

Big 12

One could tell as far back as 2006 that the Big 12 was going to have a great year in 2008. Colt McCoy was excelling as a redshirt freshman at Texas, and Josh Freeman was getting by as a true freshman at Kansas State. Chase Daniel (Missouri), Graham Harrell (Texas Tech), Stephen McGee (Texas A&M), and even Bobby Reid (Oklahoma State) were all good-looking sophomores piling up the experience. In a league already dominated by offense and quarterbacks, half the teams in the league would be starting a three-year starter in 2008 — and this doesn't even count future 2008 Heisman winner Sam Bradford, who was redshirting in 2006.

In all, the season lived up to expectations. Thanks to both experience and mostly easy non-conference schedules, the league produced four teams with at least ten wins and two more with nine. It also produced a fair share of controversy when Oklahoma, Texas, and Texas Tech all tied for the South title with a 7-1 record, having gone 1-1 versus each other and 6-0 versus everybody else in the South. To break the tie, the Big 12 had to go to its fifth tie-breaker procedure (“The highest ranked team in the first Bowl

Championship Series Poll following the completion of Big 12 regular season conference play shall be the representative”) to choose Oklahoma for the Big 12 title game. Naturally, Texas fans screaming “45-35!!” were appalled by the process, but let’s face it: If you have to get down to the fifth tie-breaker to determine a champion, the losing schools are inevitably going to feel pretty raw about it.

In 2009, the Big 12 returns plenty of familiar faces — Bradford and McCoy to name just two — but the balance of power in the rest of the conference may shift. Gone are Freeman, Daniel, Harrell, McGee, and Nebraska’s Joe Ganz. (Reid was already gone a year ago, transferring to Texas Southern when he lost his job to Zac Robinson.) Gone are two-time Biletnikoff Award winner Michael Crabtree from Texas Tech, as well as Missouri All-Americans Jeremy Maclin and Chase Coffman. Gone is most of Oklahoma’s offensive line, and all of Kansas’s linebackers.

New faces — just as heavily recruited as the last batch of stars — abound in the Big 12, but the race for the conference title will still probably be decided by some names you recognize.

SOUTH

No. 3 TEXAS LONGHORNS 11-1 (7-1)

2008: 12-1 (7-1)		FEI: No. 4		S&P+: No. 5		F/+ : No. 4		Program FEI: No. 3		Returning Starters: OFF 8, DEF 6	
2008 Offense		Rank		2008 Defense		Rank		2008 Field Position		Rank	
Offensive FEI	0.774	3	Defensive FEI	-0.616	3	Field Position Advantage		0.529	21		
Unadjusted Offense	1.068	1	Unadjusted Defense	-0.247	27	2009 Projections		Rank			
Offensive S&P+	124.6	10	Defensive S&P+	146.4	2	FEI	0.245	3			
Rushing S&P+	115.4	29	Rushing S&P+	147.1	2	Strength of Schedule	0.349	59			
Passing S&P+	133.3	9	Passing S&P+	148.9	3	Offensive FEI	0.774	1			
Standard Downs S&P+	114.4	24	Standard Downs S&P+	130.6	3	Defensive FEI	-0.513	8			
Passing Downs S&P+	152.8	2	Passing Downs S&P+	145.0	4	Mean Wins: 10.6		Big 12: 6.8			

There were 780 minutes of game time in Texas’ 2008 season; oh, what a difference only 15 seconds can make. The final 15 seconds of the Texas-Texas Tech game — just 0.03 percent of the Longhorns’ season — changed the 2008 fate of both Texas and Oklahoma. A dropped interception was followed by the national

play of the year, Graham Harrell to Michael Crabtree for the touchdown with 0:01 left, and both the win and eventually a shot at the national title disappeared. Alas, 100 percent of the season needs to go your way sometimes, not just 99.97 percent.

The good news for Texas is, they return as much tal-

ent as anybody else in the country. Colt McCoy returns for his senior season, his favorite target Jordan Shipley was granted a sixth year of eligibility, his offensive line looks great, the defense returns playmakers like Sergio Kindle, and a secondary that was green in 2008, returns deep and intact.

