next three weeks.

*(Insert obligatory complaining about the lack of a playoff here.)*

Here for your perusal are my capsules and predictions for every bowl game to be played before the ball drops on midnight of December 31<sup>st</sup>. I'll be back next time with my capsules and predictions on the post-New Year's bowls, including Ohio State's Rose Bowl showdown with Oregon and the BCS Championship Game between Alabama and Texas. In the

meantime, be happy, be festive, and if you're celebrating the holidays with Patron... be careful. That stuff does strange things to a man.

## **Saturday, December 19**

*New Mexico Bowl: Fresno State (8-4) vs. Wyoming (6-6), 4:30 PM, ESPN*

Fresno's Ryan Matthews was second in the nation in rushing yards with 1,664 and should have his way with a Wyoming defense that was 88<sup>th</sup> in the nation against the run. Fresno fared well against a tough schedule, playing competitively in losses to Boise State, Cincinnati and Wisconsin, while the Cowboys were outscored by more than ten points per game. It would be a surprise if this game were close.

**Prediction: Fresno State 34, Wyoming 10**

*St. Petersburg Bowl: Rutgers (8-4) vs. Central Florida (8-4), 8:00 PM, ESPN*

Tropicana Field will be Knights Inn for this battle between the Scarlet Knights of Rutgers and the Knights of UCF. Rutgers took advantage of a woeful schedule to win eight games, while UCF played well down the stretch, winning five of its last six including an upset of Houston. Playing near its Orlando campus, Central Florida should have the crowd, but they'll be dealing with a tough Rutgers defense that ranks 19<sup>th</sup> nationally in yards allowed. Rutgers is 3-1 in the postseason under Greg Schiano, while George O'Leary's team seeks its first bowl victory in program history.

**Prediction: Rutgers 27, Central Florida 17**

**Sunday, December 20**

*New Orleans Bowl: Middle Tennessee State (9-3)  
vs. Southern Miss (7-5), 8:30 PM, ESPN*

Led by dual-threat quarterback Dwight Dasher MTSU enjoyed its best season since moving up to Division I-A in 1999. But they'll have their hands full with a Southern Miss team playing just two hours from its campus in Hattiesburg. The Eagles took wing after Martevious Young took over at quarterback: the junior has thrown 13 touchdown passes and only one interception since assuming the starting job five weeks into the season. Both teams are opportunistic, with identical +11 turnover margins; still, the superior talent and defense of Southern Miss should prevail.

**Prediction: Southern Miss 35, Middle Tennessee State 23**

**Tuesday, December 22**

*Las Vegas Bowl: BYU (10-2) vs. Oregon State (8-4), 8:00 PM, ESPN*

The first bowl between ranked opponents features a pair of teams wondering what might have been. Oregon State came within an eyelash of making its first Rose Bowl appearance since 1964, while BYU opened the season with an upset of Oklahoma and had designs on the BCS before one-sided losses to Florida State and TCU. The Beaver offense is Rodgers-centric: brothers Jacquizz and James accounted for 75 percent of their team's rushing attempts and 54 percent of their team's receptions. BYU looked horrible defensively against good opponents and might be getting a little tired of this game; with their fifth consecutive Vegas Bowl appearance, they've become as much of a Sin City staple as the Blue Man Group.

**Prediction: Oregon State 42, BYU 28**

**Wednesday, December 23**

## *Poinsettia Bowl: Utah (9-3) vs. California (8-4), 8:00 PM, ESPN*

The Pac-10/Mountain West challenge resumes in San Diego, as a Utah team that reloaded strongly from its perfect season of 2008 tangles with a Cal team that has to be considered a major disappointment after some early Rose Bowl buzz. The brilliant Jahvid Best should be back on the field for this game, but Cal's major problem is defense, especially against the pass, where the Bears rank 108<sup>th</sup> nationally. The teams have one common opponent, Oregon: the Utes lost to the Ducks 31-24, while the Bears were manhandled 42-3 the following week in Eugene.

**Prediction: Utah 30, California 24**

**Thursday, December 24**

## *Hawaii Bowl: Nevada (8-4) vs. Southern Methodist (7-5), 8:00 PM, ESPN*

Hopefully June Jones saved some of those hibiscus-patterned shirts from his days at Hawaii for his return to the islands. What he'll really need is a run defense. Nevada was the nation's top rushing team this season and set an NCAA record with three 1,000-yard ball carriers. This is a bad match-up for SMU, which finished tied with Wyoming at 88<sup>th</sup> nationally against the run. The Mustangs have been a nice story, but they did lose to Washington State, which should tell you something about the overall strength of this team.

