



**Favorite**

There's so much talk about what **Ohio State** lost from last year's dominating defense, which included three first-round picks in the NFL draft. But all it takes is a peek at the other side of the line of scrimmage to see why the Buckeyes are ranked No. 1 in most preseason polls. Quarterback Troy Smith has the skills to be what Vince Young was for Texas last season, and wide receiver-kick returner Ted Ginn Jr. is a threat every time he touches the ball. Perhaps because of those two, running back Antonio Pittman isn't always mentioned among the nation's top backs, but the only Buckeye to ever rush for more yards as a sophomore was a fellow named Archie Griffin. Ohio State's defense might be short on experience, but the replacements for A.J. Hawk and Co. are products of top-flight recruiting classes. If the Buckeyes get through September unblemished, they likely will enter the season finale the same way.

When **Texas** won it all last season, Mack Brown said the team's approach was to "take dead aim." His theme this year? "Do what you can do." As defending national champion, the Longhorns are under a certain amount of pressure, but they will be fine, so long as they follow Brown's slogan of trying to improve as a team.

There are a few asterisks. One big star, Vince Young, is missing, and so are tight end David Thomas and safety Michael Huff. Texas will miss having Young at quarterback, but Colt McCoy and Jevan Snead will be helped by a strong group of running backs, including Selvin Young. The defense is aided in large part by safety Michael Griffin, who opted to return for his senior year.

**West Virginia** has perhaps the scariest quarterback-running back tandem in the country in sophomores Pat White and Steve Slaton. Problem is, the only one that may be better — and is loaded with experience to boot — happens to reside in its conference. Louisville, with junior Brian Brohm and senior Michael Bush prowling the backfield, is the only team in the Big East that can match West Virginia's talent. The conference title will almost certainly be decided when the teams clash Nov. 2. Because the game will be played in Louisville, the edge here goes to the Cardinals.

Regardless of who wins that game, it's distinctly possible that the Big East — a conference many critics said deserved zero teams in the BCS last season — could send two teams to BCS bowls this year. Even if West Virginia loses to Louisville, the Mountaineers could still finish at 11-1 if all goes to plan, putting them in position to snare an at-large bid.

**Dark Horse**

After the June death of coach Randy Walker, the **Northwestern** Wildcats want nothing more than to preserve his legacy. A big part of that was Walker's ability to help the Wildcats overachieve. While they will miss Brett Basanez and his 3,622 passing yards, Northwestern returns versatile running back Tyrell Sutton, playmaking wide receiver Shaun Herbert (Bishop McNamara) and an experienced offensive line. After struggling last season, the defense should improve now that it is more experienced. A more manageable schedule helps, too.

**Colorado** likely wouldn't win the South Division (prime evidence would be its 70-3 loss to Texas in last season's conference championship), but the North remains the usual free-for-all. There are concerns: injuries to the offensive line, the lingering quarterback question and the pass defense. Yet, there is something new. Coach Dan Hawkins was brought in from Boise State, where he accrued a 53-11 record and won or shared four Western Athletic Conference titles.

What might keep Colorado from going to its fifth Big 12 title game in six years is a difficult schedule that includes road games against Georgia, Missouri, Oklahoma and Nebraska.

Punch line and patsy no more, **Rutgers** is coming off its first bowl game appearance since the 1978 Garden State Bowl and owns the most dynamic running back tandem in the league in the shifty Raymell Rice and bruising fullback Brian Leonard. The duo combined for 1,860 yards last season, Rice gaining 1,120 of them as a freshman. Coach Greg Schiano and his staff have finally found a way to stake claim to several of New Jersey's best recruits, and he has also scoured Florida, where he uses his contacts from his days as Miami's defensive coordinator. About three-quarters of the team comes from those two states, two of the most talent-rich in the country, owing largely to Schiano's "State of Rutgers" theme.

**Heisman Hopeful**

It's perplexing to hear **Troy Smith** come under fire for his arm strength despite finishing last season with the nation's fourth-best pass efficiency rating. He improved as the season progressed, finishing with 2,282 passing yards and 16 touchdowns with just four interceptions. He focused his summer's work on staying in the pocket longer, and his elusiveness as a runner is even more pronounced when the Buckeyes' air attack is spreading the field.

High hopes once again surround **Adrian Peterson**. Last year, expectations were high, given that the Oklahoma tailback rushed for 1,925 yards as a freshman and finished second in 2004 Heisman Trophy voting. Then came an ankle problem, which marred Peterson's chance at repeating his freshman numbers, but he still managed to rush 1,108 yards.

Heisman talk is back for the junior, and it began before quarterback Rhett Bomar and another player were dismissed for accepting excessive wages for their jobs at a car dealership. Now Peterson can expect attention both for his speed and for his ability to lead a team.

