

# Atlantic Coast Conference

**F**or a conference mocked for so long as a one-man show, the extended absence of a real national power hasn't done much for the ACC's reputation. Since the collapse of Florida State's reign of terror over the rest of the league a decade ago, the ACC champion is 1-10 in BCS games, and the conference as a whole joins the MAC, Conference USA and Sun Belt as the only leagues that have failed to put a team in the top five of the final polls. Seven of those 11 years, the ACC has failed to put a team in the top ten. In 2011, on the heels of another dismal postseason punctuated by Clemson's 70-33 Orange Bowl incineration at the hands of West Virginia, it failed to put a team in the top 20. Altogether, ACC teams were 2-6 last winter in bowl games and 0-2 in BCS games, extending their failure to beat a single ranked team from another conference (based on the final polls) all season. The power void has yawned so wide for so long, it's beginning to seem permanent.

Such a mediocre state of affairs has positioned the league as the Sick Man of college football in the ongoing wars of realignment. The waves of chaos rippling across the continent in search of increasingly lucrative television money have left the ACC straddling the divide between the Haves and Have Nots—an ironic twist, considering the ACC's bold move to solidify its place at the adult's table by poaching Miami, Virginia Tech, and Boston College at the Big East's expense back in 2003. With the dominoes continuing to fall at a rapid pace last year, the ACC made another night-

time raid into Big East territory to annex Pittsburgh and Syracuse, both scheduled to expand the league's ranks to 14 members in 2013. But it may have been too little, too late: When the ACC's newly renegotiated, \$3.6 billion television deal with ESPN this spring failed to match the record sums in recently renegotiated deals by the Big 12, Pac-12, and SEC, several Florida State officials began nakedly lobbying for a move to the Big 12.

If Florida State leaves the fold, though, the ACC will lose its most valuable asset in its most vulnerable sport, and it will almost certainly lose another (either Clemson or Virginia Tech) to give the Big 12 the even dozen teams it needs under NCAA rules to reboot its conference championship game. That, in turn, will diminish the ACC's influence in the ongoing process of converting the BCS into a four-team playoff by 2014, and make it exponentially more difficult to place a team in that playoff (or to reap the as yet undetermined financial benefits certain to come with it). Once that happens, its seat at the table may be permanently removed.

As of publication, that scenario remains speculative. And in the murky game of brinksmanship that is conference realignment, much surer machinations have come and gone or fallen apart at the last minute. But if FSU follows through on its threat, and the ACC watches its BCS birthright slip through its fingers as a result, there will be no shortage of postmortems looking over the last ten years and wondering what took so long.

## ATLANTIC

## No. 7 Florida State Seminoles (10-2, 7-1)

2011: 9-4 (5-3) / F/+ #8 / FEI #12 / S&amp;P+ #11

Program F/+	-199.9	16	Returning Starters: 6 OFF, 8 DEF		2-Yr Recruiting Rank	3		
2011 Offense			2011 Defense		2011 Field Position			
Offensive F/+	+4.9%	32	Defensive F/+	+10.4%	6	Field Position Advantage	0.560	3
Offensive FEI:	0.052	54	Defensive FEI	-0.51	10	2012 Projections		
Offensive S&P+	89.5	56	Defensive S&P+	150.5	5	Mean Wins	10.3	
Rushing S&P+	103.8	56	Rushing S&P+	134.6	9	Proj. F/+	+22.2%	7
Passing S&P+	105.1	54	Passing S&P+	129.8	12	Offensive F/+	+7.0%	30
Standard Downs S&P+	108.1	41	Standard Downs S&P+	127.7	7	Defensive F/+	+15.2%	4
Passing Downs S&P+	114.6	35	Passing Downs S&P+	134.7	15	Strength of Schedule	0.370	56

Many years ago, when some brilliant, overworked hack coined the phrase “on paper” to describe the gap between potential and reality, he probably had Florida State football in mind. A full decade after ceding their crown as perennial ACC overlords, the Seminoles are still pulling in first-rate recruiting classes, still rolling out blue-chip lineups that command respect from the preseason polls, and still finding ways to fall short of their potential. Since the league expanded to twelve teams in 2006, the ‘Noles have failed to win the ACC championship they used to take for granted and have dropped at least two games to unranked opponents in every season. In three of those six years, they’ve finished outside of the polls their own selves. For prognosticators, Florida State is the team that cried “wolf.”