Three main obstacles stand between Mack Brown's Longhorns and a spot in the national title game:

1) As yet, nobody has emerged as the No. 1 running back. Cody Johnson (short yardage specialist), Vondrell McGee (steady, consistent), and Fozzy Whitaker (shifty and explosive) all have particular strengths, but none have seized the job yet. The loss of Chris Ogbonnaya — a great receiving threat and, like McGee, a steady performer — might end up hurting Texas in close games.

2) Quan Cosby has departed from the receiving corps, and while his potential replacements — namely, Malcolm Williams, Brandon Collins, Dan Buckner, and James Kirkendoll — are all more explosive than Cosby, none have proven to be a consistent force yet. Ogbonnaya and Cosby were both great bailout

options for McCoy when a play broke down.

3) In 2008, Texas' offense actually performed better on Passing Downs than Standard Downs. They were one of only two teams in the country able to claim that (the other: East Carolina), and it raises a concern that their disproportionate success on Passing Downs may not be duplicable from one season to another. (In fact, this is so rare that right now we don't have a big enough sample of teams in our college database to do a study on it.)

At this stage, however, these concerns are minor. The Longhorns are loaded with athletes at the skill positions, their offensive line returns more career starts (91) than anybody else in the country, their defense is deeper and more experienced than in recent years, and they have fewer question marks than anybody else in the conference. They are the favorites heading into the fall.

Top 2010 NFL Prospects: QB Colt McCoy (1), LB Sergio Kindle (1), OL Adam Ulatoski (1-2) DE Lamar Houston (2-3)

No. 5 OKLAHOMA SOONERS 10-2 (6-2)

2008: 12-2 (7-1)		FEI: No. 3	S&P+: No. 3	F/+ : No. 3	Program FEI: No. 5	Returning Starters: OFF 5, DEF 9		
2008 Offense		Rank	2008 Defense		Rank	2008 Field Position		Rank
Offensive FEI	0.786	2	Defensive FEI	-0.433	11	Field Position Advantage	0.532	18
Unadjusted Offense	0.894	3	Unadjusted Defense	-0.036	59	2009 Projections		Rank
Offensive S&P+	151.7	2	Defensive S&P+	129.2	7	FEI	0.219	5
Rushing S&P+	133.4	6	Rushing S&P+	129.8	9	Strength of Schedule	0.251	39
Passing S&P+	170.5	1	Passing S&P+	129.3	7	Offensive FEI	0.545	6
Standard Downs S&P+	128.6	6	Standard Downs S&P+	124.8	8	Defensive FEI	-0.450	10
Passing Downs S&P+	151.3	3	Passing Downs S&P+	139.6	9	Mean Wins: 9.9 Big 12: 6.5		

Oklahoma returns only 29 career starts on the offensive line in 2009 — second-worst in the conference — but if a new line gels around star tackle Trent Williams, the offense should click, and the Sooners could be as good as ever.

Heisman winner Sam Bradford surprised many by returning for his junior season to defend both the Heisman and Oklahoma's three straight South division titles. If Bradford is not running for his life behind a thin, patchwork offensive line, he will have plenty of weapons surrounding him. Backs DeMarco Murray and Chris Brown should both be healthy in the fall after rehabilitating from injuries most of the offseason; behind them are former high school stars Justin Johnson and Jermie Calhoun. The receiving corps is raw behind star tight end Jermaine Gresham and receiver Ryan Broyles, but

the Sooners are optimistic about injury-prone senior Adron Tennell, junior Brandon Caleb, and sophomore Jameel Owens. The offensive line is a large concern, but against most teams the Oklahoma offense should click along without missing much of a beat from 2008.

Oklahoma's defense was much-maligned through portions of 2008, but the criticism was overblown. After struggling briefly to compensate for an injury that sidelined linebacker Ryan Reynolds, the Sooners were almost as dominant as ever, finishing seventh in the Close-Game S&P+ rankings and allowing some of the lowest Success Rate+ figures across the board. Every key figure on this defense will be back in 2009.

Oklahoma should have one of the best defensive lines in the game behind star tackles Gerald McCoy and DeMarcus Granger and ends Auston English,

Jeremy Beal and Frank Alexander. Linebacker Travis Lewis was a revelation as a sophomore, and Austin Box got valuable experience in Reynolds' absence. Reynolds also returns, but with the experience around him, not as much will be required of him. In the defensive backfield, the Sooners will miss departed safeties Nic Harris and Lendy Holmes, but the cornerback tandem of Dominique Franks and Brian Jackson should be rock solid.

