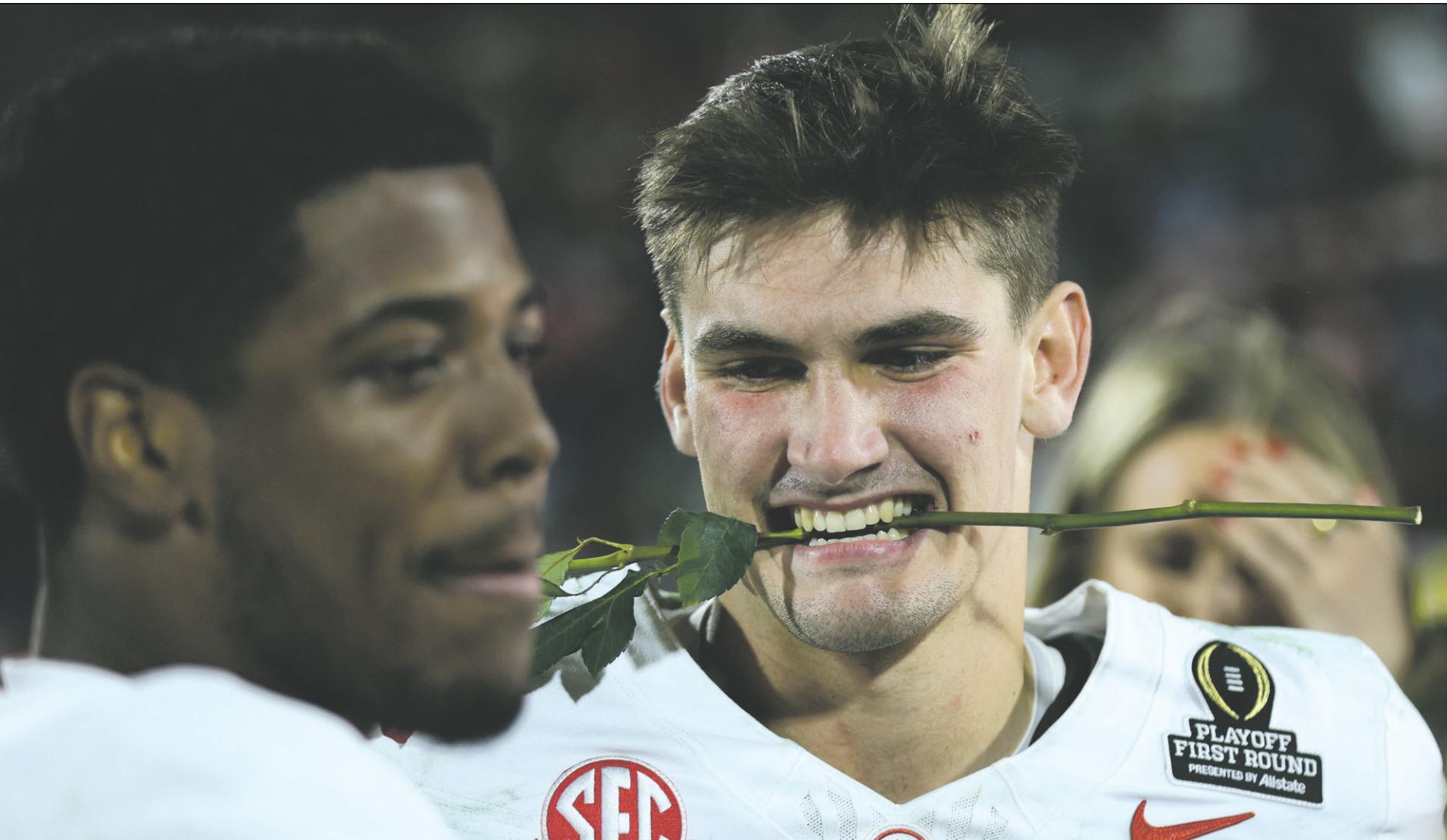


GAMEDAY



GOING BACK TO CALI

Tide hopes to leave Rose smelling sweet — Indiana: 'I don't think so'

COLUMN

Will history repeat in Saban Invite?

