

TN Valley

Thursday, December 4, 2025

# GAMEDAY



## ROUND 2

Georgia gets a second swing at Crimson Tide, this time for SEC championship

**Win a Mini Max Big Green Egg from Story & Lee!\***

# TAILGATE of the week RECIPE

## Mom's Chicken Thighs

### INGREDIENTS

2 lbs. boneless skinless chicken thighs  
1 cup apricot jam

1 cup Italian dressing  
1 1/2 (2 oz.) envelopes of onion soup mix

### DIRECTIONS:

Rinse chicken with water, pat dry with paper towel. In a bowl, combine other ingredients well. Pour in a 6 quart low cooker, then add chicken. Cook on low 4-6 hours. Serves 3-5.



This week's recipe submitted  
by Nigel Hubbard,  
Russellville, AL

Submit your recipes now and you could win \$50 if your recipe is selected.

To enter, submit your recipe to:

Tailgate Recipe Contest, 219 West Tennessee St., Florence, AL 35630 - Attn: Mara Beth Cravens

\*Weekly winners are entered for grand prize drawing for a Mini Max Green Egg.



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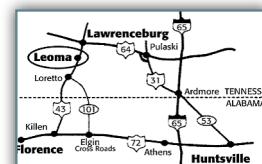
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Ohio State fans hope the Buckeyes still deserve their No. 1 ranking after playing Indiana. [JACOB KUPFERMAN/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

## THE LINE

(as of Tuesday)

Friday	TODAY O/U		UNDERDOG
at JAMES MADISON	23½	47½	Troy
Kennesaw State	2½	59½	at JAX STATE
at BOISE STATE	3½	58½	UNLV
North Texas	2½	66½	at TULANE

## Saturday

Western Michigan	1½	43½	Miami (Ohio)
Texas Tech	12½	49½	BYU
Georgia	2½	47½	Alabama
Ohio State	4½	48½	Indiana
Virginia	3½	57½	Duke

## SEC TITLE GAMES

2024: Georgia 22, Texas 19, OT (MVP: Daylen Everette, Georgia)  
 2023: Alabama 27, Georgia 24 (Jalen Milroe, Alabama)  
 2022: Georgia 50, LSU 30 (Stetson Bennett, Georgia)  
 2021: Alabama 41, Georgia 24 (Bryce Young, Alabama)  
 2020: Alabama 52, Florida 46 (Najee Harris, Alabama)  
 2019: LSU 37, Georgia 10 (Joe Burrow, LSU)  
 2018: Alabama 35, Georgia 28 (Josh Jacobs, Alabama)  
 2017: Georgia 28, Auburn 7 (Roquan Smith, Georgia)  
 2016: Alabama 54, Florida 16 (Reuben Foster, Alabama)  
 2015: Alabama 29, Florida 15 (Derrick Henry, Alabama)  
 2014: Alabama 42, Missouri 13 (Blake Sims, Alabama)  
 2013: Auburn 59, Missouri 42 (Tre Mason, Auburn)  
 2012: Alabama 32, Georgia 28 (Eddie Lacy, Alabama)  
 2011: LSU 42, Georgia 10 (Tyrann Mathieu, LSU)  
 2010: Auburn 56, South Carolina 17 (Cam Newton, Auburn)  
 2009: Alabama 32, Florida 13 (Greg McElroy, Alabama)  
 2008: Florida 31, Alabama 20 (Tim Tebow, Florida)  
 2007: LSU 21, Tennessee 14 (Ryan Perrilloux, LSU)  
 2006: Florida 38, Arkansas 28 (Percy Harvin, Florida)  
 2005: Georgia 34, LSU 14 (D.J. Shockley, Georgia)  
 2004: Auburn 38, Tennessee 28 (Jason Campbell, Auburn)  
 2003: LSU 34, Georgia 13 (Justin Vincent, LSU)  
 2002: Georgia 30, Arkansas 3 (David Greene, Georgia)  
 2001: LSU 31, Tennessee 20 (Matt Mauck, LSU)  
 2000: Florida 28, Auburn 6 (Rex Grossman, Florida)  
 1999: Alabama 34, Florida 7 (Freddie Milons, Alabama)  
 1998: Tennessee 24, Mississippi St. 14 (Peerless Price, Tennessee)  
 1997: Tennessee 30, Auburn 29 (Peyton Manning, Tennessee)  
 1996: Florida 45, Alabama 30 (Danny Wuerffel, Florida)  
 1995: Florida 34, Arkansas 3 (Danny Wuerffel, Florida)  
 1994: Florida 24, Alabama 23 (Ellis Johnson, Florida)  
 1993: Florida 28, Alabama 13 (Terry Dean, Florida)  
 1992: Alabama 28, Florida 21 (Antonio Langham, Alabama)

## GAMES ON TV

### Friday

CUSA, Kennesaw State at Jacksonville State, 6 p.m., CBSSN  
 Sun Belt, Troy at James Madison, 6 p.m., ESPN  
 American Conference, North Texas at Tulane, 7 p.m., ABC  
 Mountain West, UNLV at Boise State, 7 p.m., FOX

### Saturday

Big 12, BYU vs. Texas Tech, Arlington, Texas, 11 a.m., ABC  
 Mid-American, Miami (Ohio) vs. Western Michigan, Detroit, 11 a.m., ESPN  
 SWAC, Prairie View at Jackson State, 1 p.m., ESPN2  
 SEC, Georgia vs. Alabama, Atlanta, 3 p.m., ABC  
 ACC, Duke vs. Virginia, Charlotte, N.C., 7 p.m., ABC  
 Big Ten, Indiana vs. Ohio State, Indianapolis, 7 p.m., FOX

FCS playoffs, Rhode Island at UC Davis, 9 p.m., ESPN2

### Dec. 13

Celebration Bowl, Atlanta, 11 a.m., ABC  
 Army vs. Navy, Baltimore, 2 p.m., CBS  
 L.A. Bowl, 7 p.m., ABC

### Dec. 16

Salute to Veterans Bowl, Montgomery, 8 p.m., ESPN

### Dec. 17

Cure Bowl, Orlando, Fla., 4 p.m., ESPN



The Duke Blue Devils hope to ring another victory bell after the ACC title game. [CHRIS SEWARD/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

### Dec. 19

68 Ventures Bowl, Mobile, 7:30 p.m., ESPN  
 CFP first-round game, 7 p.m., ABC

### Dec. 20

CFP first-round game, 11 a.m., ABC  
 CFP first-round game, 2:30 p.m., tba  
 CFP first-round game, 6:30 p.m., tba

### Dec. 22

Famous Idaho Potato Bowl, Boise, Idaho, 1 p.m., ESPN

### Dec. 23

Boca Raton (Fla.) Bowl, 1 p.m., ESPN  
 New Orleans Bowl, 4:30 p.m., ESPN  
 Frisco (Texas) Bowl, 8 p.m., ESPN

