

2011-12 Bowl Preview, New Year's Weekend

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}

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The final two days of the year 2011 are packed with nine bowl games, several of which don't exactly jump off the page as high-quality affairs. Of the eighteen teams participating, eight carry .500-or-worse records into the matchups; UCLA has a losing record at 6-7. Three of the games are between teams without winning records.

So it looks pretty lackluster on the surface. But there are some intriguing matchups among the detritus. The Pinstripe Bowl between Rutgers and Iowa State, the Insight Bowl between Oklahoma and Iowa and the Sun Bowl between Georgia Tech and Utah might just be compelling. And if nothing else the weekend bowl schedule presents an opportunity to do some advance scouting on guys who will be available for the Browns at Draft time, like Rutgers receiver Mohamed Sanu and Illinois defensive end Whitney Mercilus.

On the whole, however, most of these games are best-served as background noise as New Year's celebrations commence. And on that note- be safe, be happy and be festive as we move into 2012. Thanks for reading, and Happy New Year.

Friday, December 30

Armed Forces Bowl (Dallas, TX, 12:00 PM): Brigham Young (9-3) vs. Tulsa (8-4)

On paper, BYU's foray into independence seems to be a success- the Cougars improved to 9-3 and are bowling for the seventh straight season under Bronco Mendenhall. But it's also been bitter at times with the missed opportunity in the opener at Texas, the 54-10 embarrassment against Utah and the fall from grace of the once-touted and [now-transferred Jake Heaps](#) . For Tulsa it was a more typical year as the Golden Hurricane won eight-plus games for the seventh time since 2003 under first-year head coach Bill Blankenship. Other than the debacle against the Utes BYU played solid defense, finishing 19

th

in the nation in total yards allowed.

Wack Predict-O: Brigham Young 35, Tulsa 24

Pinstripe Bowl (Bronx, NY, 3:20 PM): Rutgers (8-4) vs. Iowa State (6-6)

Greg Schiano's Scarlet Knights enjoyed a bounce-back season behind a sack-happy defense and the wizardry of receiver Mohamed Sanu, who racked up 109 receptions for 1,144 yards. Paul Rhoads's Cyclones again maximized their ability, beating archrival Iowa and ruining Oklahoma State's BCS title chances in November. Playing in New York Rutgers will have the home-field advantage, and Schiano knows how to get his team ready for the postseason: the Knights own a 4-1 bowl record during his tenure. This should actually be one of the better games of the bowl season- both teams are well-coached and have no reason not to play hard, motivated football.

Wack Predict-O: Iowa State 23, Rutgers 21

Music City Bowl (Nashville, TN, 6:40 PM): Wake Forest (6-6) vs. Mississippi State (6-6)

The Music City offers up its usual lackluster ACC-God's Conference affair as a pair of .500 teams square off in Nashville. Mississippi State came in to the season ranked but could not get untracked, never winning more than two in a row amid rumors that Dan Mullen was [actively seeking greener pastures](#)

. Wake started out 5-2 but dropped four of its last five, including a 41-7 blistering by Vanderbilt

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in the regular-season finale- a result that, regardless of the different-season aspect, doesn't bode well for the Deacons in this game.

Wack Predict-O: Mississippi State 31, Wake Forest 10

Insight Bowl (Tempe, AZ, 10:00 PM): Oklahoma (9-3) vs. Iowa (7-5)

On paper this looks like a mismatch: an Oklahoma team that was top-ranked deep into the season against an Iowa team that lost to Iowa State and Minnesota, among others. Maybe it will be. Then again, the Hawkeyes have an excellent upperclassman at quarterback in James Vandenberg, talented weapons in tailback Marcus Coker and split end Marvin McNutt, and a defense marbled with experience at all three levels. Iowa is also 6-3 in bowl games under Kirk Ferentz. Don't be surprised if the Hawkeyes give the Sooners everything they can handle out in the desert.