By Doug Segrest

For GameDay

When Alabama was announced for the prestigious game, the decision was widely ridiculed. Leading up to kickoff, the Crimson Tide was told it didn't belong — a familiar refrain from desk-chair warriors across the country.

You'll embarrass yourself.

Instead, Alabama fell behind by three scores, then rallied for a stunning comeback — the program's first LANK-assisted victory.

That was 100 years ago, when Alabama shocked Washington — the sport's elite — in the 1926 Rose Bowl.

The win announced Southern football's arrival and sent Wallace Wade's team home to celebrations at every stop along the rails.

A century later, Alabama returns to Pasadena as an underdog in the College Football Playoff quarterfinals — also known as the Nick Saban Coaching Tree Invitational.

Imagine waking from a coma to learn Alabama no longer has Saban and is considered the outsider, while Indiana — the losingest Power Four program in history — is unbeaten and ranked No. 1.

Yes, in football. (In basketball, Alabama would be a heavy favorite.)

Curt Cignetti is the reason. In two seasons, Indiana is 24-2 with back-to-back playoff appearances in the new 12-team format.

Cignetti learned under Saban, took a small-school detour to establish himself, then arrived in Bloomington and quickly built a powerhouse. You could argue Indiana was overrated last year — not this one.

The Hoosiers play disciplined defense, run an efficient offense led by the Heisman Trophy winner and rarely make mistakes — reminiscent of early Saban teams. In their toughest games, they closed strong, pulling away from Oregon and rallying past Ohio State 13-10 in the Big Ten championship game.

If history matters, Alabama may have fate on its side. You don't reach this stage by accident.

CFP quarterfinals

• **Cotton Bowl, Miami vs. Ohio State:** Ohio



Nick Saban's fingerprints are all over this year's playoffs with ties to at least six of the remaining teams. [GERALD HERBERT/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

State is chasing a second straight title, but Miami is coached by Saban disciple Mario Cristobal and led by quarterback Carson Beck. Pick: Miami jumps out early and holds on.

• **Orange Bowl, Oregon vs. Texas Tech:** Texas Tech has explosive offense, while Oregon failed its biggest test. Oregon coach Dan Lanning also traces back to Saban. Pick: Texas Tech by a touchdown.

• **Rose Bowl, Alabama vs. Indiana:** Alabama will need its October edge — like the win over Oklahoma — to keep this close. If not, Cignetti won't slow down. Pick: The calendar says January, but Alabama keeps its October Mojo and advances.

• **Sugar Bowl, Ole Miss vs. Georgia:** Georgia won the October shootout and owns the postseason under Kirby Smart, Saban's most successful protégé.

Since the initial meeting, ex-Sabanite Lane Kiffin shuffled off to Baton Rouge and former Bama DC Pete Golding took over. There was little dropoff last week, but the defense must pick up. Pick: Georgia controls the tempo and moves on.

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

ROSE BOWL

Alabama vs. Indiana

When: 3:10 p.m. Thursday

Where: Pasadena, California

TV/Radio: ESPN/FM-93.9, FM-97.7, AM-920

Records: No. 11 Alabama (11-3), No. 1 Indiana (13-0)

The series: First meeting.

Four-down territory

1. Remember the Rose Bowl: It's only fitting Alabama play in the Rose Bowl this season. The Crimson Tide celebrates the centennial anniversary of winning its first national title when it knocked off Washington in its first Rose Bowl appearance on New Year's Day 1926. Overall, Alabama has played in eight Rose Bowls (5-2-1 record), the last being 2024's overtime playoff loss to Michigan. Other Rose Bowl wins include Washington State in 1931, Stanford in 1935, USC in 1946 and Notre Dame in 2021, which was played in Arlington, Texas.

2. Facing the best: It's a couple of first for this game. Alabama squares off against the Hoosiers for the first time in school history and Fernando Mendoza is Indiana's first Heisman Trophy winner. The Crimson Tide has faced several Heisman winners with mixed results. Overall, Alabama is 5-8 against teams with the eventual Heisman winner. Heisman winners Alabama defeated include Auburn's Bo Jackson and Pat Sullivan, Oklahoma's Kyler Murray, LSU's Jayden Daniels and Miami's Gino Torretta. Notable Heisman winners Alabama lost to are LSU's Joe Burrow, Texas A&M's Johnny Manziel, Auburn's Cam Newton, Oklahoma's Jason White and Florida's Danny Wuerffel.