In all, Oklahoma's national title hopes will come

down to blocking and a random slip-up. If OU loses to Texas but goes 11-1, they will be in the national title hunt, as they were in 2008. But if another team gets to Bradford — and tricky road trips to Miami, Kansas, Nebraska and Texas Tech do loom — then the Sooners' 2009 goals will not include a national title.

Top 2010 NFL Prospects: QB Sam Bradford (1), DT Gerald McCoy* (1), OL Trent Williams (1), Jermaine Gresham (1)*

No. 24 OKLAHOMA STATE COWBOYS 8-4 (5-3)

2008: 9-4 (5-3)		FEI: No. 36	S&P+: No. 14	F/+ : No. 18	Program FEI: No. 41	Returning Starters: OFF 9, DEF 7		
2008 Offense		Rank	2008 Defense		Rank	2008 Field Position		Rank
Offensive FEI	0.552	7	Defensive FEI	0.155	77	Field Position Advantage		0.526 26
Unadjusted Offense	0.672	7	Unadjusted Defense	0.296	98	2009 Projections		Rank
Offensive S&P+	123.5	13	Defensive S&P+	113.2	27	FEI	0.100	24
Rushing S&P+	123.2	13	Rushing S&P+	108.6	41	Strength of Schedule	0.185	19
Passing S&P+	129.4	11	Passing S&P+	115.8	17	Offensive FEI	0.634	5
Standard Downs S&P+	118.5	14	Standard Downs S&P+	104.2	49	Defensive FEI	0.194	83
Passing Downs S&P+	136.9	10	Passing Downs S&P+	117.7	27	Mean Wins: 7.6 Big 12: 4.7		

For a while last October, the Big 12 South was looking at not only a three-way race for the title, but a four-way race. Oklahoma State had followed up a surprising upset of Missouri in Columbia by coming within four points of Texas in Austin. Their QB-RB-WR combo of Zac Robinson, Kendall Hunter and Dez Bryant looked like OSU's best since Mike Gundy was handing to Thurman Thomas and throwing to Hart Lee Dykes. Meanwhile, defensive coordinator Tim Beckman was unloading a bag of tricks on opponents, confusing both Chase Daniel and Colt McCoy, and completely confounding Baylor's Robert Griffin.

Unfortunately, Beckman's bag of tricks fell empty, and the Cowboys finished the season by giving up 59 points to Texas Tech, 61 to Oklahoma, and 42 in a Holiday Bowl loss to Oregon. All three of these opponents had Top 10 offenses, but regardless, Oklahoma State finished the year losing three of four after an 8-1 start.

No disappointment, however, can quell runaway optimism in Stillwater for 2009. Robinson (3,000 yards passing, 500 rushing), Hunter (1,555 yards rushing, 17 total touchdowns), and Bryant (1,480 yards receiving, 21 total touchdowns) all return, and the OSU offensive line, led by potential 2010 Top 10 pick Russell Okung, is the second-most experienced in the conference behind Texas. The only offensive question mark comes at wide receiver, where the Cowboys are thin

and inexperienced behind Bryant, and Brandon Pettigrew has departed for the NFL. Early indications say redshirt freshman Juston Blackmon could be a strong player, but clearly the answers here will not come until the fall.

The defense is highlighted by All-American candidate Andre Sexton and a strong, experienced linebacker corps. The secondary has been shaken up with the losses of cornerback Jacob Lacey and safety Ricky Price, but the biggest adjustment will come on the sidelines. Defensive Coordinator Beckman accepted the head coaching job at Toledo, and while replacement Bill Young has put together a strong resume at Kansas and Miami, it sometimes takes a defense a while to adapt to a new coordinator.

Oklahoma State has become this year's Texas Tech — the choice of many preseason prognosticators to have a breakthrough season. If the stars stay healthy and the defense adapts well to Young's defensive philosophy, they will have a chance. But a tough home schedule — Georgia, Missouri, Texas, and Texas Tech all visit Stillwater — and a Thanksgiving weekend trip to Norman await.