The four best bets reside in two backfields — Slaton and White for West Virginia and Louisville's Brohm and Bush. The brightest hopeful is **Brohm**, a classic drop-back passer playing in Coach Bobby Petrino's pass-happy spread offense. Brohm completed 69 percent of his passes before suffering a torn right anterior cruciate ligament against Syracuse in the team's second-to-last regular season game. He says he's 100 percent after an offseason of rehab, reason for the Cardinals to rejoice and the rest of the conference to worry. Brohm's showcases will come against Miami and West Virginia.



**On the Hot Seat**

Michigan State hired **John L. Smith** because of his mid-major magic with Idaho, Utah State and Louisville. But the Spartans haven't been to a bowl since Smith's first season in 2003. Michigan State's Big Ten record has regressed every year, from 5-3 in 2003 to 2-6 last season. In Year 4, Smith needs to show signs of turning things in the right direction.



There is reason to mention both Missouri's Gary Pinkel and Nebraska's Bill Callahan, but it's Texas A&M's **Dennis Franchione** whose employment is likely in greatest jeopardy. Having failed to make the postseason in 2005 with a 5-6 record, Franchione is in somewhat of a delicate position. In three years, Franchione has compiled a 16-18 record, increasing both the criticism and worrisome looks among Aggies fans and boosters.



When **Dave Wannstedt** arrived at Pittsburgh last season, he said his first initiative was to build a metaphorical fence around western Pennsylvania, so that no big-time recruits could escape. Well, so far it seems like Penn State found the bolt cutters mighty fast, and Wannstedt's 5-6 debut record didn't help. Greg Robinson's 1-10 maiden season at Syracuse didn't win him a special place in the hearts of Orange fans, either, but SU Athletic Director Darryl Gross is committed to the former Denver Broncos defensive coordinator.



**Game Of the Year**

**Michigan at Ohio State, Nov. 18:** Every season, this matchup has more juice than 85 percent of bowl games. This year is no different. The Wolverines should rebound from last year's 7-5 debacle, and having lost four of the past five meetings in this rivalry, they won't lack for motivation. Ohio State might have nothing less on the line than a spot in the national championship game.

**Texas vs. Oklahoma in Dallas, Oct. 7:** The Red River Shootout will have a new cast starring in lead roles, but the result will be no less significant. Both teams will have installed new quarterbacks. In the case of Texas, it's a freshman, either McCoy or Snead. In the case of Oklahoma, last year's backup, Paul Thompson, a converted wide receiver, takes over.

**West Virginia at Louisville, Nov. 2:** Everyone else, really, plays in the Less-Than-Adequate East. West Virginia's win in a 46-44, triple-overtime classic in Morgantown against the Cardinals last season propelled it to a BCS bowl. This year, the Mountaineers go to Louisville in the contest that will decide the conference.

Last Season's Results	This Season's Predictions
Penn State 11-1, 7-1	1. Ohio State
Ohio State 10-2, 7-1	2. Iowa
Wisconsin 10-3, 5-3	3. Michigan
Michigan 7-5, 5-3	4. Penn State
Northwestern 7-5, 5-3	5. Purdue
Iowa 7-5, 5-3	6. Michigan State
Minnesota 7-5, 4-4	7. Wisconsin
Purdue 5-6, 3-5	8. Northwestern
Michigan State 5-6, 2-6	9. Minnesota
Indiana 4-7, 1-7	10. Illinois
Illinois 2-9, 0-8	11. Indiana

Last Season's Results	This Season's Prediction
NORTH DIVISION	
Colorado 7-6, 5-3	1. Nebraska
Nebraska 8-4, 4-4	2. Colorado
Iowa State 7-5, 4-4	3. Iowa State
Missouri 7-5, 4-4	4. Missouri
Kansas 7-5, 3-5	5. Kansas
Kansas State 5-6, 2-6	6. Kansas State
SOUTH DIVISION	
Texas 13-0, 8-0	1. Texas
Texas Tech 9-3, 6-2	2. Oklahoma
Oklahoma 8-4, 6-2	3. Texas Tech
Texas A&M 5-6, 3-5	4. Texas A&M
Baylor 5-6, 2-6	5. Oklahoma State
Oklahoma State 4-7, 1-7	6. Baylor

Last Season's Results	This Season's Predictions
West Virginia 11-1, 7-0	1. Louisville
Louisville 9-3, 5-2	2. West Virginia
Rutgers 7-5, 4-3	3. Rutgers
South Florida 6-6, 4-3	4. South Florida
Pittsburgh 5-6, 4-3	5. Pittsburgh
Connecticut 5-6, 2-5	6. Connecticut
Cincinnati 4-7, 2-5	7. Cincinnati
Syracuse 1-10, 0-7	8. Syracuse