3. More trouble: Alabama just survived a win against an elite run defense. Now it faces an even better defense in Indiana. Just two Hoosier opponents topped 100 yards this season, and five other opponents were held to under 60, including Ohio State, which ran for just 53 yards. That's not good news for an Alabama offense struggling to run the ball. "I think a lot of it is the tackle for losses is what you've got to really try to guard against," Alabama coach Kalen DeBoer said. "You get behind the chains with teams like Oklahoma, Georgia, and now obviously Indiana, they'll find a way to make you pay for it."



Alabama tight end Josh Cuevas will be a key in the Crimson Tide's hopes against top-ranked and top-seeded Indiana. [VASHA HUNT/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

4. Tide ties: Since 1995, Indiana endured 26 losing seasons with two teams finishing just over .500. Curt Cignetti has brought Indiana to new highs since his arrival in 2023. The Hoosiers earned a spot in the playoff last season and are the top seed this year. He is also a former Crimson Tide assistant and was on the staff when Alabama won national titles in 2009 and 2011. "Yeah, we had a great experience at Alabama," Cignetti said. "It was real important part of my journey. Learned a lot from coach (Nick) Saban in terms of organization, standards, stock and complacency. I wouldn't be where I am today without my time under Nick."

Key matchup

Alabama DB Bray Hubbard vs. Indiana DB Louis Moore

Turnovers will be key for this matchup and these two are the best on the field at

creating them. Hubbard leads Alabama with four interceptions and has forced three fumbles. Moore is tied for second in the nation with six interceptions.

Player of the week

Josh Cuevas, Alabama TE

The missing piece of the offensive puzzle returned to the lineup against Oklahoma after missing two games with an injury. He caught five passes for just 43 yards, but his presence was crucial in converting big plays and giving the offense confidence.

By the numbers

2: The Hoosiers have the second-most losses in college football history with 714. Northwestern is No. 1 with 716.

11: Alabama owns the NCAA record for the most wins all-time against the Associated Press poll's No. 1 team with 11.

28: With the Dec. 19 win, Alabama has reached 11 wins in a season for the 28th time.

33: Indiana QB Fernando Mendoza leads the nation with 33 passing touchdowns.

Prediction

Indiana 35, Alabama 24

Alabama faced a great defense in Oklahoma and found a way to tie for the most points scored against the Sooners this season (34). It gets tougher with the Hoosiers, who have the nation's No. 2 scoring defense and No. 3 rushing defense. The Tide defense has its work cut out with Mendoza. What worked against Oklahoma will have to be the strategy against Indiana. If Alabama can't get pressure on Mendoza, it has no chance.

— Edwin Stanton

For Cignetti, time with Tide formative

By Michael Marot

The Associated Press

INDIANAPOLIS — Indiana coach Curt Cignetti reflects on his time as an Alabama assistant coach nearly every day.

He believes his four seasons working with Nick Saban helped him learn how to prioritize organization, avoid complacency and maintain high standards. In fact, Cignetti thinks it's a primary reason he's preparing for his first Rose Bowl as a head coach.

Alabama coach Kalen DeBoer feels similarly about the one season he spent at Indiana. He developed tight bonds there with fellow staff members who eventually followed him to Tuscaloosa and helped orchestrate the 11th-ranked Crimson Tide's impressive comeback at No. 8 Oklahoma last weekend.

On New Year's Day, Cignetti, the two-time AP Coach of the Year, will square off against Saban's replacement in Pasadena, California, vying off for a spot in the College Football Playoff semifinals — against the schools that helped put them on this stage.

"I wouldn't be where I am today without my time under Nick," Cignetti said last week. "We had great years there. We took over a team (that was 6-7), we went 7-6 and 12-0 the next year in the regular season. We fell short in the SEC (title) game to (Tim) Tebow and Florida and Urban (Meyer), then had a rematch the next year and beat them and won the national championship at the Rose Bowl."

