

# WHICH IS THE TOUGHEST CONFERENCE?

BY PHIL STEELE

Let me help clarify the great debate on which conference is the toughest. One of the most exciting things about College Football is that the toughest conference can change on a yearly basis, but of course, lately the SEC has dominated winning 8 of the last 9 National Titles as well as the top spot in my final Toughest Conference Ratings for the last 9 years. I remember back in the late 1960's, when it could have been argued that the SWC was the top conference in the country with powerhouses like Texas and Arkansas battling it out for #1. Nittany Lion fans are still not too pleased with President Nixon's proclamation that Texas was #1 after they beat Arkansas in 1969 when their undefeated Penn St team finished #2. In later years, it was the Big 8 with Nebraska and Oklahoma dominating the landscape. The SEC, of course, is usually near the top, as is the Big Ten. Both conferences have had their powerhouse years, with Bear Bryant's Crimson Tide and the rivalry between Woody Hayes (Ohio St) and Bo Schembechler (Michigan). They, of course, have also had some off years. There have been a lot of conference changes in the last 15 yrs. These realignments have created some major shifts of power.

Another interesting point is that there is not an exact science for picking the toughest conference. You cannot rely strictly on how many bowl wins a conference racks up during the postseason, or on its overall record in non-conference play. Let's face it, some leagues' non-conf slates are much tougher than others. Conferences can play non-conf games vs FCS or BCS opponents and if you go strictly on overall records, the wins and losses count the same.

Before I take a look at 2015's results, let's look at the results from the previous 10 years for a historical perspective. I put together all the factors (non-conf record, record vs BCS conf, average power ratings and bowl records) and rated the conferences

In 2006, it appeared late in the year that the Big Ten was the toughest league with Ohio St and Michigan #1 and #2 and Wisconsin not far behind. The Big Ten got blown up in the bowls (2-5) with #1 Ohio St, being dominated by Florida. That dropped the Big Ten to #3. The SEC was the CLEAR #1 with the best record during the regular season vs FBS teams at 32-8 (80%). The SEC led with 41 players drafted followed by the Big Ten (32), then the ACC (31). The SEC and Big Ten each had THREE Top 10 teams (Big East 2). The SEC was 6-3 in bowls with 4 wins over ranked teams. The Big East was 5-0 but had only ONE win over a ranked foe. All of the factors above were tossed into my computer and the result was **#1 SEC, #2 Big East, #3 Big Ten, #4 Pac-10, #5 ACC, #6 Big 12.**

In 2007, it was another finish at the wire with the Big 12 making a huge rebound to #2. The best non-conf record (reg season) vs FBS teams was the Big Ten at 29-7 (80.6%) followed by the Big 12 at 29-11 (72.5%) and then the MW at 70.7%. The MW posted more wins (7) in non-conf BCS games than the Big Ten, Pac-10 or Big 12!! The SEC led again with 35 players drafted, followed by the Pac-10 (34) and the ACC (33). The Big 12 led with FOUR Top 10 teams (SEC 2). **All of the factors above were tossed into my computer and the result was a nail-biting close-win for the SEC in '07. The Big 12 was a hair behind at #2.**

In the 2008 regular season there was little doubt that the top 2 conf's were the SEC and the Big 12. The top 4 ranked teams heading into the bowls were all from those 2 conf's. They were the top two in terms of non-conf record vs FBS foes (Big 12 28-10, 73.7%, SEC 28-11, 71.8%). The SHOCKING winner of best record in non-conf games vs BCS schools was the MW at 9-4 (6-1 vs Pac-10) with the ACC at 13-8 (61.9%), the only other conf topping .500 in that category. The Pac-10 was actually 12-17 in non-conf FBS games (8th best). The bowls saved the Pac-10 as they went a perfect 5-0 (4 wins vs ranked bowl foes) and finished with 2 Top 10 teams. The SEC went 6-2 in bowls (Big 12 4-3) and won the title game. Five conferences had TWO Top 10 teams at the end but one of them was the MW while the Big East and ACC had NONE. The top 3 conf's in terms

of players that were drafted were the SEC with 37, the ACC with 33 and the Pac-10 with 32. **The top 4 conf's of '08 were #1 SEC, #2 Big 12, #3 Pac-10 and for the first time the MW cracked the top 4.**

