

PHIL STEELE'S PROJECTED AP TOP 10

This is NOT Phil's Top 10! This is who he predicts to be in the AP Top 10!

For the past several years I have projected the preseason AP Top 10 nearly six months in advance and I have correctly projected at least nine of the Top 10 teams each year and last year I projected all 10 of them correctly on January 30, 2012, more than six months prior to it being released in August!

Again, this is not MY preseason Top 10 for next year, it is where I project the AP Top 10 to come out at the start of the season.

No. 10 Louisville



- Despite playing in a non-power conference, the Cardinals clearly fit the mold of a preseason AP Top 10 team. First, they return a Heisman Trophy candidate at quarterback in Teddy Bridgewater who threw for 3,718 yards with 27 touchdowns and 8 interceptions as a sophomore last year. In addition to Bridgewater, they also return their top two rushers and top four receivers from a year ago and their only significant loss on defense was cornerback Adrian Bushell. Second, they are coming off an impressive 33-23 Sugar Bowl win over SEC power Florida that had them skyrocket to No. 13 in the final AP Poll. Finally they have arguably the easiest schedule of all the 2013 contenders as their non-conference schedule includes Ohio, Eastern Kentucky, Florida International and Kentucky and play a Big East schedule that is basically a glorified CUSA at this point. Add it all up and the Cardinals should be favored to win all of their games in 2013.

No. 9 South Carolina



- The Gamecocks are off back-to-back 11-2 seasons finishing in the AP Top 10 each year despite losing star running back Marcus Lattimore to injury mid-way through both seasons. The future continues to look bright for the Gamecocks as they return most of their key players including quarterbacks Connor Shaw and Dylan Thompson along with their leading receiver in Bruce Ellington. On defense, star defensive end Jadeveon Clowney, who is arguably the best player in the country regardless of position is back. The non-conference schedule is daunting, but both North Carolina and Clemson have to travel to Columbia along with Florida in conference play. The toughest road test is at Georgia on September 7 and they do avoid Alabama, Texas A&M and LSU from the SEC West.

No. 8 Florida



- While the Gators did finish the season with a disappointing loss to Louisville in the Sugar Bowl, it is hard to ignore their terrific regular season, which featured four wins over teams that finished in the final AP Top 15. The offense figures to be much improved with Jeff Driskel back at quarterback. While the defense loses arguably its best player at each level the good news is that it looks like Muschamp will be bringing one of the nation's best recruiting classes to fill the void and don't forget that defensive end Ronald Powell will be back after missing all of last year with an ACL injury. The schedule is brutal with non-conference games against Miami and Florida State and they must travel to South Carolina and LSU in SEC play.

No. 7 Notre Dame



- Losing 42-14 in the BCS National Championship to Alabama probably knocked the Irish from being in the 2013 preseason Top 5, but they still will return 14 starters including quarterback Everett Golson who figures to continue to make significant progress in his second year as a starter. While they lose their star on offense in tight end Tyler Eifert and defense in linebacker Manti Te'o, the Irish look well-stocked on both sides of the line of scrimmage as offensive tackle Zack Martin and nose guard Louis Nix both announced their return along with defensive end Stephon Tuitt who recorded 12 sacks a year ago. Like most years, the schedule is tough with home games against Michigan State, Oklahoma and USC along with road games at Michigan and Stanford, however, the Irish beat all five of those teams last year and many felt they were a year ahead of schedule in their 12-1 finish.

No. 6 Georgia



- The Bulldogs are a clear example of a team that fits my projected AP Top 10 criteria. First, they welcome back quarterback Aaron Murray who announced his return for his fourth year as the starter after leading the Bulldogs to a school-record 529 points in 2012. Georgia also returns their dynamic duo of freshman running backs in Keith Marshall and Todd Gurley along with several key receivers. They capped off their 11-2 season with a 45-31 win over Nebraska in the Capital One Bowl after taking Alabama to the wire in the SEC Championship game. While the defense will have to rebuild, an argument could be made that Georgia has one of the best offenses in the country and it will need to be effective early with matchups against Clemson, South Carolina and LSU all coming in the first four games.

No. 5 Texas A&M



- No team in the country may have ended the season on a hotter run than the Aggies, who after their upset win at No. 1 Alabama in November, saw their quarterback Johnny Manziel become the first freshman to take home the Heisman Trophy and then followed it up by destroying Oklahoma 41-13 in the Cotton Bowl to finish No. 5 in the final AP Poll. In 2013, the Aggies naturally bring back Manziel who accounted for an SEC-record 5,116 yards of total offense and their No. 2 rusher in Ben Malena along with their leading receiver in Mike Evans. Offensive tackle Luke Joeckel and defensive end Damontre Moore announced their early departure to the draft but tackle Jake Matthews surprisingly announced his return and a quick look at the schedule shows the Aggies avoiding Georgia, Florida and South Carolina from the SEC East while they also get the defending champs at home in week three.