Top 2010 NFL Prospects: OL Russell Okung (1), WR Dez Bryant (2-3), CB Perrish Cox (5-7), S Andre Sexton (5-7)

No. 25 TEXAS TECH RED RAIDERS 8-4 (5-3)

2008: 11-2 (7-1)		FEI: No. 15	S&P+: No. 15	F/+ : No. 16	Program FEI: No. 20	Returning Starters: OFF 4, DEF 7		
2008 Offense	Rank	2008 Defense		Rank	2008 Field Position		Rank	
<i>Offensive FEI</i>	0.716	4	<i>Defensive FEI</i>	-0.364	21	Field Position Advantage	0.494	69
<i>Unadjusted Offense</i>	1.026	2	<i>Unadjusted Defense</i>	0.103	78	2009 Projections		Rank
Offensive S&P+	128.0	7	Defensive S&P+	105.7	45	FEI	0.098	25
Rushing S&P+	138.9	4	Rushing S&P+	96.1	77	Strength of Schedule	0.261	41
Passing S&P+	121.7	15	Passing S&P+	114.4	21	Offensive FEI	0.470	7
Standard Downs S&P+	121.4	11	Standard Downs S&P+	98.7	63	Defensive FEI	-0.341	19
Passing Downs S&P+	143.5	7	Passing Downs S&P+	142.3	7	Mean Wins: 8.1 Big 12: 4.5		

If Oklahoma State is this year's Texas Tech, what does that leave for this year's Texas Tech? Before 2008, the Red Raiders under Mike Leach had been almost boringly consistent, winning between seven and nine games every year of the 2000s. Tech broke through with 11 wins and a South co-title in 2008, but they will likely take a step back into eight-win land in 2009 as they attempt to replace three-year starting quarterback Graham Harrell and two-time All-American receiver Michael Crabtree.

Harrell and Crabtree proved that if you put elite talent into Mike Leach's wide-open offense, the yards and wins will pile up in unprecedented fashion. But it is a given that Tech will move the ball at will against a majority of teams, no matter who is slinging the ball around. This year, those honors will likely go to senior Taylor Potts, long-time backup to Harrell.

Though Crabtree is gone, there is no shortage of decent options in the receiving corps — Detron Lewis (71 catches), Tramain Swindall (42), Edward Britton (30), and Lyle Leong (17) have all shown flashes of talent, and walk-on Alex Torres looked great in the spring. At running back — yes, Tech uses a running back sometimes — Baron Batch was outstanding in

2008 (742 rushing yards, 6.7 yards per carry). Even though the Red Raiders only use the run to keep teams off-balance, he is a tremendous weapon.

Harrell and Crabtree were great, but the other reason Tech was so successful in 2008 was that their defense, while not great, was not the liability it had been in years past with Leach. Their Close-Game S&P+ ranked only 45th in the country, but they were seventh on Passing Downs. Their offense would put the pressure on opponents to pile up points, and the defense would leverage desperate opponents into passing situations, then light them up. (For you NFL fans reading, consider the defensive philosophy of the Indianapolis Colts.)

The strength of Tech's defense was on the defensive line, where Brandon Williams and McKinner Dixon combined for 19 sacks and Colby Whitlock was one of the league's best tackles. Whitlock returns, as does improving tackle Richard Jones, but replacements need to be found for at defensive end. Tech also needs a new anchor in the secondary with the departure of Darcel McBath and Daniel Charbonnet.

Top 2010 NFL Prospects: CB Jamar Wall (4-5), OL Brandon Carter (6-7), OL Rajon Henley (6-7)

No. 61 TEXAS A&M AGGIES 5-7 (3-5)

2008: 4-8 (2-6)		FEI: No. 113	S&P+: No. 98	F/+ : No. 101	Program FEI: No. 70	Returning Starters: OFF 9, DEF 7		
2008 Offense	Rank	2008 Defense		Rank	2008 Field Position		Rank	
<i>Offensive FEI</i>	0.033	56	<i>Defensive FEI</i>	0.567	116	Field Position Advantage	0.461	109
<i>Unadjusted Offense</i>	-0.021	57	<i>Unadjusted Defense</i>	0.584	114	2009 Projections		Rank
Offensive S&P+	93.6	85	Defensive S&P+	92.4	84	FEI	-0.004	61
Rushing S&P+	88.7	95	Rushing S&P+	88.2	93	Strength of Schedule	0.217	31
Passing S&P+	97.8	70	Passing S&P+	96.4	72	Offensive FEI	0.456	8
Standard Downs S&P+	94.0	87	Standard Downs S&P+	94.3	83	Defensive FEI	0.263	91
Passing Downs S&P+	117.1	26	Passing Downs S&P+	86.9	92	Mean Wins: 5.4 Big 12: 3.0		

Former Green Bay Packers coach Mike Sherman took over the Texas A&M head coaching job before the 2008 season, and to say the Aggies struggled would be an understatement. Never mind that they lost to Ar-

kansas State in the season opener, and never mind that they gave up a combined 188 points to Oklahoma State, Kansas State, Texas Tech, and Iowa State in October.