This is useful to remember when scanning another depth chart that appears too stacked to fail. There’s the senior quarterback, E.J. Manuel, surrounded by a familiar corps of veteran skill players and a mostly intact offensive line. There are ten returning starters from the best overall defense in the conference, four of them on a nasty-looking defensive line, where a handful of five-star backups threaten to hijack the rotation. (Behind NFL-bound starters Brandon Jenkins, Bjoern Werner and Everett Dawkins are a number of highly-regarded recruits, including sophomore Timmy Jernigan and incoming freshmen Mario Edwards

and Eddie Goldman.) The schedule is as friendly as ever, featuring not just one but *two* FCS patsies out of the gate as well as both Clemson and Florida coming to Tallahassee. The stench of decay that defined the end of the Bobby Bowden era has been replaced by an air of energy and momentum under Bowden’s successor, Jimbo Fisher. And after all, three of FSU’s four regular season losses last year *did* come with Manuel either on the bench or severely limited by a shoulder injury.

That’s how easy it is. But even with a healthy quarterback and a nightmarish D, the Seminoles won’t be turning any corners without a leap forward from the offensive line, a unit so inconsistent and besieged by injuries by the end of the year that it was forced to conscript four true freshmen into the starting lineup for the bowl game. The all-important left tackle spot was won this spring—at least temporarily—by a new convert from the defensive line, sophomore Cameron Erving. As always, talent and expectations here are a given. Until there’s stability up front, FSU stock remains *caveat emptor*.

*Top 2013 NFL Prospects: CB Xavier Rhodes\* (1), DE-OLB Brandon Jenkins (1-2), DE Bjoern Werner\* (1-2), QB E.J. Manuel (2-3), CB/KR Greg Reid (4-5), K Dustin Hopkins (6), DT Everett Dawkins (6-7).*

## No. 21 Clemson Tigers (9-3, 6-2)

2011: 10-4 (6-2) / F/+ #36 / FEI #32 / S&P+ #48

Program F/+	-199.9	18	Returning Starters: 6 OFF, 7 DEF		2-Yr Recruiting Rank	9		
2011 Offense			2011 Defense		2011 Field Position			
<b>Offensive F/+</b>	+7.7%	20	<b>Defensive F/+</b>	-2.3%	76	Field Position Advantage	0.501	59
Offensive FEI:	0.326	22	Defensive FEI	-0.134	50	<b>2012 Projections</b>		
Offensive S&P+	101.4	20	Defensive S&P+	110.4	69	<b>Mean Wins</b>	8.7	
Rushing S&P+	106.8	47	Rushing S&P+	94.4	82	Proj. F/+	+13.9%	21
Passing S&P+	131.1	12	Passing S&P+	99.3	65	Offensive F/+	+12.0%	10
Standard Downs S&P+	113.0	25	Standard Downs S&P+	96.0	80	Defensive F/+	+1.9%	51
Passing Downs S&P+	127.3	19	Passing Downs S&P+	119.4	31	Strength of Schedule	0.295	44

With a different ending, 2011 might have been a triumph for Clemson. Fueled by an 8-0 start, the Tigers climbed as high as fifth in the BCS standings, spent nearly half the season ranked in the top 10, clinched their first conference championship in two decades and finished the year in their first-ever BCS game. And yet, on the heels of the Orange Bowl debacle against West Virginia, the whole exercise felt like just another missed opportunity. With visions of a dark horse national title run beginning to form in late October, Clemson proceeded to drop four of its last six, all by double digits, including back-to-back blowouts at the hands of lowly N.C. State and archrival South Carolina that stung even more than the most lopsided rout in BCS history. For lack of a better term, it was a very *Clemson* collapse.

So the lack of momentum for the 2012 bandwagon is fairly easy to grasp, despite the usual trappings on the depth chart. Junior Tajh Boyd was the best quarterback in the conference as a first-year starter, thanks in no small part to the up-tempo spread attack imported by new offensive coordinator Chad Morris and the emergence of the most productive freshman in the nation, dreadlocked dynamo Sammy Watkins (1,225 receiving yards, 9.9 yards per target). By himself, Watkins is a cruise missile awaiting launch from anywhere on the

field; as part of an arsenal that also includes All-ACC tailback Andre Ellington (1,178 rushing yards, plus-7.3 Adj. POE) and veteran targets Jaron Brown and DeAndre Hopkins, he'll have plenty of opportunities to strike against man coverage. The question on offense isn't one of firepower, but of consistency.

The question on defense, on the other hand, is one of evolution. The historic embarrassment in the Orange Bowl sounded the death knell for coordinator Kevin Steele, who ceded the title a few days later to longtime Oklahoma defensive coordinator Brent Venables. First priority: rebuilding a defensive line that lost two seniors, sack master Andre Branch and defensive tackle Brandon Thompson, who went on the second day of the draft. Then it's on to a veteran but oft-victimized secondary, which found itself on the wrong end of too many career games by opposing quarterbacks. Not that Venables didn't have his share of long afternoons in the pass-happy Big 12, but given the current state of ACC offenses, another string of shootouts in his new job will carry a slightly different connotation.