### Dec. 24

Hawai'i Bowl, Honolulu, 7 p.m., ESPN

### Dec. 26

GameAbove Sports Bowl, noon, ESPN  
 Rate Bowl, Phoenix, 3:30 p.m., ESPN  
 First Responder Bowl, Dallas, 7 p.m., ESPN

### Dec. 27

Military Bowl, Annapolis, Md., 11 a.m., ESPN  
 Pinstripe Bowl, New York, 11 a.m., ABC  
 Fenway Bowl, Boston, 1:15 p.m., ESPN  
 Pop-Tarts Bowl, Orlando, Fla., 2:30 p.m., ABC

### Dec. 22

New Mexico Bowl, Albuquerque, 4:45 p.m., ESPN  
 Arizona Bowl, Tucson, 3:30 p.m., CW

### Dec. 23

Gator Bowl, Jacksonville, Fla., 6:30 p.m., ESPN  
 Texas Bowl, Houston, 8:15 p.m., ESPN

### Dec. 29

Birmingham Bowl, 1 p.m., ESPN

### Dec. 30

Independence Bowl, Shreveport, La., 1 p.m., ESPN  
 Music City Bowl, Nashville, 4:30 p.m., ESPN  
 Alamo Bowl, San Antonio, 8 p.m., ABC

### Dec. 31

ReliaQuest Bowl, Tampa, Fla., 11 a.m., ESPN  
 Holiday Bowl, San Diego, 7 p.m., FOX

### Jan. 8

CFP semifinal, Fiesta Bowl, Glendale, Ariz., 6:30 p.m., ESPN

### Jan. 9

CFP semifinal, Peach Bowl, Atlanta, 6:30 p.m., ESPN

### Jan. 19

CFP championship, Miami Gardens, Fla., 6:30 p.m., ESPN

## SOUTHEASTERN CONFERENCE CHAMPIONSHIP GAME

# Alabama vs. Georgia

**When:** 3 p.m. Saturday

**Where:** Atlanta

**TV/radio:** ABC/FM-93.9, FM-97.7, AM-920

**Records:** No. 10 Alabama (10-2), No. 3 Georgia (11-1)

**The series:** Alabama leads 45-26-4.

## Four-down territory

**1. The hunted:** Sometimes it's hard to figure out who has the advantage in a rematch game. In Alabama's recent history, there's a pattern — it's best to lose the first time. Alabama's had two pivotal rematch games from the same season, starting with LSU in 2011. Alabama lost the regular-season clash, but downed LSU in the national title game. Alabama downed Georgia in the 2022 SEC title game but lost to the Bulldogs in the national title game. Alabama won this year's regular-season meeting with Georgia in September and has a motivated Georgia team to contend with in Atlanta.

**2. Running low:** It's bad enough Alabama's run game is one of the worst in the SEC, but now the Crimson Tide is down two backs heading into Atlanta. Starter Jamill Miller left the Auburn game with an injury and is questionable for this week, and backup Kevin Riely has been out with a jaw injury. That leaves sophomore Daniel Hill and freshman AK Dear as the options as well as rarely used Dre Washington. "They'll all have to do their part," Alabama coach Kalen DeBoer said. "We just got to keep plugging away with guys that are excited about their opportunity."

**3. Under the gun:** The defensive strategy of putting pressure on Alabama QB Ty Simpson seems to work. Oklahoma dialed up several blitz packages for Simpson, who was sacked four times, was strip-sacked and threw an interception. Last week, Auburn constantly pressured Simpson, who finished 19-of-35 for 122 yards and was sacked three times. He also tossed three touchdowns. In the first meeting with Georgia, Simpson was 24-of-38 for 276 yards, two touchdowns and no sacks. "None of that means anything. They're going to have a chip on their shoulder and something to prove and we know what's at stake," Simpson said.



Alabama receiver Isaiah Horton can point to his big game against Georgia in September with hopes of another big game Saturday against the Bulldogs.

[COLIN HUBBARD/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

**4. Same Dawgs, new tricks:** In the first meeting, Georgia was caught off guard, and Alabama used two drives of 14 plays that ended with touchdowns. Later, Alabama scored on another long drive and sealed the game by converting a crucial third down. Several months have passed, and the Bulldogs have matured a bit. "Defensively we've got guys a little more experienced," Georgia coach Kirby Smart said. "That's probably the biggest difference probably is that the guys that were young when we played them last time, they're a little more grown up now."

## Key matchup

**Alabama QB Ty Simpson vs. Georgia QB Gunner Stockton**

The game will be decided by the play of these two. As Simpson goes, so goes the Tide offense. He's third in the SEC with

3,056 passing yards and tied for second with 25 touchdowns. Stockton's passing numbers aren't eye-popping at 2,535 yards with 20 touchdowns, but his 403 rushing yards with eight touchdowns make him dangerous.

## Player of the week

**Isaiah Horton, WR**

In the first meeting with Georgia, Horton led the Tide with five catches for 65 yards and a touchdown. Also, he's coming off a game against Auburn where he caught five passes for 35 yards with three touchdowns.

## By the numbers

**0:** Alabama has not lost to Georgia in the SEC title game in four meetings.

**7:** Georgia has played in seven of the last eight SEC title games, including five

straight.

**7:** Georgia has lost the most SEC title games with seven.

**16:** Alabama is making its league-leading 16th SEC title-game appearance, having won a league-best 11.

## Prediction

**Georgia 28, Alabama 21**

Alabama will play with lots of emotion Saturday with a playoff spot at stake. There is a slight chance of getting in with a loss, but nothing should be left to chance. Georgia is in the driver's seat, having won eight straight since the September loss to the Tide. The Bulldogs have had plenty of time to stew on that loss and will come up with a game plan to finally break through and beat Alabama in an SEC title game.

— Edwin Stanton

# Tide's fate could hinge on SEC success

By Maura Carey  
The Associated Press

Alabama's trip to the SEC championship offers some reward and plenty of risk.

The Crimson Tide's path to the playoff narrowed before the calendar flipped to September after a loss to Florida State in Week 1. Months later, despite winning 10 of its last 11 games and clinching the SEC championship game berth, Alabama still isn't a sure thing for the College Football Playoff.

That could change this weekend. A win against Georgia on Saturday would secure a spot for Alabama as one of the five highest-ranked conference winners. A loss would put the Tide's fate in the hands of the CFP committee, which could dock them for a third loss — even if it stemmed from a championship game competitors didn't qualify for.

Saturday gives Alabama the chance to take control of its own destiny, and the Tide has no interest in giving any outsiders final say.

As far as second-year coach Kalen DeBoer is concerned, his team's future shouldn't be a topic of debate. The Tide is 10-2 this season. Their only loss aside from a Week 1 blunder was a close one against a ranked Oklahoma team in Week 12. That was after knocking off six conference opponents, four of which were ranked.

"We're in the championship game with a 7-1 (SEC) record, won four conference games on the road in the toughest conference," DeBoer said Monday. "I just think when you're really trying to have a playoff, you need your best teams in there. There's no doubt in my mind that we are one of the best teams. I don't say that arrogantly. I just really believe that's what it is."

