



Southern California again enters the wide-open Pacific-10 race as the morning line favorite. But the Trojans are hardly the same even-money bet they have been the last several years.

Coach Pete Carroll has the unique and daunting challenge of replacing two Heisman Trophy winners — Reggie Bush and Matt Leinart — from the same backfield. LenDale White is gone, too. There's a slew of talent to replace the major losses at tailback, though all of it is unproven. The situation at quarterback looks a bit better, though John David Booty and Mark Sanchez are equally untested. Explosive wide receiver Dwayne Jarrett kept his eligibility after an NCAA scare.

Carroll has scored some great recruiting classes. The depth of that talent will be put to the test this season.

It's hard to call California, Oregon and Arizona State "dark horses," so the default pick goes to hard-luck **Washington State**. Though the Cougars lost conference rushing leader Jerome Harrison, they bring back experienced playmakers in quarterback Alex Brink and wide receiver Jason Hill. The pass defense could be shaky — which is bad news in this league — though defensive end Mkristo Bruce is a difference-maker. The Cougars were better than their 4-7 record last season, when they dropped five games by four points or less.

California's push to include more spread option formations in Coach Jeff Tedford's already potent offense bodes well for running back **Marshawn Lynch**. He's the type of fast and physical back that could thrive with the extra space created by the spread. With Cal's quarterback situation also in flux, Lynch is sure to get plenty of opportunities to put up even bigger numbers than he did last year, when he rushed for 1,246 yards and 10 touchdowns. Lynch will also enjoy the benefits of national exposure, with the Golden Bears facing Tennessee and USC in highly anticipated matchups.



With a 3-5 record in the league and a 5-6 mark overall, Coach **Mike Riley** couldn't get Oregon State to a bowl. Even with the loss of top wide receiver Mike Hass, the Beavers have the talent to rectify the situation this year, which Riley needs to do.



California at Southern California, Nov. 18: After years of being a top threat, Cal has its best chance to knock off USC. For the first time in years, the most dangerous player on the field in this game will be wearing a Golden Bears uniform. Cal is still the last Pac-10 team to beat the Trojans. Of course, winning these kinds of games has been a staple of USC's stellar run.

Last Season's Results

Southern Cal	12-1, 8-0
Oregon	10-2, 7-1
UCLA	10-2, 6-2
California	8-4, 4-4
Arizona State	7-5, 4-4
Stanford	5-6, 4-4
Oregon State	5-6, 3-5
Arizona	3-8, 2-6
Wash. State	4-7, 1-7
Washington	1-7, 2-9

This Season's Predictions

1. Southern Cal
2. California
3. Oregon
4. Arizona State
5. Washington State
6. UCLA
7. Arizona
8. Oregon State
9. Stanford
10. Washington



Auburn is coming off a 9-3 season and returns 23 seniors, including running back Kenny Irons, who last year rushed for 1,293 yards and 13 touchdowns.

Completing the offensive power trio: quarterback Brandon Cox and wide receiver Courtney Taylor, whose sprained ankle limited his production in 2005. Defensively, Auburn returns six starters, and the Tigers sport a secondary that includes Will Herring and David Irons, who are both expected to have productive seasons.

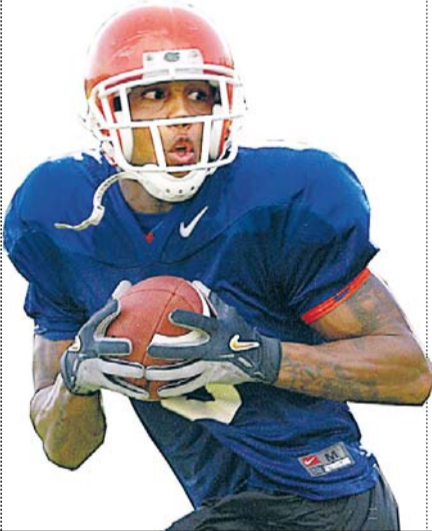
Auburn is also aided by a schedule that works in its favor. There are home dates against LSU, Florida and Georgia, and only two tough road games in South Carolina and Alabama.

In Steve Spurrier's first year, **South Carolina** went to a bowl game, beat Florida and Tennessee and nearly beat Georgia. The Gamecocks should go to a bowl again in large part because of quarterback Blake Mitchell and wide receiver Sidney Rice, who had 1,143 receiving yards last season. Spurrier also returns the team's leading rusher, Mike Davis.

The concerns lie at defense, where just four starters return. Overall the team is young, but with an easier schedule — there's no Alabama and the Gamecocks start the season tomorrow at Mississippi State, which finished last season 3-8 — Spurrier should improve upon last year's 7-5 record. All eyes will be on Spurrier when he makes his return to Florida on Nov. 11.

Having made the adjustment to Urban Meyer's spread offense, **Chris Leak** has generated enough buzz to be merit consideration here. And yet there is equal buzz that Leak might not even have the starting job by the time the season is over. The senior is being pushed by freshman Tim Tebow, who has been working out with Florida since enrolling in January.

While Meyer has said this is Leak's team, Leak has yet to lead the Gators to a Southeastern Conference title or a BCS bowl. Then again, this will be Leak's second year under Meyer, and Florida is set up to succeed. Leak should be fueled by a missing ring, and if all falls into place, he may leave with one.