Cignetti was already an established assistant coach when Saban hired him following the 2006 season. The Pittsburgh native had more than two decades of Football Bowl Subdivision experience and a track record any national championship contender would want.

In three seasons at Rice, Cignetti helped Mark Comalander, future NFL draft pick Donald Hollas and Quentis Roper all finish their careers among the five most productive quarterbacks in school history. Cignetti did the same with Matt Baker at Temple, and by the time his six-year tenure at Pittsburgh ended, five of the Panthers' top 10 in career passing yards had worked with Cignetti.

Then it was off to North Carolina State, where Cignetti connected with his star pupil, Philip Rivers, an Alabama native



Indiana coach Curt Cignetti was part of an Alabama national championship as an assistant and needs a win over the Crimson Tide in the Rose Bowl to reach one this season. [DARRON CUMMINGS/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

and four-year starter who beat the Hoosiers in his second career game. So when Saban needed someone with a penchant for finding and developing quarterbacks, Cignetti seemed like a natural — even if he was coaching Alabama's receivers. The personal connections didn't hurt, either.

"I've watched Curt grow as a coach in every one of his stops since he left us," Saban said. "You know, I used to coach for his dad. So I knew Curt when he was a high school quarterback. ... So we saw him grow and develop as a player and a coach, which has been really fun."

After Alabama won a national title in Cignetti's fourth and final season as an assistant, he took on a new challenge — as head coach at Indiana University

Pennsylvania, the same school where his father, Frank Sr., carved out a Hall of Fame coaching career.

"He had some questions about whether that would be a very good move for me. I was just ready to kind of run my own show," Cignetti said, explaining Saban's reaction. "I was just ready for something different. I respected his opinion, but I decided to make the move."

Over the next 15 seasons, Cignetti bounced from the Indiana in eastern Pennsylvania to Elon in North Carolina to James Madison in Virginia to Indiana University, never posting a losing season while presiding over the most successful transition of an FCS school to the FBS and now, perhaps, the greatest turnaround in FBS history.

In just two seasons, the Hoosiers won their first Big Ten title since 1967 and their first outright title since 1945; produced their first Heisman Trophy winner, Fernando Mendoza; and claimed the No. 1 ranking for the first time. Indiana (13-0) enters the CFP as the top seed.

Cignetti insists none of it may have been possible without Saban's tutelage.

"I probably think about it every single day, because it had such a big impact in my growth and development," Cignetti said of his years with the Crimson Tide. "I think philosophically, the program that we run here is probably a lot more the same than different than Alabama. There's probably not a day that goes by where I don't draw from those experiences."

SUGAR BOWL

Georgia vs. Ole Miss

When: 7 p.m. Thursday

Where: New Orleans

TV: ESPN

Records: No. 2 Georgia (12-1), No. 6 Ole

Miss (12-1)

The series: Georgia leads 34-11.

Four-down territory

1. Not down for long: Georgia went 7-1 in the SEC and needed come-from-behind efforts to secure several wins. The Bulldogs rallied to beat Tennessee and Ole Miss in the fourth quarter. Georgia won its fifth straight over Florida after trailing in the fourth quarter and fought off Auburn in the second half to win. Georgia trailed in a few other games, erasing a 7-0 deficit at Mississippi State with 38 unanswered points and using a 21-point fourth quarter to beat Texas.

2. Gunner's gun: Georgia's Gunner Stockton doesn't get talked about much as an elite quarterback, but he does come through with explosive plays. Stockton has thrown 56 passes considered explosive plays (more than 16 yards), including a 64-*yd* touchdown against Mississippi State. He had five or more explosive plays in five games. The junior is on pace to be only the second QB in school history to post a completion percentage above 70% for a season (70.7). Carson Beck has the record at 72.4% in 2023.

3. Second chance: Ole Miss was just a series or two away from staying unbeaten and possibly be a top 4 seed in the playoffs if not for a rough fourth quarter against Georgia in October. Ole Miss scored on its first five possessions and led 35-33 in the fourth quarter before being forced to punt on its next two series. That opened the door for Georgia to score 10 points to take the win. "When we found out they were the next game, a lot of people were really excited," Ole Miss quarterback Trinidad Chambliss said. "We played well vs. Georgia early on, we just couldn't finish it. I struggled in the fourth quarter. I have a lot of redemption to do in the next game."