It doesn't help that the CFP committee is subjective by nature, and the playoff race is overcrowded. But no matter how the numbers are crunched, even with a loss, DeBoer argues his squad has proved it belongs.

"There's a ton of metrics I know people look at: strength of record, FPI. We're right at the top," he said. "Playing in your conference championship in the SEC shouldn't be something that we're worried about as far as what that would do to our playoff hopes. We got here by earning it."



Alabama receiver Ryan Williams and the Crimson Tide hope to latch on to a second win over Georgia and secure a spot in the playoffs. [COLIN HUBBARD/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

Should Alabama lose on Saturday, earning a CFP bid would be historic. No three-loss team has ever appeared in the playoff. Alabama would have to compete for one of the seven remaining spots. In the SEC alone, Texas A&M, Ole Miss, Oklahoma and Vanderbilt would have stronger overall records. In other words, Alabama's back is against the wall, but that's not a new feeling this season.

"Man, I feel like honestly we've kind of had that mindset ever since our first loss," senior linebacker Deontae Lawson said. "Just control what we can control, and that's doing our best to win the game, leave nothing up for chance."

The Crimson Tide has had Georgia's number in recent years. Kirby Smart is 1-7 against his former team, and Bama has won the past three. In September, Alabama snapped Georgia's 33-game

home win streak, 24-21. That offers the locker room some peace of mind ahead of the heavyweight showdown.

"We've already beat this team before. We're going to go out there and make sure we do the same thing," Tide defensive lineman Tim Keenan III said. "We're going to make sure we handle business on our own end and not leave it up to the committee to make decisions for us."

## CONFERENCE USA CHAMPIONSHIP GAME

# Kennesaw State at Jacksonville State

**When:** 6 p.m. Friday

**TV:** CBS Sports

**Records:** Kennesaw State (9-3), Jacksonville State (8-4)

**The series:** Tied 3-3.

## Four-down territory

**1. Another round:** This will be the second meeting between the programs in less than a month. Jacksonville State beat Kennesaw State 35-26 on Nov. 15 in Jacksonville. Foreshadowing? The Gamecocks led from the 2:42 mark of the second quarter on with the Owls making it a one-score game with 3:22 left. Jacksonville State had two running backs rush for more than 100 yards. Cam Cook scurried for 132 yards and a score on 27 touches, while quarterback Caden Creel ran for 127 yards and two touchdowns on 14 carries. Kennesaw State quarterback Amari Odom threw for 248 yards, but three of his passes went to defenders. It allowed the Gamecocks, who later lost to Florida International, to host the conference title game.

**2. A smooth transition:** Unlike a cross-state school, Jacksonville State has invested quite a bit into its football program — both in terms of money and facilities — and, wouldn't you know, it has helped result in wins as it has moved up in classification. (Good coaches and administrators aren't a bad thing, either.) The Gamecocks made the jump from the FCS to FBS ahead of the 2023 season. Friday will mark their second straight CUSA title game appearance (they beat Western Kentucky 52-12 last season). A win would also give them their third consecutive nine-win FBS season and fourth overall. Overall, Jacksonville State is 20-4 against regular-season CUSA competition. Not too shabby at all.

**3. Quite the turnaround:** It's not a stretch to say Kennesaw State is enjoying its second season in the FBS a lot more than its first. The Owls went 2-10 last season, including 2-6 in conference play. It was the fewest games the program had won since its founding in 2015. Under first-year coach Jerry Mack, Kennesaw State is in line for its first double-digit win season since 2021. Of the Owls' three losses, two have come against Power Four foes — a 10-9 loss at Wake Forest on Aug. 29 and a 56-9 drubbing from Indiana, which is currently the No. 2 team



Jacksonville State running back Cam Cook is no stranger to meeting his teammates in the end zone. [JACKSONVILLE STATE ATHLETICS]

in the nation. Now, Kennesaw State has been helped by its ability to win close games. Of the six single-score matchups they've played, the Owls have won five.

**4. It appears to be an advantage:** Conference USA has used a No. 1-vs.-No. 2-seeded championship game since 2022. The home team has won all three — UTSA besting North Texas 48-27 the first year, Liberty topping New Mexico State 49-35 in 2023 and Jacksonville State last season. The winner seems destined for the Cure Bowl. It's where UTSA and Jacksonville State both went. Liberty went to the Fiesta Bowl as the highest-ranked Group of Five school that year. But three games is a small sample size. How about when divisions were used from 2005-21? Home teams were 12-5 in that format.

## Key matchup

**JSU RB Cam Cook vs. KSU LB Baron Hopson**

Cook had a successful outing the last

time the Gamecocks and Owls met (see above). But the junior has been effective nearly every week. He leads the nation with 1,581 yards (5.7 yards per carry on 276 touches) and is tied for sixth with 15 rushing touchdowns. So far, only two teams have held Cook to less than 100 yards — UCF (75 yards on 17 carries) and Southern Miss (77 on 22). Hopson, meanwhile, ranks 10th in the country with 120 tackles. He has also tallied 8 1/2 tackles for loss.

## Player of the week

**Amari Odom, KSU QB**

As mentioned above, Odom did throw three interceptions the last time the teams met. Two of those led to Jacksonville State touchdowns. So ...

## By the numbers

**41:** The number of touchdowns Jacksonville State has scored this season. Only 12 have been via the pass game. The

rest are rushing.

**3:** The number of conference titles Kennesaw State owns. Each one — 2017-18 and 2021 — came when the Owls were in the Big South.

**2:** The most title games won — by current or former — conference members. Western Kentucky, UCF, UAB, East Carolina, Tulsa, Florida Atlantic and UTSA are tied. Jacksonville State can join that group with a win.

**29:** The number of sacks Kennesaw State has recorded. It ranks first in CUSA. The Owls also surrender the second fewest to opposing defenses with 17.

## Prediction

**Jacksonville State 31, Kennesaw State 28**

The first matchup was fairly entertaining. Maybe this one can be as well. But hard to pick against the home team with the conference's history.

— David Glovach

SUN BELT CHAMPIONSHIP GAME

# Troy at James Madison

**When:** 6:30 p.m. Friday

**TV:** ESPN

**Records:** Troy (8-4), No. 11 James Madison (11-1)

**The series:** James Madison leads 2-1.

## Four-down territory

**1. Goose is not cooked:** Troy quarterback Goose Crowder missed much of the season due to an injury, but he has blossomed in two games since his return. Crowder is 51-of-77 passing for 646 yards and seven touchdowns, helping the Trojans beat Georgia State and Southern Miss to claim their third West Division championship in four seasons. He began the season as Troy's starter before getting hurt. In the two games before Crowder's return, both losses, the Trojans mustered 187 and 138 yards total offense against Arkansas State and Old Dominion. In the two games since, they've averaged over 425 yards. The "Goose" nickname comes from his brother, Michael, who hung it on him in honor of their favorite movie, "Top Gun".