Rich Brooks's only conference wins last season came against Vanderbilt and Mississippi State. Kentucky finished 3-8 (the Wildcats' third win came against Idaho State), and in three seasons, Brooks is 9-25 and 4-20 in the SEC.

The question becomes, how many wins does Brooks need in order to retain employment? Five? Six? A bowl game? During Brooks's tenure there have been some formidable challenges. This year, there's no Auburn, but there is LSU.



Auburn at Alabama, Nov. 18: With LSU finishing off its schedule against Mississippi and Arkansas, this game may very well decide who wins the West. LSU and Auburn will face each other Sept. 16, meaning this game may be a must-win for Auburn. Last year Auburn beat the Tide, 28-18.

Last Season's Results

EAST DIVISION	
Georgia	10-3, 6-2
Florida	9-3, 5-3
South Carolina	7-5, 5-3
Vanderbilt	5-6, 3-5
Tennessee	5-6, 3-5
Kentucky	3-8, 2-6
WEST DIVISION	
LSU	11-2, 7-1
Auburn	9-3, 7-1
Alabama	10-2, 6-2
Arkansas	4-7, 2-6
Mississippi St.	3-8, 1-7
Mississippi	3-8, 1-7

This Season's Predictions

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| EAST DIVISION | |
| 1. Florida | |
| 2. Georgia | |
| 3. South Carolina | |
| 4. Tennessee | |
| 5. Kentucky | |
| 6. Vanderbilt | |
| WEST DIVISION | |
| 1. Auburn | |
| 2. LSU | |
| 3. Alabama | |
| 4. Arkansas | |
| 5. Mississippi | |
| 6. Mississippi St. | |

Independents, Others

Weekend hotel room rates are soaring to more than \$650 a night in South Bend, Ind. The quarterback is a Heisman Trophy front-runner. The star wide receiver is a big-league pitching prospect. The safety has boxed at Madison Square Garden. And the echoes most definitely have their alarm set. **Notre Dame**, with second-year coach-offensive mastermind Charlie Weis leading the way and Brady Quinn riding shotgun, is as legitimate a national contender as you'll find. Its offense is loaded, with Quinn and running back Darius Walker operating behind a solid offensive line and Jeff Samardzija providing a big, fleet target on the outside (not to mention a mean fastball). Part-time pugilist Tom Zbikowski returns punts with ferocity and, at safety, anchors the defense.

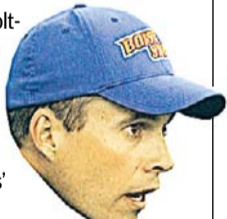
Meantime, TCU and Utah might not be national title contenders, but each has enough talent to make a BCS bowl, if they don't beat up one another too much in the Mountain West.

Because of the addition of a fifth BCS bowl, a number of teams have a chance to crash the national party. The most fun would be **Nevada**, which employs an offense no other team utilizes. The brainchild of Coach Chris Ault, the "pistol" offense places the quarterback in a shortened shotgun formation with a running back directly behind him. It hides the running back from linebackers and gives the quarterback a unique look at the defense to make quick passes. Last season, it worked to the tune of nearly 3,000 passing yards and 2,400 rushing yards, a 9-3 record and a season-ending win in the Hawaii Bowl over UCF. Senior QB Jeff Rowe and last season's leading rusher, B.J. Mitchell, return, giving the Wolf Pack another shot at a WAC championship.

Perhaps you've heard of **Brady Quinn**? Guy that plays quarterback for Notre Dame? Seriously, Quinn likely will be on more magazine covers than Brangelina this fall (we hear Popular Mechanics asked for a photo shoot), and he may just deserve the hype. Playing in Weis's great-in-the-NFL, unstoppable-in-college passing offense, he's sure to put up huge stats. He has mastered the offense even more than last season, when he threw for 3,919 yards and 32 touchdowns (both No. 3 in the nation). Because it's hard to find a more high-profile position in college sports than Fighting Irish quarterback, the Heisman is essentially Quinn's to lose. But on the opposite end of the hype spectrum, the ultimate Heisman underdog is 5-foot-7 running back Garrett Wolfe of Northern Illinois, who rang up 1,580 yards last season, fifth in the nation, despite missing three games.



When Dan Hawkins bolted for Colorado during the offseason after spending the past five seasons establishing Boise State, the job of defending the Broncos' territory fell to **Chris Petersen**. He knows what it takes to win with the Broncos — he's been BSU's offensive coordinator for the past five seasons, leading an offense that averaged 41.6 points. Petersen has help in returning quarterback Jared Zabransky, but he'll find that with a big-time program comes big-time pressure.



TCU at Utah, Oct. 5: This one will likely decide the Mountain West, and perhaps much more. Both teams are candidates to make the BCS's new fifth game, and the winner could see its dream realized or crushed thanks to this showdown.

Last Season's Results

Notre Dame	9-3
TCU	11-1
Utah	7-5
Fresno State	8-5
UTEP	8-1
Boise State	9-4
Nevada	9-3
Northern Illinois	7-5
BYU	6-6
Navy	8-4

This Season's Predictions

1. Notre Dame
2. TCU
3. Utah
4. Fresno State
5. UTEP
6. Boise State
7. Nevada
8. Northern Illinois
9. BYU
10. Navy

Favorite

Dark Horse

Heisman Hopeful

On the Hot Seat

Game Of the Year