4. No running allowed: A big reason for Ole Miss' regular-season loss to Georgia, other than allowing the Bulldogs to score on all eight possessions, was failure to stop the run. Georgia rolled up 221 rushing yards, the second most by an Ole Miss



Georgia running back Nate Frazier, after a big game against Ole Miss in the regular season, seeks another in the Sugar Bowl against the Rebels. [COLIN HUBBARD/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

opponent this season. Georgia broke runs of 12 or more yards four times. "To have a chance, you've got to be able to stop the run, which is easier said than done," Ole Miss coach Pete Golding said. "You've got to create some turnovers and some takeaways within the game to get the offense back on."

Key matchup

Georgia QB Gunner Stockton vs. Ole Miss QB Trinidad Chambliss

Big games come down to quarterback play. Stockton won the first matchup, but Chambliss is ready for the rematch. Stockton has 2,691 passing yards with 23 touchdowns with five interceptions while Chambliss has 3,298 yards with 18 touchdown passes and just three

interceptions.

Player of the week

Nate Frazier, Georgia RB

Frazier gives the Bulldogs a boost when they need it and he did that in the first matchup with Ole Miss, running for 72 yards. He leads the offense with 821 rushing yards and has six TDs. Georgia needs Frazier to be great on New Year's Day.

By the numbers

0: Georgia didn't punt in the first meeting with Ole Miss this season.

1: Rebels running back Kewan Lacy has broken school records in rushing touchdowns (20), all-purpose TDs (20) and points by a non-kicker (120).

4: Georgia ranks fourth nationally, allowing only 79.2 rushing yards a game.

20: Ole Miss is 20-of-22 in red-zone scoring in its last four games.

Prediction

Georgia 28, Ole Miss 17

Georgia seems to have Ole Miss' number, winning 12 of the last 14 meetings. The first clash this season was a crushing blow for Ole Miss. Georgia has the hot hand and has looked unstoppable the past few games. The Rebels also don't have Lane Kiffin calling plays, which didn't matter too much against Tulane, but could be a big factor against a defensive juggernaut like Georgia.

— Edwin Stanton

COTTON BOWL

Ohio State vs. Miami

When: 6:30 p.m. Wednesday

Where: Arlington, Texas

TV: ESPN

Records: No. 3 Ohio State (12-1), No. 10 Miami (11-2)

The series: Tied 2-2.

Four-down territory

1. Second-highest stakes: Ohio State and Miami meet in the Cotton Bowl for a chance to advance to the College Football Playoff semifinals. But it was more than 20 years ago when the programs matched up for something a little more important — a national championship trophy. Miami, going for its second straight title, was the No. 1 team in the BCS for the 2002 season. Ohio State the No. 2 squad. Hurricanes kicker Todd Sievers made a 40-yard field goal as time expired to send the game into overtime 17-all. Buckeyes quarterback Craig Krenzel then scored on a 1-yard run to send the game into the second extra period tied at 24. Krenzel's run was set up by the still-talked about 4th-down pass interference call on Miami. Ohio State won 31-24 after Maurice Clarett scored on a 5-yard run and the Hurricanes failed four times to score from the 1-yard line. The other three meetings were at the beginning of the 1999, 2010 and 2011 seasons.

2. One who got away? Ohio State All-American receiver Jeremiah Smith could have ended up at Miami. He grew up in Miami Gardens, which is about 30 minutes from the Hurricanes' campus and seven minutes from where they play home games at Hard Rock Stadium. He, obviously, did not. In two seasons with the Buckeyes, Smith has 156 catches for 2,401 yards and 26 touchdowns. Oh, he also helped Ohio State win the national title last season.

3. O, no or O, yeah? Miami came out with its first CFP win when it topped Texas A&M on Dec. 20. The Hurricanes' offense, however, left quite a bit to be desired. Miami only won 10-3 thanks, in part, to an 11-yard touchdown from receiver Malachi Toney with 1:44 left. The Hurricanes managed just 278 yards offense, 172 of which came from running back Mark Fletcher Jr. Carson Beck passed for just 103 yards. Luckily, their defense recorded seven sacks and three



Maurice Clarett scored the deciding touchdown the last time Ohio State and Miami played in a high-stakes postseason game. That was the national championship for the 2002 season. [TED S. WARREN/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

turnovers. Some points in the quarterfinals would be nice considering Ohio State averages almost 35 a game.