**2. Short-timer?** James Madison coach Bob Chesney is reportedly set to become UCLA's new coach at the end of the season. He has the Dukes contending for the Group of Five's College Football Playoff berth. JMU, at No. 19, is the highest-ranked Group of Five team, ahead of No. 20 North Texas, No. 21 Tulane and No. 23 Navy. Chesney is 131-51 in 16 seasons as a head coach, including 20-5 in two seasons with the Dukes.

**3. Let's go streaking:** James Madison, with last week's 59-10 win at Coastal Carolina, has a 10-game winning streak. The Dukes are tied for the third longest streak in the FBS and, with a win, will be second at worst. No. 1 Ohio State (16 wins in a row) and No. 2 Indiana (12) play for the Big Ten title Saturday. Notre Dame (10) does not play this weekend. JMU lost 28-14 at Louisville on Sept. 5 before hitting its stride.

**4. Put up your Dukes:** James Madison is in its fourth season in the Sun Belt and playing for its first Sun Belt championship. However, the Dukes have nine league titles in their history, most recently in 2021 when Curt



Troy quarterback Goose Crowder staying upright could be key at James Madison for the Trojans, who are tied for the most sacks allowed in the nation.

[JACOB KUPFERMAN/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

Cignetti — now at No. 2 Indiana — led them to a sixth Colonial Athletic Association crown. JMU was ineligible for the league title in 2022 and 2023 and, had it been eligible, would have been in the championship game. Against Troy both times.

## Player of the week

### Tae Meadows, Troy RB

Meadows leads Troy with 685 yards rushing, more than double the No. 2 Trojan, with five touchdowns. His rushing could clear things for Crowder since Troy has given up 49 sacks this year, which is tied with Ball State for worst in the FBS. Unfortunately, the Dukes surrendered minus-5 yards last week at Coastal.

## Key matchup

### Troy DE Donnie Smith vs. JMU QB Alonza Barnett III

Barnett has accounted for over 3,000 yards offense and 33 touchdowns this season, while Smith leads the Sun Belt with nine sacks. Barnett accounted for four touchdowns last week at Coastal Carolina. Smith had a season-high two sacks in Troy's win at Southern Miss.

## By the numbers

**3-31:** Troy has a 3-31 record against ranked teams. The Trojans beat No. 17 Missouri at home in 2004, No. 22 LSU on the road in 2017 and No. 22 Texas-San Antonio in a 2022 bowl.

**5:** Where James Madison ranks in total defense in the FBS. The Dukes

allow an average of 253.5 yards per game.

**Plus-4:** The Trojans already have a four-win improvement in coach Gerard Parker's second season.

**8:** Troy has eight Sun Belt titles, the most in the league and two ahead of Arkansas State.

## Prediction

### James Madison 34, Troy 14

The Shenandoah Valley is a scenic place that played a prominent role in the Civil War. Unfortunately for Troy, the Trojans won't be marching home with many warm memories or, in particular, a conference championship.

— A. Stacy Long



Indiana quarterback Fernando Mendoza leads the nation in touchdown passes and has the Hoosiers on a second straight historic season. [STEPHANIE SCARBROUGH/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]



Ohio State's Julian Sayin, who began his career at Alabama, has the top completion rate and passing efficiency in the nation with the top-ranked Buckeyes. [JAY LAPRETE/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

# Big Ten stars chasing title, Heisman

By Michael Marot  
The Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — Ohio State quarterback Julian Sayin and Indiana quarterback Fernando Mendoza each have one prize in mind for their showdown this weekend in Indianapolis: a Big Ten championship.

It's another one — Heisman Trophy winner — that will consume most of next week's debate.

The two first-year starters at their respective schools each played their way into frontrunner status by leading their teams to unbeaten regular seasons, posting outstanding numbers and delivering when the stakes have been highest. They get final chances to pad those Heisman resumes when No. 1 Ohio State and No. 2 Indiana square off in the Big Ten championship game.

Sayin and Mendoza appear tailor-made for the moment.

"With the spotlight, with the pressure of it, comes a privilege," said Mendoza, a two-year starter

at California before arriving in Bloomington.

Mendoza has been deferential to his teammates and coaches all season, routinely using his platform to build up those who helped him reach the precipice of becoming the first Indiana player to win college football's most prestigious award.

Sayin, meanwhile, has spent most of this season trying to get acclimated to being the starter for the defending national champs and more recently with a revolving door of receivers caused by injuries. He started his career at Alabama and redshirted last season in Columbus. He would be Ohio State's first Heisman winner since Troy Smith in 2006.

Mendoza and Sayin find themselves as the feature attractions in a rare, late-season head-to-head matchup between the Football Bowl Subdivision's last two unbeaten teams.

The tale of the tape is every bit as close as one might expect.

Sayin's staggering 78.9%

completion rate leads the nation, as does his passing efficiency of 184.85. His 30 touchdown passes rank second nationally. He's 13th in passing yards with 3,065 and tied for 15th in points responsible for with 180.

Mendoza leads the FBS with 32 TD passes, ranks second in passing efficiency at 183.71 and points responsible for at 228, fifth in completion percentage (72.0%) and 27th in yards passing with 2,758.

Both are 12-0 overall, 9-0 in conference play and have five interceptions. The biggest difference statistically — Mendoza averages 13.07 yards per throw, No. 24 nationally, while Sayin ranks 62nd.

Mendoza has a chance to put an exclamation on Indiana's second straight record-breaking season — if Indiana beats the Buckeyes for the first time since 1988, claims its first conference crown since 1967 and reaches No. 1 in The Associated Press poll for the first time in school history.

Sayin is trying to extend the nation's

longest active winning streak to 17 games, capture Ohio State's first conference crown since 2020 and help the Buckeyes become back-to-back national champions for the first time in school history.

"Julian Sayin is a tremendous football player. He's young but doesn't play like he's young," second-year Hoosiers coach Curt Cignetti said. "Super quick release, very accurate and he's mobile. They've got great weapons on the outside."

But as coaches and players stay focused on Saturday's contest, the quarterbacks are downplaying the game inside the game — whether the winner has the inside track to winning the Heisman.

"A lot of quarterbacks have struggled with (Ohio State's defense) throughout the entire season, and there's a reason for that," Mendoza said. "I think it's a great opportunity and a great challenge for the Indiana offense to play the Indiana brand of ball we want to play against such a great defense."



Eric Morris isn't exiting North Texas for Oklahoma State until the end of the Mean Green's season.  
[JESSICA TOBIAS/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]



Jon Sumrall is pointing toward a hopeful playoff berth with Tulane before leaving for the Florida Gators. [MIKE BUSCHER/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

# Morris, Sumrall stay put before moving on

By Stephen Hawkins  
The Associated Press

North Texas coach Eric Morris and Tulane's Jon Sumrall confided in each other over the past few weeks when the good friends were facing similar decisions about their futures. Both are going to finish this season with their American Conference teams before moving on to their next jobs.