*Top 2013 NFL Prospects: RB Andre Ellington (2-3); C Dalton Freeman (3-4); DE Malliciah Goodman (3-4); DB Rashard Hall (7-FA).*

## No. 45 Boston College Eagles (6-6, 4-4)

2011: 4-8 (3-5) / F/+ #69 / FEI #64 / S&P+ #82

Program F/+	-199.9	36	Returning Starters: 9 OFF, 9 DEF		2-Yr Recruiting Rank	44		
2011 Offense			2011 Defense		2011 Field Position			
<b>Offensive F/+</b>	-5.2%	88	<b>Defensive F/+</b>	+1.8%	48	Field Position Advantage	0.536	14
Offensive FEI:	-0.26	95	Defensive FEI	-0.187	40	<b>2012 Projections</b>		
Offensive S&P+	74.5	99	Defensive S&P+	114.9	59	<b>Mean Wins</b>	6.4	
Rushing S&P+	90.9	95	Rushing S&P+	98.7	65	Proj. F/+	+5.8%	45
Passing S&P+	85.1	98	Passing S&P+	112.7	28	Offensive F/+	-1.5%	64
Standard Downs S&P+	85.3	109	Standard Downs S&P+	101.4	54	Defensive F/+	+7.3%	22
Passing Downs S&P+	99.9	72	Passing Downs S&P+	119.9	30	Strength of Schedule	0.284	40

At one point last season, Boston College was 1-6 with losses to Northwestern, Central Florida, Duke, and Wake Forest, and coach Frank Spaziani was beginning to catch glimpses of the grim reaper around every corner. He wasn't the only one: Normally patient B.C. fans and blogs, frustrated by the impending end of a 12-year bowl streak, spent the rest of the year openly rooting for the reaper.

Few of the skeptics were swayed by three wins in the last five games, which still left the Eagles with a depressing 4-8 record and the most anemic offense in the conference. But it was enough for athletic director Gene DeFillipo, who apparently felt that Spaziani was owed another year out of either a) Loyalty, for filling the void in early 2009 after DeFillipo followed through on his promise to fire popular head coach Jeff Jagodzinski for interviewing with the New York Jets, or b) Sympathy, for presiding over a lineup plagued by injuries and youth. The offense played the entire season without its best running back or receiver, and the defense largely held its own despite being forced to rely on 26 starts from six different true freshmen.

At any rate, the prospect of a more seasoned, stable lineup doesn't make for much of a silver lining in an offseason already filled with its share of clouds: All-Universe linebacker Luke Kuechly left early for the draft, career rushing leader Montel Harris was booted from the team and a pair of returning defensive starters (defensive end Max Holloway and safety Hampton Hughes) turned down the standard fifth year of eligibility to get on with life. Among those who decided to stick it out, the most notable is junior quarterback Chase Rettig, who enters his third season as a starter with last year's top three rushers, top four receivers and four-fifths of the starting offensive line in tow. That group didn't do much together in 2011—the Eagles failed to crack 30 points against FBS competition, and cracked 20 just once without the help of a defensive score—and it will be adjusting to its third new coordinator in as many years. But there is nowhere to go but up.

*Top 2013 NFL Prospects: DT Kaleb Ramsey (6), TE Chris Pantale (7-FA).*

## No. 53 N.C. State Wolfpack (6-6, 3-5)

2011: 8-5 (4-4) / F/+ #67 / FEI #50 / S&P+ #77

Program F/+	-200.0	58	Returning Starters: 7 OFF, 7 DEF	2-Yr Recruiting Rank	62			
<b>2011 Offense</b>			<b>2011 Defense</b>		<b>2011 Field Position</b>			
<b>Offensive F/+</b>	+0.7%	57	<b>Defensive F/+</b>	-2.0%	73	Field Position Advantage	0.484	81
Offensive FEI:	0.012	58	Defensive FEI	-0.314	25	<b>2012 Projections</b>		
Offensive S&P+	75.3	98	Defensive S&P+	115.2	57	<b>Mean Wins</b>	6.0	
Rushing S&P+	78.2	115	Rushing S&P+	95.8	76	Proj. F/+	+2.4%	53
Passing S&P+	96.0	74	Passing S&P+	105.0	45	Offensive F/+	+2.2%	46
Standard Downs S&P+	85.7	108	Standard Downs S&P+	101.6	52	Defensive F/+	+0.2%	62
Passing Downs S&P+	103.0	60	Passing Downs S&P+	108.3	48	Strength of Schedule	0.389	61

A few years back, pop philosopher Malcolm Gladwell introduced the pseudo-intellectuals, self-help gurus and aspiring Earl Woodses of America to the “10,000-hour rule,” the idea that mastering any complex skill at an elite level requires 10,000 hours of dedicated practice. If you or someone you know subscribes to this idea, or some variant thereof, have I got the college football team for you: Entering year six under head coach Tom O'Brien, N.C. State's fate is more dependent on fourth- and fifth-year vets than any other outfit in the ACC, and maybe the country.