Wack Predict-O: Oklahoma 28, Iowa 24

Saturday, December 31

Meineke Car Care Bowl of Texas (Houston, TX, 12:00 PM): Texas A&M (6-6) vs. Northwestern (6-6)

Northwestern is 1-8 all-time in bowl games with that win coming in the 1949 Rose Bowl- but if the Wildcats don't get it done this year they might never. They'll be facing a Texas A&M team that has been rocked by the firing of Mike Sherman and the [death of senior offensive lineman Joe Villavicencio](#) in a car crash two days before Christmas. The Aggies were one of the nation's biggest disappointments in 2011, finishing 6-6 in a season filled with blown leads and close losses. Northwestern also went 6-6 but salvaged a bowl bid with a late four-game winning streak and should be focused and ready to roll down in Houston. A&M might be anything but.

Wack Predict-O: Northwestern 45, Texas &M 35

Sun Bowl (El Paso, TX, 2:00 PM): Georgia Tech (8-4) vs. Utah (7-5)

The oldest non-BCS game features a pair of teams that, for different reasons, are not prolific in the passing game. Georgia Tech's triple-option offense finished 112th in the nation in passing, although the Jackets make it count when they throw- they're tops in yards-per-completion. Utah finished 99th in passing thanks largely to the shoulder injury that kayoed Jordan Wynn for the season. The Utes leaned heavily on little tailback John White IV, who scooted for 1,405 yards and 14 touchdowns; Tech counters with quarterback Tevin Washington, who threw for 1,515 yards and ran for 890 with 14 scores. The only other meeting between the teams took place in the [2005 Emerald Bowl](#); Utah routed the Yellow Jackets 38-10 in that one.

Liberty Bowl (Memphis, TN, 3:30 PM): Cincinnati (9-3) vs. Vanderbilt (6-6)

It's usually cold and wet in Memphis at Liberty Bowl time, but the conditions won't dampen the ardor of these Cinderella squads. Cincinnati turned it around under second-year head coach Butch Jones, improving its record by five games and winning a share of the Big East title behind a defense that led the nation in sacks. Vandy went 4-20 under two different head coaches in 2009-10 but finished .500 under energetic first-year coach James Franklin. The Commodores were only 2-6 in the SEC but lost to Georgia and Arkansas by a combined eight points.

Wack Predict-O: Vanderbilt 17, Cincinnati 13

Kraft Fight Hunger Bowl (San Francisco, CA, 3:30 PM): Illinois (6-6) vs. UCLA (6-7)

Unless you're a really big fan of the Illini or the Bruins- who enter this game with a losing record- you probably won't miss much if you skip this one in favor of New Year's Eve festivities. Neither team "made" it to this game as much as they free-fell into it. Illinois saw its best start in sixty years degenerate into a 0-6 finish that cost Ron Zook his job. UCLA was so terminally mediocre

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that Rick Neuheisel was fired despite his team backing into the Pac-12 South title. It's a battle between two of the biggest underachievers in the sport: Illinois, which can't find consistency, and UCLA, which can't escape the shadow of cross-town rival USC.

Wack Predict-O: Illinois 27, UCLA 13

Chick-fil-A Bowl (Atlanta, GA, 7:30 PM): Virginia (8-4) vs. Auburn (7-5)

Blue and orange will be the predominant color as the Cavaliers and Tigers meet for a New Year's Eve duel in Dixie. Virginia must be feeling blue about its regular-season finale against Virginia Tech when the Cavaliers, with an opportunity to win the ACC Atlantic, were blown out at home, 38-0. Auburn, as expected, struggled without Cam Newton. The Tigers were fortunate to escape Utah State in the opener and were lost to LSU, Alabama, Georgia and Arkansas- the face cards in the SEC deck- by an average score of 43-11. Suffice to say, top competition didn't exactly bring out the best in either team.

Wack Predict-O: Auburn 31, Virginia 14