**Prediction: Nevada 52, SMU 24**

## **Saturday, December 26**

*Little Caesar's Pizza Bowl: Ohio (9-4) vs. Marshall (6-6), 1:00 PM, ESPN*

The organizers of the game wanted Notre Dame, but they'll settle for this match-up between green-clad former Mid-American Conference rivals. Ohio rolled to the MAC East title behind quarterback Theo Scott (2,258 yards, 19 touchdowns) and a defense that forced a nation's best 36 turnovers while Marshall slumped late, losing three of its last four and losing head coach Mark Snyder, who resigned after a loss to UTEP in the finale. The Herd won only five games against FBS opponents and

will be hard-pressed to win a sixth against a Bobcats team hungry for it's first-ever bowl victory.

**Prediction: Ohio 31, Marshall 17**

*Meineke Car Care Bowl: Pittsburgh (9-3) vs. North Carolina (8-4), 4:30 PM, ESPN*

The Panthers were all set to go to the Sugar Bowl before blowing a 31-10 lead in the season finale against Cincinnati. Now they'll head to Charlotte to take on North Carolina in a virtual home game for the Tarheels. Both teams are rock-solid defensively, ranking in the top 26 nationally. UNC's

superb run defense will be tested by Pitt's frosh sensation Deon Lewis, who pounded out 1,640 yards and 16 touchdowns. But the real difference is at quarterback; Pitt senior Bill Stull completed 64.6 percent of his passes with 21 scores, while Carolina junior T.J. Yates threw more picks (14) than touchdowns (12.) The opposing coaches are well-acquainted: Dave Wannstadt and Butch Davis were assistants on Jimmy Johnson's staff with the dynastic early '90s Dallas Cowboys.

**Prediction: Pittsburgh 24, North Carolina 14**

*Emerald Bowl: USC (8-4) vs. Boston*

## *College (8-4), 8:00 PM, ESPN*

The Trojans were one of the season's biggest underachievers, losing four games, the most for the program since 2001. But if Pete Carroll can get his team motivated for this minor bowl they'll roll past the Eagles, over whom they enjoy a massive edge in talent. With the dubious exception of Central Michigan, BC didn't beat anyone with a pulse and will bring a hearty contingent of about a half-dozen fans to Pac Bell Park for the showdown with SC.

**Prediction: USC 35, Boston College 3**

## Sunday, December 27

*Music City Bowl: Clemson (8-5) vs.  
Kentucky (7-5), 8:30 PM, ESPN*

You can spell "Music City" without "UK," but you shouldn't. The Wildcats are in Nashville for the third time in four years and defeated Clemson in this game in 2006. It'll be a battle of playmakers: Kentucky's Randall "Don't Call Me Tex" Cobb, who compiled 1,619 all-purpose yards and 15 touchdowns, against Clemson's C.J. Spiller, who racked up 2,512 all-purpose yards with 20 touchdowns. Clemson is a better team, but the Tigers have lost three straight bowl

games and after coming oh-so-close to the Orange Bowl may have trouble getting up to play in chilly Nashville.

**Prediction: Kentucky 24, Clemson 21**

**Monday, December 28**

*Independence Bowl: Georgia (7-5) vs. Texas A&M (6-6), 5:00 PM, ESPN2*

Thanks to its worst season since 1996 the Bulldogs land in Shreveport against the Aggies, who are 107<sup>th</sup> in the nation in total

defense and twice gave up more than 60 points this season. Georgia's defense somehow ranks 30<sup>th</sup> nationally despite looking downright awful at times this season. A&M quarterback Jerrod Johnson had a big year, throwing for 3,217 yards and 28 touchdowns, but he'll have a tough time compensating for his team's weakness on the other side of the ball.

**Prediction: Georgia 45, Texas A&M 30**

**Tuesday, December 29**

*EagleBank Bowl: Temple (9-3) vs. UCLA*

*(6-6), 4:30 PM, ESPN*

The once-hapless Owls had their best season since 1979, which also happens to be the last year they played in a bowl game. UCLA had an up-and-down season, losing five straight at one point before rallying against a soft late schedule to secure bowl eligibility. Expect two things from this game: at least one shot of Bill Cosby in the Temple rooting section, and a victory for the Bruins, who should contain freshman sensation Bernard Pierce (1,308 rushing yards, 15 touchdowns) and the weak Owl passing attack. It's been a great ride for Al Golden's team, but it ends in Washington D.C.

## **Prediction: UCLA 26, Temple 7**

*Champs Sports Bowl: Miami (9-3) vs. Wisconsin (9-3), 8:00 PM, ESPN*

It'll be a classic match-up between the speed of Jacory Harris and Miami and the power of John Clay and Wisconsin. Both teams bounced back strongly from 7-6 finishes in 2008, with Miami in particular performing well against a rugged early schedule. The Badgers were embarrassed by Florida State in this game last year and sorely need a win to repair their own reputation as well as that of their conference. The young

Hurricanes need a win to secure their first ten-win season since 2003 as well as to set up a BCS run in 2010.