The starting quarterback, Mike Glennon, is a senior with draft-worthy measurables and now a full season as a starter under his belt; ditto the leading returning rusher (James Washington) and receiver (Tobias

Palmer). The offensive line returns five old hands who have combined for 111 career starts. On defense, the top four members of the secondary have combined for 114 career starts. Other seniors and fourth-year juniors are atop the depth chart at receiver, tight end, two of the three linebacker slots and both ends of the defensive line. These guys have played *a lot* of football together.

The line from quantity to quality, though, is still a little shaky—especially on the offensive line, whose venerable members presided over an attack last year that finished 115th in Rushing S&P+ and 98th in sacks allowed, barely avoiding the ACC cellar on both counts. Despite a relatively forgiving schedule, at various points the Wolfpack were blown out by

Cincinnati, shut out by Florida State, and upset by division doormats Wake Forest and Boston College. If not for an unsustainably high turnover margin (plus-14 for the year, best in the ACC and easily the best of the O'Brien era), they would have likely fallen short of the postseason for the third time in five years and subjected their coach to an offseason of incessant "hot seat" chatter.

Still, the fact that a struggling outfit did rally with a pair of November upsets over North Carolina and Clemson and an incredible fourth quarter comeback against Maryland to score a bowl bid does speak to a general upward trend over the course of the season, as

does the bowl win over Louisville. Glennon, in particular, showed up late with 11 touchdown passes in the three-game winning streak to close the year, arguably the three best games of his career. Given a little run support, enough time in the pocket and a go-to target to replace the departed T.J. Graham, it's not out of the question for Glennon to pass the Pack into dark horse contention in the Atlantic Division. But it would require a leap well beyond the natural progression.

*Top 2013 NFL Prospects: CB David Amerson\* (1), QB Mike Glennon (3-4), DB Brandan Bishop (6-7), OT R.J. Mattes (6-7).*

## No. 72 Maryland Terrapins (4-8, 2-6)

2011: 2-10 (1-7) / F/+ #96 / FEI #81 / S&P+ #95

Program F/+	-200.0	61	Returning Starters: 5 OFF, 8 DEF		2-Yr Recruiting Rank	47		
2011 Offense			2011 Defense		2011 Field Position			
Offensive F/+	-5.1%	87	Defensive F/+	-3.0%	83	Field Position Advantage	0.494	68
Offensive FEI:	-0.102	75	Defensive FEI	0.148	74	2012 Projections		
Offensive S&P+	80.8	79	Defensive S&P+	99.6	94	Mean Wins	3.9	
Rushing S&P+	109.1	41	Rushing S&P+	83.0	112	Proj. F/+	-3.9%	72
Passing S&P+	86.9	93	Passing S&P+	100.1	61	Offensive F/+	-5.1%	82
Standard Downs S&P+	100.8	63	Standard Downs S&P+	94.1	85	Defensive F/+	+1.2%	54
Passing Downs S&P+	109.9	45	Passing Downs S&P+	97.0	72	Strength of Schedule	0.324	48

Randy Edsall arrived in College Park last January touting Maryland as his "dream job," and immediately found himself in a nightmare. On the field, the Terps dropped their last ten against FBS competition, eight of them by double digits, including blow-out losses at the hands of Temple and Wake Forest and blown fourth quarter leads against Clemson and N.C. State. Off the field, holdovers from the Ralph Friedgen regime rejected the coaching transplant en masse—a staggering 24 players transferred out of the program during Edsall's first 14 months on the job, led by Wisconsin-bound quarterback Danny O'Brien and fellow starters at left tackle and safety. One venerable columnist in Washington compared Edsall to Captain Queeg in *Mutiny on the Bounty*; another skipped the literary pretense and called for his head after just one year.