In '09 there was little doubt that once again the SEC was the king but at least the Big Ten made a comeback after their #6 finish in '08. The SEC had the best record in non-conf games vs FBS foes at 36-10 (78%) with the Big East #2 at 26-10 (72%) and the Big Ten #3 at 27-15 (64%). In games vs AQ conf's the SEC was tops at 15-8 (65.2%) and they were the only league above 50%. The MW was #2 at 7-9 (44%). The SEC led with 10 bowl teams (6-4). The Big 12 was 4-4 and the Big Ten was 4-3. The Big Ten's 4 bowl wins were ALL vs ranked teams. The SEC once again led in draft picks with 49 (Big Ten 34, ACC 31). The Big Ten actually finished with the most AP Top 10 teams (3) while the SEC had two. **The top 4 conferences of '09 were #1 SEC, #2 Big Ten, #3 Big 12 and #4 Big East.**

In 2010, the SEC went 36-11 (76.9%) in non-conf games and went 15-10 (60%) vs other AQ conf's (no other conf above 50%). Their 10 bowl teams were the most as were their 38 draft picks. The Pac-10 had 31 draft picks and two Top 10 teams and might have been #2 but only had 4 bowl teams overall. The Big Ten had 8 bowl teams and despite just 29 players drafted finished a distant #2 to the SEC with a very slight edge over the others. **The top 4 conf's of '10 were #1 SEC, #2 Big Ten, #3 Big 12 and #4 Pac-10 (now the Pac-12).**

In 2011, the SEC was far and away the best again with 4 Top Ten teams at the end of the year, the most NFL draft picks with 42, the best record (9-3) in non conf BCS games, 3 wins over ranked bowl teams and a 6-3 record in bowls that included a loss to an SEC school (LSU to Bama in Title game). **The top 4 conf's of '11 were #1 SEC, #2 Big 12, #3 Big Ten and #4 Pac-12.**

In 2012, the Big 12 for the 2nd year in a row had the best record in overall non-conference action with a 26-4 (87%) mark which just edged out the SEC 48-8 (86%). The conference was also 5-1 against BCS conferences. However, in the end, the SEC had a better bowl record at 6-3, set a record with an amazing 5 teams finishing in the AP Top 10 and then broke the NFL draft record with 63 players drafted as they claimed an 8th straight title. **The top 4 conf's of '12 were #1 SEC, #2 Pac-12, #3 Big 12 and #4 Big Ten.**

In 2013, the SEC had the best non-conf record (47-9, 83.9%) while the P-12 had the best win% versus P5 teams (6-3, 67%). The SEC's dominated the rest of the way finishing with the most bowl wins, most wins vs AP top 10 teams as well as top 25's and also had the most players drafter with 49. **The top 4 conf's of '13 were #1 SEC, #2 Pac-12, #3 ACC and #4 Big Ten.**

In 2014 the Big Ten stopped the streak of nine straight SEC National titles. The Big Ten was just 5-9 vs Power 5 non conf tms during the regular season. The Pac 12 had the best mark at 6-2 with the ACC 2nd at 8-5. The SEC had the best non conf record vs FBS teams at 24-7. The SEC and Pac 12 each had 6 teams in the final top 25. It was the tightest battle ever for top conference and by the slimmest of margins the SEC got the nod. **The top 4 conf's of '14 were #1 SEC, #2 Pac-12, #3 Big Ten and #4 Big 12.**

In 2015 the SEC got another national title and was the clear cut top conference. For a complete breakdown of each category for last year go to [PhilSteele.com](http://PhilSteele.com) and check out the Daily Blog Archives from March 14-20 (4 separate articles).