**Prediction: Miami 30, Wisconsin 17**

**Wednesday, December 30**

*Humanitarian Bowl: Idaho (7-5) vs.  
Bowling Green (7-5), 4:30 PM, ESPN*

Playing in-state in Boise, Rob Akey's

Vandals are led by the three-headed monster of quarterback Nathan Enderle (2,666 yards, 18 touchdowns), tailback DeMaundray Woolridge (16 touchdowns) and receiver Max Komar (62 catches, 1,036 yards, ten touchdowns.) BGSU counters with quarterback Tyler Sheehan (3,664 yards, 23 touchdowns) and the nation's most prolific receiver, Freddie Barnes (138 catches, 1,551 yards, 16 scores.) Expect a shootout; the Falcons and Vandals rank 82<sup>nd</sup> and 105<sup>th</sup> in total defense, respectively. Idaho's relative home-field advantage rates the edge.

**Prediction: Idaho 45, Bowling**

## Green 35

### Thursday, December 31

*Armed Forces Bowl: Houston (10-3)  
vs. Air Force (7-5), 12:00 PM, ESPN*

The Cougars and Falcons meet in a re-match of last year's Armed Forces Bowl, a 34-28 Houston victory. It's a contrast in styles- Houston's passing attack, led by the brilliant Case Keenum, versus Air Force's rushing

attack, with ranks fourth nationally. The Falcons have the nation's top-ranked pass defense, but they haven't dealt with the likes of Keenum, who led the nation in both passing yards (5,410) and touchdowns (43.) Houston, meanwhile, was 112<sup>th</sup> against the run. The stats seem to favor the Academy, the only Mountain West team to give TCU a game this season, but Keenum, snubbed by the Heisman voters, will "rest his Case" in this one.

**Prediction: Houston 37, Air Force**

# 31

*Sun Bowl: Stanford (8-4) vs.  
Oklahoma (7-5), 2:00 PM, CBS*

Two teams in vastly different frames of mind meet in El Paso on New Year's Eve; Stanford sees the game as a reward for its best season since 2001, while Oklahoma sees it as a consolation for its worst season since 1999. The headliner is Cardinal tailback

Toby Gerhart, who led the nation with 1,736 yards and 26 touchdowns. Oklahoma was 7<sup>th</sup> in the nation in run defense; it was an injury-riddled offense that served as the culprit for its disappointing season. Stanford hasn't played a defense like this, and the Cardinal are at a further disadvantage with Andrew Luck likely on the shelf.

**Prediction: Oklahoma 23,  
Stanford 17**

## *Texas Bowl: Navy (8-4) vs. Missouri (8-4), 3:30 PM, ESPN*

Like its up-state neighbor the Armed Forces Bowl, the Texas Bowl features a sharp clash of styles: Missouri's air attack, ranked 13<sup>th</sup> in the nation in passing, versus Navy's option attack, ranked third in the nation in rushing. The Tigers are pretty stout against the run, giving up 2.92 yards per carry, and they are vastly superior athletically to

the Midshipmen. The last meeting between the teams, the 1961 Orange Bowl, ended in a Missouri victory; this game should have the same result.

**Prediction: Missouri 31, Navy 14**

*Insight Bowl: Minnesota (6-6) vs. Iowa State (6-6), 6:00 PM, NFL Network*

Don't you just love those bowl match-ups between .500 teams? They do in the Upper Midwest. Ames and Minneapolis are only about 200 miles apart along I-35, but the Cyclones and Gophers have only met three times in the last 85 years. Neither comes into this game on a high note: Iowa State has lost three of its last four, while Minnesota went 3-5 after a 3-1 start. Neither team ranks in the top 60 in either total offense or total defense.

It's a true pick 'em in this battle of blah.

**Prediction: Minnesota 27,  
Iowa State 23**

*Chick-fil-A Bowl: Virginia Tech  
(9-3) vs. Tennessee (7-5), 7:30  
PM, ESPN*

What's that sulfurous odor emanating from Atlanta this New Year's Eve? Why, it's Lane Kiffin's Tennessee Volunteers- shady, scandal-ridden, yet bowl-bound after going 7-5 and *almost* beating Alabama in Tuscaloosa. Lil' Lane will match wits with both the NCAA investigators and Frank Beamer, who's Hokies failed to win the ACC Coastal for the first time since 2006. Expect a low-scoring game: Virginia

Tech and Tennessee finished  
14<sup>th</sup>  
and 16<sup>th</sup>

in the nation, respectively, in total defense. Like Minnesota and Iowa State, these two schools are relative neighbors, yet rarely play, having met only once since 1937.

**Prediction: Virginia Tech  
20, Tennessee 13**