None of which has seemed to throw Edsall, who has brushed off the attrition with a kind of "those who stay will be champions" resolve, even if, for now, he'll settle for a middling bowl game. To kick off the reboot, he ditched both coordinators in favor of Mike Locksley (a dysfunctional flop in his own right as head coach at New Mexico, but a proven

recruiter in his native D.C.) on offense and former Houston defensive coordinator Brian Stewart to resuscitate the most generous defense in the conference. On paper, this group also happens to be one of the most promising in 2012: The front seven alone boasts at least three future draft picks at defensive end (senior Joe Vellano, a two-time All-ACC pick) and linebacker (seniors Kenny Tate and Demetrius Hartsfield), along with four other regulars (tackles Andre Monroe and Keith Bowers and linebackers Alex Twine and L.A. Goree) who were thrown into the fire as freshmen. Tate and Monroe are also two of five likely starters on defense who missed at least three full games in 2011 to injury, which should be more than enough—at minimum—to pull the stat line out of the gutter.

It's harder to say the same about an offense that now rests on the unpredictable arm of junior C.J. Brown, a scrambly junior who completed just south of 50 percent of his passes last year and probably necessitates a full-time emphasis on the zone read. Whatever they do scheme-wise, the Terps are in desperate need of someone who fits the description of "playmaker." Even with three fairly reliable senior targets in the

passing game (Kevin Dorsey, Kerry Boykins and tight end Matt Furstenburg), the best hope for a breakthrough is five-star freshman Stefon Diggs, a DeSean Jackson type who passed on national offers to become Maryland's biggest local recruiting victory in ages. If

Diggs or prep teammate Wes Brown can't produce an immediate spark, it may be a short-lived trend.

*Top 2013 NFL Prospects: LB Kenny Tate (2-3), DT Joe Vellano (3-4), LB Demetrius Hartsfield (6).*

## No. 81 Wake Forest Demon Deacons (4-8, 2-6)

2011: 6-7 (5-3) / F/+ #66 / FEI #55 / S&P+ #71

Program F/+	-200.0	57	Returning Starters: 3 OFF, 7 DEF			2-Yr Recruiting Rank	90
2011 Offense			2011 Defense			2011 Field Position	
Offensive F/+	+2.3%	47	Defensive F/+	-3.4%	86	Field Position Advantage	0.483 83
Offensive FEI:	0.178	36	Defensive FEI	0.012	62	2012 Projections	
Offensive S&P+	86.6	62	Defensive S&P+	109.6	72	Mean Wins	3.8
Rushing S&P+	97.4	78	Rushing S&P+	95.6	77	Proj. F/+	-6.7% 81
Passing S&P+	107.5	47	Passing S&P+	94.3	77	Offensive F/+	-3.0% 69
Standard Downs S&P+	99.2	69	Standard Downs S&P+	92.9	89	Defensive F/+	-3.7% 84
Passing Downs S&P+	112.9	39	Passing Downs S&P+	106.3	51	Strength of Schedule	0.287 41

Jim Grobe once won an ACC championship at Wake Forest, which might as well have come with a guarantee of lifetime tenure. In the meantime, though, Grobe has managed the equally unprecedented task of keeping the Demon Deacons mostly in the black. Last year's trip to the Music City Bowl was their fourth bowl bid in six years, a run that quietly stands as Wake's best since World War II. Few coaches in the ACC or anywhere else have done as much with so little, or with so little credit.

So if there's anyone in the business with patience enough to handle, say, a chaotic overhaul of the entire offensive line, it's Jim Grobe. Not only is senior center Garrick Williams the only Deacon who's started a game up front, but aside from a few garbage snaps in last year's win over Gardner-Webb, only one other returning lineman (sophomore guard Colin Summers) has even set foot on the field, turning the spring into an impromptu round of *Winston-Salem Idol* for the 300-pound set. Given the beating he's already taken over his first two years on the job, junior quarterback Tanner Price may want to consider employing his red-

shirt year, or at least an insurance policy.

But seriously, folks, despite the reassuring presence of Price and steady junior receiver Michael Campanaro, this is a "rebuilding" year for the offense, to put it mildly. The defense is in significantly better shape, largely thanks to cornerbacks Merrill Noel and Kenny Okoro (42 combined career starts), a long-in-the-tooth linebacker corps and All-ACC nose guard Nikita Whitlock, an undersized junior who was reportedly set to join the Army before landing a late scholarship offer from Wake in 2009; he's repaid the favor by emerging as the most improbably disruptive lineman in the conference at a relatively bite-sized 260 pounds. (According to the school's scales, anyway, which means he's probably slightly smaller in reality.) That's the kind of underdog story programs like Wake Forest thrive on. But it's going to take a few more we haven't heard yet to get the Deacons back to .500.

*Top 2013 NFL Prospects: CB Kenny Okoro (7).*

Matt Hinton