Morris and Sumrall are two of the league's four coaches who are headed to Power Four schools. Their teams, the No. 20 Mean Green (11-1) and the No. 21 Green Wave (10-2), play Friday night in the American championship game. The winner very likely will make it into the 12-team College Football Playoff.

"Not a ton of people really know what we're going through and how hard some of this stuff is and how hard the decisions are," Morris, who will be Oklahoma State's new coach, said Monday. "Ultimately, I think it's really cool that we're kind of in the same position right now,

and that we're both still able to lead these teams that have fought so hard for us."

Unlike Lane Kiffin, who left playoff-bound 11-1 Ole Miss to become LSU's new coach, Sumrall and Morris are being allowed to finish what they started this season.

There is a very distinct difference in those situations. Kiffin left for a hated Southeastern Conference rival of the Rebels. Morris and Sumrall are both moving up from Group of Five schools.

"A lot of respect for the outfit we're playing, and I'm very honored and privileged that Tulane, given the circumstances we're in, is allowing me to coach in the game and do this experience with our players," said Sumrall, who will be Florida's new coach. "Because when you have a chance to pursue a championship, man, there's nothing like it."

The other American coaches moving up are South Florida's Alex Golesh, who was introduced Monday as Auburn's new coach, and Ryan Silverfield going from Memphis to Arkansas.

Tim Pernetti, the American's commissioner, said on a Zoom call about Friday's championship game in New Orleans that he was not surprised that power conference schools needing new coaches looked at those in his league. He expected it.

"This league is overflowing with talented people, from administrators to coaches to student-athletes," he said. "Just a talented, tough, gritty league. And I think we have the ingredients that a lot of programs around America are looking for. ... People are viewing the American as a place that has a lot of talent in the coaching ranks."

Pernetti, who said he has no doubt about the American champion making the CFP, also expressed his admiration for Morris and Sumrall finishing out the season with their teams, and for the schools allowing that to happen.

"It says a lot, and it also speaks to the fact that there can be cooperation between institutions when these changes take place," Pernetti said. "It

speaks to the administration, like you have to have a maturity about these situations. Like things are gonna change and it's very easy to show people the door. What's harder is to finish the season given all the momentum both of these teams have going into the championship game."

Also under different circumstances, Sumrall didn't have the same chance to finish the season when he left Troy for Tulane in December 2023.

Sumrall was still Troy's coach when the Trojans won the Sun Belt championship with a home win over Appalachian State in the league title game, but the Green Wave hired him six days later and Troy was not a playoff contender.

The Trojans, the same day as Tulane's hire, named defensive coordinator Greg Gasparato interim head coach for their Birmingham Bowl loss that month to Duke. Troy hired Gerard Parker, who is their current coach, days before the bowl game. Gasparato joined Sumrall at Tulane.



Tulane's Jon Sumrall won't be the only coach in the American Conference waving goodbye to his current program when the season is over. [MATTHEW HINTON/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

# This week's title games

## No. 20 North Texas at No. 21 Tulane

**What:** American championship

**When:** 7 p.m. Friday

**TV:** ABC

**Records:** North Texas (11-1), Tulane (10-2)

**The series:** Tulane leads 3-0.

**The lowdown:** It's not easy being green? Apologies to Kermit the Frog, but the Mean Green or the Green Wave will take a nice trophy Friday and, perhaps, land a

College Football Playoff berth. ... Navy tied with North Texas and Tulane for first place but lost the tiebreaker due to a head-to-head loss to North Texas. ... Tulane is in the championship game for the fourth straight year and is hosting for the third time. ... The Green Wave's only prior American title was in 2022. ... North Texas is in its third year in the American and hasn't won a conference title since it won four straight Sun Belt

championships 2001-04. ... Tulane coach Jon Sumrall and North Texas coach Eric Morris are headed elsewhere. Sumrall has been hired at Florida and Morris at Oklahoma State, but they haven't, respectively, been fully Gator-ized or Cowboyed-up yet. They'll coach their teams the rest of the season. ... Green Wave QB Jake Retzlaff, a star last year at BYU, has thrown for over 2,700 yards and 14 touchdowns this season. He also

leads Tulane with 561 yards and 14 TDs rushing. ... North Texas QB Drew Mestemaker scoffs at Retzlaff's passing numbers. Mestemaker has 3,835 yards passing with 29 TDs against four interceptions. ... Mestemaker has all of 57 yards rushing this year, over 1,100 behind team-leading Caleb Hawkins, who has 23 scores. ... North Texas, which

# CAPSULES

From Page G10

has two overtime wins, lost 63-36 at home to South Florida in October. ... Tulane is undefeated at home this year, losing only at Ole Miss and Texas-San Antonio, for the first time since Yulman Stadium opened in 2014. The last time the Wave was perfect at home was 1998 when Tulane played in the Superdome.

## UNLV at Boise State

**What:** Mountain West championship

**When:** 7 p.m. Friday

**TV:** FOX

**Records:** UNLV (10-2), Boise State (8-4)

**The series:** Boise State leads 12-3.

**The lowdown:** The two teams finished in a four-way tie for first place, but all four teams did not play. ... The tie was broken by a composite average of nationally recognized metrics (Connelly SP+, ESPN SOR, KPI and SportSource). ... UNLV had a 45.5 composite and Boise a 47.75. ... So sorry, San Diego State (51.0) and New Mexico (54.75). ... This is the third straight year UNLV and Boise have met for the league title. The Broncos won both, 44-20 in 2023 and 21-7 last year. ... Boise is hosting due to a 56-31 win over UNLV on Oct. 18. ... The Rebels haven't won a conference championship since wearing the Big West crown in 1994. Their only other was in 1984 in the Pacific Coast Athletic, but it was forfeited due to ineligible players. ... First-year UNLV coach Dan Mullen was previously at Mississippi State (2009-17) and Florida (2018-21). He has a 113-63 career record. ... Boise State, which made the College Football Playoff last year, is headed toward a 28th straight winning season. It's the third-longest such streak in FBS history, tied with Oklahoma (1966-93). ... Notre Dame had 42 straight winning seasons, ending in 1932, and Nebraska 40, ending in 2002. ... Broncos QB Maddux Madsen has 1,994 yards and 15 touchdowns passing, while RB Dylan Riley has 1,016 yards and 10 TDs rushing. ... UNLV QB Anthony Colandrea crossed 3,000 yards passing in last week's 42-17 win at Nevada and has 22 touchdowns.