No, the most jarring, telling loss of the season came

in a 41-21 shellacking at the hands of Baylor in mid-November. Baylor had more young talent and athleticism than the Aggies, and it sent warning signals of the road ahead.

If Texas A&M has any hope for a bounce-back season in 2009, it is because of the developing connection between junior quarterback Jerrod Johnson and sophomore receivers Ryan Tannehill and Jeff Fuller; that is, unless Tannehill overtakes Johnson for his

starting job.

Meanwhile, both leadership and an influx of speed are needed on a defense that was almost equally iffy at defending the run (93rd in Rushing S&P+) and pass (72nd). Hope is high that linebacker Von Miller can provide both.

Top 2010 NFL Prospects: DT Kellen Heard (4-5), OL Michael Shumard (6-7), LB Anthony Lewis (6-7).

No. 73 BAYLOR BEARS 4-8 (2-6)

2008: 4-8 (2-6)		FEI: No. 78	S&P+: No. 40	F/+ : No. 57	Program FEI: No. 92	Returning Starters: OFF 9, DEF 9		
2008 Offense		Rank	2008 Defense		Rank	2008 Field Position		Rank
Offensive FEI	0.286	21	Defensive FEI	0.285	95	Field Position Advantage	0.491	76
Unadjusted Offense	0.350	18	Unadjusted Defense	0.409	108	2009 Projections		Rank
Offensive S&P+	110.4	37	Defensive S&P+	102.1	58	FEI	-0.040	73
Rushing S&P+	116.0	28	Rushing S&P+	100.4	65	Strength of Schedule	0.203	26
Passing S&P+	105.1	47	Passing S&P+	102.4	56	Offensive FEI	0.318	14
Standard Downs S&P+	102.1	59	Standard Downs S&P+	107.0	42	Defensive FEI	0.270	92
Passing Downs S&P+	109.2	44	Passing Downs S&P+	99.8	65	Mean Wins: 4.4 Big 12: 2.1		

Is this the year Baylor returns to the land of the living? Following a season that saw the Bears finish 4-8 while going 0-3 in games decided by a touchdown or less, with an offense that finished 37th in Close-Game S&P+ (28th rushing) and a young defense that was solid on Standard Downs (42th), there is hope.

More specifically, there is Robert Griffin III. A true freshman in 2008, Griffin — who bears a striking resemblance to SNL-era, “James Brown’s Celebrity Hot Tub Party” Eddie Murphy — was eased into the lineup during nonconference play but still finished with 2,091 yards passing (15-3 TD-INT, 59.9% completion rate) and 843 yards rushing (13 TD). Barring a sophomore slump, Griffin seems a lock for a 2,000-1,000 season, but in BU’s quest for their first bowl since 1994, coach Art Briles needs to find more complementary talent for Griffin. Nine offensive starters return, including intriguing junior running back Jay Finley (865 rushing yards,

5.8 yards per carry). Much hope resides in sophomore receiver Kendall Wright turning into a big-time threat.

An experienced defense (nine starters returning) hopes to build around the up-the-middle trifecta of All-Big 12 safety Jordan Lake, three-year starting linebacker Joe Pawelek, and defensive tackles Trey Bryant and Phil Taylor. Taylor, a Penn State transfer, is particularly intriguing after a dominating spring.

If there is a red flag for the Bears, it is that they benefitted tremendously from turnovers. Their +16 turnover margin was fourth-best in the country, and a margin that high is hard to duplicate from one year to another. Defenses will start to figure out Griffin’s tendencies as well, meaning he will potentially throw more than just three interceptions in 2009.

Top 2010 NFL Prospects: LB Joe Pawelek (4-5), S Jordan Lake (4-5), TE Justin Akers (6-7)