4. A return to the old ways: Ohio State offensive coordinator Brian Hartline has called the Buckeyes' plays in their first 13 games. He will not do so for the Cotton Bowl after being hired as South Florida's head coach on Dec. 3. Hartline will

remain on Ohio State's staff through the team's playoff run, but head coach Ryan Day will call the offense. Day last did so in 2023. He gave up that responsibility to Chip Kelly last season and then to Hartline. In 2023, the Buckeyes averaged a little more than 30 points and 407 yards offense per game. They lost in a New Year's six game.

Key matchup

Ohio State OT Austin Siereveld vs. Miami DL Rueben Bain Jr.

Siereveld and his lineman compatriots have allowed Ohio State quarterbacks to be sacked just 11 times this season. They will certainly have their work cut out for them in the CFP quarterfinals. Of the seven sacks Miami had at Texas A&M, Bain had three of them. The ACC defensive player of the year has 8 1/2 on the season and tends to line up along the line, not just one spot.

Player of the week

Malachi Toney, Miami WR

Much of the attention will be on Jeremiah Smith when it comes to receivers, and rightfully so. But Toney isn't a slouch by any stretch. The Miami freshman leads the Hurricanes in catches (89), yards (992) and receiving touchdowns (8). The ACC's top rookie also scored the go-ahead score at Texas A&M.

By the numbers

3: The number of consecutive seasons Ohio State has played in the Cotton Bowl. The Buckeyes lost 14-3 to Missouri in a non-playoff edition in 2023 and beat Texas 28-14 in last season's semifinal.

1991: The last time Miami played in the Cotton Bowl. It was the Hurricanes' finale for the 1990 season. Miami routed Texas 46-3 despite racking up 15 penalties for 202 yards. (That was shown in "The U" documentary. But it wasn't the Canes' fault.)

7: The number of Ohio State players who have Florida listed as their home state. Miami has one player from Ohio.

2002: The last time Miami won 12 games in a season when the Hurricanes finished 12-1. The loss was to Ohio State for that national title.

Prediction

Ohio State 34, Miami 28

The Hurricanes pulled off one upset. Can they pull off another? That likely won't be the case. No matter what Cotton Bowl history says.

— David Glovach

ORANGE BOWL

Oregon vs. Texas Tech

When: 11 a.m. Thursday**Where:** Miami Gardens, Florida**TV:** ESPN**Records:** No. 5 Oregon (12-1), No. 4 Texas Tech (12-1)**The series:** Oregon leads 3-0.

Four-down territory

1. Top stopper: Linebacker Jacob Rodriguez is the heart and soul of Texas Tech's defense, both with his results and his attitude. He is an All-American with tons of other honors. Rodriguez won the Bednarik Award (nation's top defensive player), Lombardi Award (top lineman or linebacker), Butkus Award (linebacker) and was the Big 12's defensive player of the year. Rodriguez has 117 tackles this season, including 11 for loss, with four interceptions. But he's also forced seven fumbles, a number that leads the nation. Late in the season, after a 29-7 win over BYU, he struck a Heisman Trophy pose. "My guess, they wanted me to hit it. Just a rush of adrenaline," Rodriguez later said of the pose. He finished fifth in the Heisman vote.

2. Letting up: Oregon wasn't happy after its 51-34 first-round home win over James Madison. The Ducks scored 34 of the first 37 points, but they didn't finish with such domination. "Winning in a playoff game — winning games in general — is really hard," senior receiver Malik Benson said. "But when you win and you can look at things and clean things up, it's exciting to know that once we fully put the pieces together, we're going to be even better."

3. QB gunslinger: Texas Tech quarterback Behren Morton is a big question mark for the Red Raiders. This year, a lower leg injury has cost him two full games and he's been hurt before half-time in two others. He missed Tech's only loss, which was in mid-October at Arizona State, but was back for the Big 12 title game and threw for 215 yards and two touchdowns. In his last four games, he has seven TDs with no interceptions. For the season, Morton sits at 2,643 yards on a 67% completion rate with 22 scores against four interceptions. "I haven't seen him run the way he's running in a while," coach Joey McGuire said in an Associated Press story last week.