No. 4 Oregon



- The Ducks would have probably been a slam dunk for the No. 2 spot had head coach Chip Kelly decide to stay in Eugene. Even with his departure, the Ducks still look like one of the favorites in 2013 as they return quarterback Marcus Mariota, who had an incredible 32-to-6 TD-to-interception ratio in his first season as a starter. While the Ducks will clearly miss running back Kenjon Barner, who ran for 1,767 yards, but they do return the explosive De'Anthony Thomas along with seven other starters from the top scoring offense in the NCAA. On defense, they lose their top two tacklers in linebackers Michael Clay and Kiko Alonso but despite another coaching change, defensive coordinator Nick Aliotti will continue to lead the Ducks on that side of the ball. The schedule is manageable as they avoid USC and Arizona State and get UCLA at home from the Pac-12 South. For the fourth year in a row, it looks like the Stanford game (November 7th in Palo Alto) will be for the Pac-12 North Title and a win there could have the Ducks playing for it all in 2013.

No. 3 Stanford



- After an overtime loss at Notre Dame, the Cardinal won eight straight games to close the season highlighted by their road win at No. 2 Oregon in November and a 20-14 triumph over Wisconsin in the Rose Bowl. 2013 could be the year the Cardinal take another step and not just make their 4th straight BCS bowl, but finally play for the National Title as they welcome back 15 starters including quarterback Kevin Hogan who was the key in their win streak down the stretch. The defense should be one of the best in the country as Trent Murphy, Ben Gardner and Shayne Skov all announced their return for their senior seasons. The schedule has them playing most of their key games at home including games against Arizona State, Washington, UCLA, Oregon and Notre Dame while Oregon State and USC are their toughest road games. The Cardinal have clearly survived the losses of head coach Jim Harbaugh and quarterback Andrew Luck and it looks like David Shaw has this program here to stay among the nation's elite.

No. 2 Ohio State



- Despite the NCAA probation, Urban Meyer's first season in Columbus was a smashing success finishing a perfect 12-0 and No. 3 in the final AP poll and it looks like the Buckeyes will continue to ride that momentum into 2013. First, they welcome back quarterback Braxton Miller who figures to be one of the Heisman favorites after a season in which he had 3,310 yards of total offense and will look to be improved in the passing game. He will have plenty of talent surrounding him as No. 2 rusher Carlos Hyde and their top two receivers Corey Brown and Devin Smith all return along with key offensive lineman Andrew Norwell and Jack Mewhort. The Buckeyes do have to replace their entire starting defensive line, but Meyer has done a great job of recruiting at that position in his short tenure while the D's other stars in linebacker Ryan Shazier and cornerback Bradley Roby should help fill the void as the young linemen mature. The schedule clearly sets up for success as the non-conference features Buffalo, San Diego State, California and Florida A&M while in conference play they avoid both Nebraska and Michigan State while hosting Wisconsin and Penn State. The two toughest hurdles look to be road trips at Northwestern and at Michigan.

No. 1 Alabama



- How do you top becoming just the second school since World War II to win three National Titles in four years? How about by becoming the first program ever to win four in five as the Crimson Tide clearly look poised to do so in 2013. It starts with the return of quarterback AJ McCarron who has played brilliantly in each of the last two National Championship games and he is surrounded by some of the best skill position players in the country in running back TJ Yeldon and wide receiver Amari Cooper. The only question on offense is how they replace center Barrett Jones, guard Chance Warmack and tackle DJ Fluker on the offensive line. The defense also loses nose guard Jesse Williams, cornerback Dee Milliner and safety Robert Lester but linebacker CJ Mosley shockingly announced his return as the Tide just continue to reload on that side of the ball after leading the nation in total and scoring defense each of the last two years. The schedule also is manageable with an opener against Virginia Tech in Atlanta followed by a bye week before the revenge game against Texas A&M at Kyle Field. The rest of the schedule is a walk in the park with key games against Ole Miss, Arkansas and Tennessee all at home not to mention two weeks to prepare for a home game against LSU. Add it all up and the Tide look just as strong if not stronger than last year's team.

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FOR THE AP TOP 14!
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