## No. 5 Texas Tech vs. No. 11 BYU

**What:** Big 12 championship

**When:** 11 a.m. Saturday

**Where:** Arlington, Texas

**TV:** ABC

**Records:** Texas Tech (11-1), BYU (11-1)



UNLV is finally hoping to blast through the ceiling that has been Boise State in the Mountain West championship game. [UNLV ATHLETICS]



Will Texas Tech fans storm another field should the Red Raiders collect another win over BYU this season? [ANNIE RICE/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]



**Miami (Ohio)** was able to celebrate winning a three-way tiebreaker to take part in a little more **MACAction**. [MIAMI (OHIO) ATHLETICS]

## CAPSULES

From Page G11

**The series:** Texas Tech leads 2-1.

**The lowdown:** Texas Tech has not won an outright conference championship since 1955. The Red Raiders were members of the Border Conference with Arizona, Arizona State, now-Division III Hardin-Simmons (Texas), New Mexico State, UTEP and now-DII West Texas A&M (then known as West Texas State Teachers College). ... Texas Tech shared Southwest Conference titles in 1979 and '94. ... BYU's last conference title was in 2007 when it was still part of the Mountain West. ... Each of the Red Raiders' wins have come by at least 20 points. ... Texas Tech can set a program record for victories by beating the Cougars. The Red Raiders have reached 11 wins only three other times. ... BYU coach Kalani Sitake is currently linked to the vacant Penn State job. He has never held a coaching position east of the Rockies. ... Texas Tech won the regular-season meeting, topping the Cougars 29-7 on Nov. 8. ... BYU is currently 11th in the CFP rankings. It would need to win to get in with the final two spots being filled by

the winners of the ACC and American or Sun Belt.

### Western Michigan vs. Miami (Ohio)

**What:** MAC championship

**When:** 11 a.m. Saturday

**Where:** Detroit

**TV:** ESPN

**Records:** Western Michigan (8-4), Miami (7-5)

**The series:** Miami leads 39-24-1.

**The lowdown:** Miami won a three-way tiebreaker with Toledo and Ohio to gain a spot in the title game. The RedHawks won due to a 3-0 record against common opponents Ball State, Northern Illinois and Western Michigan. ... The RedHawks are in the title game for a third straight year, beating Toledo 23-14 in 2023 and losing to Ohio 38-3 last season. ... Western Michigan has one appearance since 2000, beating Ohio 29-23. ... Miami busted the Broncos 26-17 in October with Dom Dzioban kicking field goals of 44, 24, 29 and 51 yards. ... Western Michigan has won four straight since that journey to the RedHawks. ... The Broncos clinched its title berth by forcing five turnovers and scoring 31 straight points in a 31-21 win at Eastern Michigan last week. ... Miami wrapped



**Those at Jackson State are no strangers to celebrating with some kind of SWAC trophy as of late.**

[JACKSON STATE ATHLETICS]



**Aiden Fisher and Indiana run off the field to unprecedented success this season. But the Hoosiers have not beaten Ohio State since 1988.** [DOUG MCSCHOOLER/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

up the MAC East with a 45-24 home win over Bowling Green State. ... Broncos DE Nadame Tucker has 12 sacks, a half-sack behind national leader David Bailey of Texas Tech. Tucker's sacks have tallied 100 yards, 14 behind Bailey's. ... Tucker's has 18.5 tackles for loss to rank No. 1 in the land.

### Prairie View at Jackson State

**What:** SWAC championship

**When:** 1 p.m. Saturday

**TV:** ESPN2

**Records:** Prairie View (9-3), Jackson State (9-2)

**The series:** Jackson State leads 41-15-2.

**The lowdown:** Prairie View is in the title game for the third time in the past five seasons, but the Panthers haven't won a SWAC championship since 2009. ... Jackson State seeks a second straight conference crown and a fourth in five seasons. ... The Tigers have won the last three meetings with Prairie View, but the most recent was in 2021, also in the league title game. ... JSU has won four straight since a 26-24 loss to Grambling State in Las Vegas in late October. ...

# CAPSULES

From Page G12

The Tigers capped their regular season two weeks ago with a 27-21 win over Alcorn State, surviving two last-season Hail Mary pass attempts to clinch the SWAC East. ... Jackson State's Ahmad Miller has 1,027 yards rushing but just five touchdowns. The Tigers have 28 rushing TDs spread among nine players. ... Prairie View has the No. 3 defense in the FCS, giving up an average of 269.4 yards. ... JSU's is 13th at 317.6 yards. ... Prairie View WR Jyzaiah Rockwell has 988 yards receiving and seven TDs this season. He's reached 100 yards in three of his last five games. ... The Panthers sealed the SWAC West with a 56-9 win over Arkansas-Pine Bluff three weeks ago. They beat Mississippi Valley State 59-6 in their regular-season finale two weeks ago.

## No. 1 Ohio State vs. No. 2 Indiana

**What:** Big Ten championship

**When:** 7 p.m. Saturday

**Where:** Indianapolis

**TV:** Fox

**Records:** Ohio State (12-0), Indiana (12-0)

**The series:** Ohio State 81-12-5.

**The lowdown:** Ohio State and Indiana have vastly different experiences when it comes to winning (or playing) for a Big Ten title. ... The Buckeyes have won



**QueSean Brown and Duke are hoping to point the way to the College Football Playoff for future teams with more than two losses.** [BEN MCKEOWN/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

at least a share of the league 39 times, the last one in 2020. Ohio State has made six appearances in the Big Ten championship game since its inception in 2011. Five of those resulted in victories. ... The Hoosiers are making their first appearance in the conference title game. They last won a share of the Big Ten crown in 1967. ... Both teams are also No. 1 and No. 2 in the College Football Playoff rankings with the winner likely getting the top spot. ...

This is only the third time the top-two teams in the Associated Press rankings are meeting in a conference title game. Alabama and Florida were the first two. The Gators beat the Crimson Tide 31-20 for the 2008 SEC championship. Alabama returned the favor next year with a 32-13 victory. ... Indiana has not beaten Ohio State since 1988. ... Indiana is second in the country in scoring offense (44.3 points per game). Ohio State is 13th (37). ... The Buckeyes are

first in scoring defense (7.8 ppg). The Hoosiers are second (10.9).

## No. 16 Virginia vs. Duke

**What:** ACC championship

**When:** 7 p.m. Saturday

**Where:** Charlotte, North Carolina

**TV:** ABC

**Records:** Virginia (10-2), Duke (7-5)

**The series:** Virginia leads 42-34.

**The lowdown:** The ACC championship was first played in 2005. Virginia and Duke will each be making their second appearance. The Cavaliers took part in the 2019 edition. They promptly lost 62-17 to Clemson. The Blue Devils were participants in 2013. They were stomped 45-7 by Florida State. ... Virginia has never won an ACC title outright. It shared in 1989 and '95. ... Duke last held the league crown by itself in 1962. ... The winner would join Georgia Tech, Wake Forest and Pitt as the only other teams not named Clemson, Florida State or Virginia Tech to win an ACC title bout. Georgia Tech, Wake Forest and Pitt have won once each. ... The victor will secure what is likely to be the ACC's lone representative in the College Football Playoff. No team has made the CFP with more than two losses. ... Virginia has won nine of the last 10 meetings, including a 34-17 victory on No. 15. ... The Cavaliers can set a program record for wins. They have just one other 10-win season. That came in 1989.