## FINAL 2015 CONFERENCE RANKINGS

- |            |             |              |
|------------|-------------|--------------|
| 1. SEC     | 5. ACC      | 8. MWC       |
| 2. BIG TEN | 6. AMERICAN | 9. MAC       |
| 3. PAC 12  | 6. AMERICAN | 10. CUSA     |
| 4. BIG 12  | 7. INDEP    | 11. SUN BELT |

Now let's take a look at which conference will be the toughest in '16. First let me explain how I derive the results. I complete 9 primary sets of power ratings at the start of the year. First is a pure power rating.

I rank the positions (QB, RB, WR, etc) from 4 to 10 points with 10 points being the highest. I then add up all of the positions, factor in coaching and special teams, and derive my Power Rating for each team.

The second Power Rating is based on my Plus/Minus Power Ratings (see page 33). These take into account the production of the team not only in terms of points, but yards gained and allowed. I compile a lengthy list of areas of improvement and spots that are weaker and either upgrade or downgrade each team's Power Plays numbers. I then add up all the different numbers and get my Preseason Plus/Minus Power Ratings number for each team.

Three other sets are based on last year's final numbers. I grade every position for each team (QB, RB, WR, OL, DL, LB, DB) on their scale of improvement from one year to the next. The scale ranges from +6 points to -6 points for each position. I take the total team number and factor it into last year's 3 final sets of Power Ratings. This gives me 3 very different ways of gauging the strength of the teams.

The question is, how do I add up the points? Conferences all have a different number of teams. If I ranked the teams by the average of the entire conference, that would give a good indication of the average rating of all the teams. But the bigger the conference, the weaker the grade could possibly be. I did use that as one factor. I added a second factor and that was an average grade of just the top 5 teams. This would give me an even comparison of all the conferences. The only thing this rating does not show, of course, is the depth of the conference. For example, let's say one conference had 9 bowl caliber teams and 1 non-bowl team and another conference had 5 bowl caliber teams and 5 non-bowl teams. The thinner conference would be rated higher if the top 5 teams had a higher average, even though the deeper conference was probably tougher. I also rate leagues by the top 3 and the top 8. By merging the 4 ratings, I get a fairly accurate assessment of the strength of the conferences.

Basically, after all of that is done, I have 4 different sets of rankings. They break down the conferences based upon the strength of the top 3 teams in each conf, the top 5 teams, the top 8 teams and then the overall strength of the whole conference.

Here are my computer's preseason rankings for this year's Toughest Conferences and also 2015's final polls. This year, the SEC is at the top once again and the ACC has made their mark as clearly the 2nd best conference. If you can't wait until the 2017 magazine, make sure to check out [PhilSteele.com](http://PhilSteele.com) after the season for a blog breaking down 2016.



## TOUGHEST CONFERENCE FOR 2016

1. SEC
2. ACC
3. Pac 12
4. Big Ten
5. Big 12
6. AAC
7. MWC
8. MAC
9. CUSA
10. Sun Belt

2015 ASSOCIATED PRESS POLL	1 Alabama	1 Alabama
	2 Clemson	2 Clemson
	3 Stanford	3 Stanford
	4 Ohio State	4 Ohio State
	5 Oklahoma	5 Oklahoma
	6 Michigan State	6 Michigan State
	7 TCU	7 TCU
	8 Houston	8 Houston
	9 Iowa	9 Mississippi
	10 Mississippi	10 Iowa
	11 Notre Dame	11 Michigan
	12 Michigan	12 Notre Dame
	13 Baylor	13 Baylor
	14 Florida State	14 Florida State
	15 North Carolina	15 North Carolina
	16 LSU	16 Utah
	17 Utah	17 LSU
	18 Navy	18 Navy
	19 Oregon	19 Oklahoma State
	20 Oklahoma State	20 Oregon
	21 Wisconsin	21 Wisconsin
	22 Tennessee	22 Northwestern
	23 Northwestern	23 Tennessee
	24 Western Kentucky	24 Georgia
	25 Florida	25 Florida

## 2015 USA TODAY COACHES' POLL