Oregon receiver Malik Benson and the Ducks hope for many more touchdown plays against Texas Tech. [MARK YLEN/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

"He's been both days full-go, and usually we move him out of some stuff. He looks really good."

4. Limited history: The teams have met three times and, surprisingly, none were in a bowl game. Most recently, Oregon ventured to Lubbock and beat the Red Raiders 38-30 in 2023. Before that, the two played a home-and-home in 1991 and '92. The Ducks won 28-13 at Tech in 1991 and 16-13 at home in 1992. All three meetings were in September.

Player of the week

Jordon Davison, Oregon RB

Davison's 90 yards rushing against James Madison marked his third-highest total of the true freshman's season. The Ducks ran for 201 yards, a number that would help open up the passing game.

Key matchup

Oregon QB Dante Moore vs. Tech LB Jacob Rodriguez

Moore broke out in the first-round

win over James Madison, finished 19-of-27 for a season-high 313 yards and four touchdowns against two interceptions. He's crossed 3,000 yards for the season. Rodriguez wasn't planning to watch live. "I can kind of just get away from football ... and then kind of go attack the work that needs to be done," Rodriguez said beforehand in an AP story. "Now, I'll watch the other games."

By the numbers

0: The number of teams who received a first-round bye in last year's playoffs to win their quarterfinal game. Texas Tech had a bye last week.

1994: The year the Red Raiders last won a conference championship before this season. That year, Texas A&M had a better Southwest Conference record but was ineligible due to NCAA sanctions.

1955: The year Texas Tech last won an outright league title. It was the Border

Conference crown and preceded a Sun Bowl loss to Wyoming.

0: The number of Orange Bowl games in which Oregon and Texas Tech have played. However, the Ducks have played at Miami once, losing to the Hurricanes 2-0 in 1958. The Red Raiders have visited the Canes three times, most recently in 1986, and lost all three by a combined 86-11.

4: Oregon's offensive touchdown plays of at least 40 yards against James Madison. The Ducks' longest TD possession featured just five plays with the shortest being 63 yards and 2:37.

Prediction

Oregon 28, Texas Tech 24

Which Oregon will show up? The Ducks need more of their early efforts from James Madison rather than the late hiccups. Texas Tech can hope for the latter.

— A. Stacy Long



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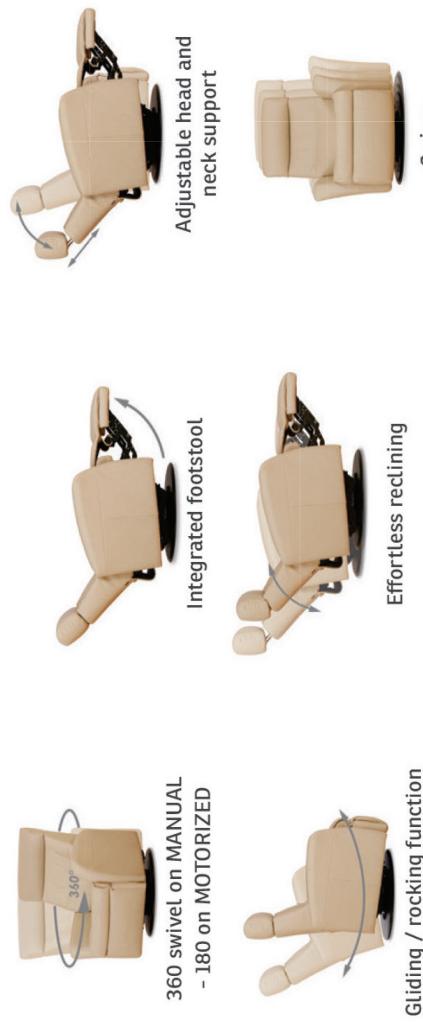
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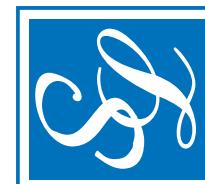
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