— A. Stacy Long and David Glovach

# PICKS PANEL



**STACY LONG**

**DAVID GLOVACH**

**RENITA JIMMAR**

**SIRVELL CARTER**

**IGRETT DEWALT**

**DEANGELO MCDANIEL**

**CALEB SUGGS**

**MARA BETH CRAVENS**

**SEC:** Alabama vs. Georgia

**CUSA:** Kennesaw St. at Jacksonville St.

**Sun Belt:** Troy at James Madison

**Big Ten:** Ohio State vs. Indiana

**Big 12:** Texas Tech vs. BYU

**ACC:** Virginia vs. Duke

**American:** North Texas at Tulane

**Mountain West:** UNLV at Boise State

**SWAC:** Prairie View at Jackson State

**MAC:** Western Michigan vs. Miami (Ohio)

**Last week**

Georgia

Kennesaw State

James Madison

Ohio State

Texas Tech

Virginia

North Texas

Boise State

Jackson State

Western Michigan

7-3

101-39

Alabama

Jacksonville State

James Madison

Ohio State

Texas Tech

Virginia

Tulane

Boise State

Prairie View

Miami

8-2

96-44

Alabama

Kennesaw State

Troy

Ohio State

Texas Tech

Virginia

Tulane

Boise State

Jackson State

Prairie View

7-3

94-46

Alabama

Jacksonville State

James Madison

Ohio State

Texas Tech

Virginia

North Texas

UNLV

Jackson State

Miami

5-5

91-49

Georgia

Jacksonville State

Troy

Ohio State

Texas Tech

Virginia

Tulane

UNLV

Jackson State

Miami

6-4

90-50

Alabama

Jacksonville State

Troy

Ohio State

Texas Tech

Virginia

Tulane

UNLV

Jackson State

Miami

5-5

74-66

Georgia

Kennesaw State

James Madison

Ohio State

Texas Tech

Virginia

North Texas

UNLV

Jackson State

Western Michigan

5-5

73-67

Alabama

Jacksonville State

James Madison

Indiana

BYU

Duke

North Texas

UNLV

Jackson State

Jackson State

3-7

70-70

## COLLEGE STANDINGS

(Through Nov. 29 games)

## American Athletic Conference

	Conference All Games							
	WL	PF	PA	WL	PF	PA		
North Texas	7	1	382	228	11	1	561	290
Tulane	7	1	244	167	10	2	344	273
Navy	7	1	261	209	9	2	357	296
South Florida	6	2	389	194	9	3	516	280
East Carolina	6	2	278	183	8	4	402	244
Memphis	4	4	272	206	8	4	415	270
Army	4	4	182	180	6	5	253	248
UTSA	4	4	280	234	6	6	405	355
Temple	3	5	210	252	5	7	334	356
FAU	3	5	218	297	4	8	354	436
Rice	2	6	140	289	5	7	238	387
UAB	2	6	191	295	4	8	317	459
Tulsa	1	7	179	293	4	8	278	347
Charlotte	0	8	113	312	1	11	172	436

## Atlantic Coast Conference

	Conference All Games							
	WL	PF	PA	WL	PF	PA		
Virginia	7	1	242	162	10	2	398	240
Miami	6	2	262	120	10	2	409	166
Georgia Tech	6	2	257	228	9	3	397	300
Pittsburgh	6	2	276	205	8	4	421	299
SMU	6	2	256	142	8	4	395	248
Duke	6	2	290	220	7	5	415	353
Louisville	4	4	202	205	8	4	362	253
Wake Forest	4	4	179	211	8	4	322	258
California	4	4	202	252	7	5	298	318
Clemson	4	4	234	188	7	5	344	245
N.C. State	4	4	240	252	7	5	362	346
Stanford	3	5	153	222	4	8	226	350
Florida St.	2	6	201	194	5	7	396	264
North Carolina	2	6	147	203	4	8	231	294
Virginia Tech	2	6	162	243	3	9	257	362
Syracuse	1	7	116	260	3	9	242	419
Boston College	1	7	166	278	2	10	305	393

## Big 12 Conference

	Conference All Games							
	WL	PF	PA	WL	PF	PA		
BYU	8	1	278	197	11	1	408	213
Texas Tech	8	1	344	100	11	1	518	135
Utah	7	2	356	199	10	2	493	224
Arizona	6	3	280	201	9	3	391	227
Houston	6	3	251	229	9	3	340	262
Arizona St.	6	3	204	218	8	4	296	276
Iowa St.	5	4	234	206	8	4	329	242
TCU	5	4	244	243	8	4	369	302
Cincinnati	5	4	260	258	7	5	381	298
Kansas St.	5	4	277	238	6	6	353	320
Baylor	3	6	259	301	5	7	373	391
Kansas	3	6	229	265	5	7	337	321
UCF	2	7	173	257	5	7	292	283
West Virginia	2	7	175	232	4	8	261	370
Colorado	1	8	163	312	3	9	251	366
Oklahoma St.	0	9	128	305	1	11	170	400

## Big Sky Conference

	Conference All Games							
	WL	PF	PA	WL	PF	PA		
Montana St.	8	0	363	110	10	2	458	206
Montana	7	1	318	201	11	1	490	282
UC Davis	6	2	252	196	8	3	343	324
Sacramento St.	5	3	291	231	7	5	405	315
Idaho St.	5	3	229	211	6	6	396	327
N. Arizona	4	4	240	234	7	5	380	375
E. Washington	4	4	180	232	5	7	281	362
Cal Poly	2	6	207	256	4	8	330	378
Idaho	2	6	207	237	4	8	302	317
N. Colorado	2	6	166	270	4	8	243	341
Weber St.	2	6	184	302	4	8	277	460
Portland St.	1	7	171	328	1	11	194	512

## Big South-OVC Association

	Conference All Games							
	WL	PF	PA	WL	PF	PA		
Tennessee Tech	8	0	290	139	11	2	488	243
UT Martin	6	2	204	139	6	6	248	287
Gardner-Webb	5	3	208	188	7	5	330	357
L'wood (Mo.)	5	3	241	204	6	6	297	324
Chas. Southern	4	4	158	172	5	7	199	288
SE Missouri	3	5	179	198	4	8	278	361
W. Illinois	3	5	185	241	4	8	277	417
E. Illinois	2	6	142	200	3	9	210	350
Tennessee St.	0	8	83	209	2	10	155	319

## Big Ten Conference

	Conference All Games							
	WL	PF	PA	WL	PF	PA		
Indiana	9	0	376	108	12	0	532	131
Ohio St.	9	0	323	77	12	0	444	93
Oregon	8	1	289	155	11	1	458	178
Michigan	7	2	221	180	9	3	331	224
Southern Cal	7	2	282	202	9	3	348	269
Iowa	6	3	253	152	8	4	347	182
Illinois	5	4	217	257	8	4	352	279



Indiana mascot Hoosier the Bison hopes to still be riding high after the Big Ten title game. [VERA NIEUWENHUIS/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

## Ivy League

	Conference All Games							
	WL	PF	PA	WL	PF	PA		
Washington	5	4	238	178	8	4	405	233
Minnesota	5	4	176	244	7	5	279	281
Nebraska	4	4	204	252	7	5	351	276
Northwestern	4	5	183	214	6	6	270	251
Penn St.	3	6	249	240	6	6	381	257
UCLA	3	6	175	293	3	9	218	401
Rutgers	2	7	205	324	5	7	344	382
Wisconsin	2	7	81	211	4	8	154	259
Maryland	1	8	179	285	4	8	282	318
Michigan St.	1	8	189	289	4	8	295	359
Purdue	0	9	130	309	2	10	225	382

## Coastal Athletic Association

	Conference All Games							
	WL	PF	PA	WL	PF	PA		
Rhode Island	8	0	313	141	11	2	412	249
Villanova	7	1	273	170	10	2	389	256
Monmouth (N.J.)	6	2	305	186	9	3	348	333
New Hampshire	6	2	225	169	8	5	323	297
William & Mary	6	2	262	195	7	5	354	308
Maine	5	3	236	192	6	6	290	291
Elon	4	4	220	188	6	6	321	301
Towson	4	4	222	197	6	6	321	301
Campbell	2	6	224	248	2	10	296	430
Bryant	1	7	179	284	3	9	270	364
Albany (N.Y.)	1	7	132	282	2	10	201	387
Hampton	0	8	126	324	2	10	215	440

## Conference USA

	Conference All Games					
WL	PF	PA	WL	PF	PA	



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## COLUMN

# Is it all or nothing for Crimson Tide?

By Doug Segrest  
For GameDay

Here we are, just as we forecast in August, looking forward to a familiar showdown in Atlanta.

Alabama vs. Georgia V.

This could be one for the ages. And it could well bring an end to the SEC championship game as we've known it.

Regardless of the outcome, Georgia is in the College Football Playoff later this month. Georgia survived one of the nation's toughest schedules with just one early-season stumble — to Alabama, of course.

Alabama played an even more difficult slate, starting with a no-show season opener at Florida State and stumbling again with a turnover-plagued shortfall against Oklahoma. Yet the Crimson Tide is still standing.

For now.

Traditional wisdom says getting to Atlanta is enough. With the SEC getting multiple bids, the two playing for the conference title should be automatic participants. But that may not be the case.

The belief is that Alabama is on shaky ground because the CFP committee favors records over strength of schedule, which would make Bama a no-brainer. (Note that Vegas oddsmakers make Alabama a heavy favorite to be included, regardless of Saturday).

Of all CFP contenders, Alabama has taken the most difficult path and leads everyone in quality wins (7-1 vs. the Top 30 per Sagarin) by a wide margin. That includes four wins over then-AP Top 25 teams in four weeks, an unprecedented SEC feat. Plus, the Tide owns the second most-impressive single-game victory, the 24-21 win at Georgia.

The latter will be usurped by the winner of the No. 1 Ohio State vs. No. 2 Indiana Big Ten title game. But the other numbers can't be surpassed.

So, welcome to the showdown that's meaningless for Georgia and means everything for the Tide.

Both were tested in their annual rivalry games but Georgia, frankly, comes in hotter. Alabama could have erased all doubt but hasn't played in November as it did in October.

The guess here is that Georgia prevails



Alabama tight end Kaleb Edwards and the Crimson Tide could be on shaky playoff ground unless they take Georgia for another ride in the SEC championship game. [STEW MILNE/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

in the rematch.

Even a close loss might be enough to keep Alabama out. If that happens, look for the SEC championship game to go dark rather quickly. With the move to nine conference games in 2026, why include a landmine to cap the regular season?

Instead, look for alternatives — maybe a doubleheader featuring four SEC bubble teams vying for the final spots. Same venue, twice the fun.

In the meantime, prepare for a championship Saturday like no other. And keep your eye on other games that could impact Alabama's inclusion or exclusion with a loss.

## Looking ahead

- **American Athletic:** North Texas vs.

Tulane (7 p.m. Friday on ABC): The winner likely gets the Group of 12 spot in the CFP. Tulane is the highest-ranked G5 in the CFP Top 25, but North Texas could surge with a victory. James Madison is also still in contention.

• **Big 12:** BYU vs. Texas Tech (11 a.m. Saturday on ABC): The Red Raiders look to be locked in at No. 5. But what happens if BYU wins? Does the Big 12 get two spots (sorry, SEC) or does Texas Tech tumble out of contention? Regardless, the loser would still have a better record (that word again) than 10-3 Alabama or 9-3 Texas.

• **SEC:** Georgia vs. Alabama (3 p.m. Saturday on ABC): Alabama is 4-0 in SEC title games against Georgia. We said it's meaningless for this year's Bulldogs, but not for Kirby Smart's reputation.

• **ACC:** Duke vs. Virginia (7 p.m. Saturday on ABC): This may be the most oddly compelling game of all. If Duke pulls off the upset, does that knock the ACC out of the playoff? Miami continues to lurk, though.

• **Big Ten:** Indiana vs. Ohio State (7 p.m. Saturday on Fox): Gus Johnson, I hope you're ready and rested. This should go down as one of the most-anticipated conference finales in history. Instead, both teams are destined for CFP byes and could face off again in the national title game. Rest the starters, if you're smart.

*Doug Segrest, who covered college football for 28 years for numerous newspapers in Alabama and Tennessee, is a freelance columnist.*

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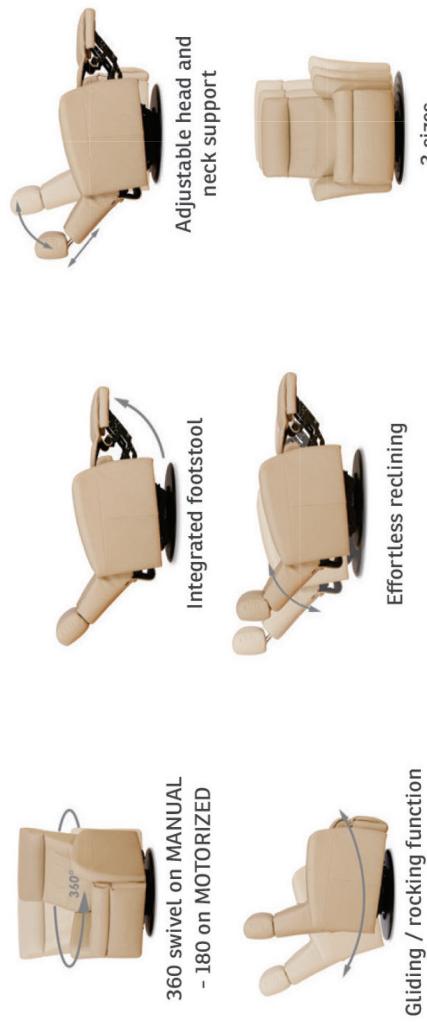
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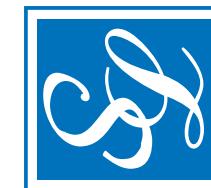
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