

TN Valley

Saturday, December 28, 2024

GAMEDAY



TAMPA TWO-STEP

Crimson Tide meets Wolverines in blueblood, non-playoff showdown

RELIAQUEST BOWL

Alabama vs. Michigan

When: 11 a.m. Tuesday

Where: Tampa, Florida

TV/radio: ESPN/FM-93.9, AM-920

Records: No. 11 Alabama (9-3), Michigan (7-5)

The series: Tied 3-3.

Four-down territory

1. Missing pieces: Kady Proctor, Alabama's two-year starter at left tackle, will not be playing on New Year's Eve. The sophomore is out with a shoulder injury and was scratched from the depth chart. Either Elijah Pritchett and Wilkin Formby, who are No. 1 and 2 at the right tackle spot, will slide over to Proctor's spot. All-American safety Malachi Moore is also out with an injury, on which head coach Kalen DeBoer didn't elaborate. He also didn't go into detail of who would replace him. "Hats off to how much he loves this place, how bad he wanted to be out on the field each and every Saturday and how bad he wanted to be out there with these guys and finish off his career for the bowl game," DeBoer said.

2. Short-staffed: Several receivers hit the transfer portal (Caleb Odom, Kobe Prentice, Kendrick Law and Emmanuel Henderson Jr.) and a handful of others (Jalen Hale, Cole Adams, Amari Jefferson and Bubba Hampton) are on the mend for the Crimson Tide. The ones remaining are starters Ryan Williams and Germie Bernard, along with redshirt freshman Jaren Hamilton and true freshman Rico Scott. There are still receiving options at tight end with CJ Dippre, Josh Cuevas and Robbie Ouzts.

3. Making the most of it: Alabama's out of the running for an opportunity to win a national title for just the second time since 2013. Still, the Crimson Tide is making the most of its bowl game. "I can't say enough about guys," DeBoer said. "It says a lot about all of them wanting to come out and finish off strong. It goes back to them sticking it out and being the ones that stayed the course and believed in this place back in January and now them knowing that they need to finish what they started this season, that's the commitment you make when you're a part of the football team here."

4. Early work: Some members of the



Alabama's Tyler Booker and Jalen Milroe, after leaving last year's Rose Bowl meeting with Michigan in pain, face the Wolverines again this year in the ReliaQuest Bowl. [MARK J. TERRILL/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

Crimson Tide's December signing class are already on campus and have been getting in some work during bowl preparations. The Crimson Tide had the No. 2 signing class, according to 247Sports. "It's exciting to see them and get a feel for them before we get into the off-season. I know it's a great time for them, too. They're fired up to be here," DeBoer said. "It's exciting to have them here learning a few things, maybe that will carry over to when we hit the field next spring."

Key matchup

Alabama RB Jam Miller vs. Michigan RB Kalel Mullings

Miller will be featured back with Justice Haynes in the transfer portal. He's got 641 rushing yards and seven touchdowns this season. Mullings is the featured back for Michigan and has a chance to eclipse 1,000 yards on New

Year's Day. He leads Michigan with 948 yards with 12 touchdowns.

Player of the game

Bray Hubbard, S

The replacement for the injured Keon Sabb has been lights out this season. He's got 48 tackles and is the team leader with three interceptions, despite having just five starts. He also has three pass break-ups and one forced fumble.

By the numbers

4: This will be the fourth bowl game Alabama has played in since 2011 that has no national title implications.

5: Alabama has scored on its opening drive five times this season. It won all five games.

7: Michigan is playing in the ReliaQuest Bowl, previously the Outback Bowl and Hall of Fame Bowl, for the seventh time

in school history.

27: The Crimson Tide has forced 27 total turnovers (11 fumbles, 16 interceptions), tied for second-most in FBS.

Prediction

Alabama 24, Michigan 17

Unlike last year's Rose Bowl when the Wolverines beat the Tide in the CFP semifinals, nothing is riding on this game except pride. Players from both teams have transferred out and a few more are out with injuries or opting out after declaring for the NFL draft. The good news for Bama fans is Jalen Milroe will play in the season's final game. The quarterback is adamant about finishing the season strong. That mentality is important to have, even in a meaningless bowl game.

— Edwin Stanton

SUGAR BOWL

Georgia vs. Notre Dame

When: 7:45 p.m. Wednesday

Where: New Orleans

TV: ESPN

Records: No. 2 Georgia (11-2, No. 2 CFP) vs. No. 3 Notre Dame (12-1, No. 7 CFP)

The series: Georgia leads 3-0.

Four-down territory

1. Beck out: Georgia starting quarterback Carson Beck underwent season-ending elbow surgery on Monday, which means Gunner Stockton takes over for the Bulldogs in the playoffs. Beck left the SEC title game on Dec. 7 on the final play of the first half. "A full recovery is expected with throwing to begin spring of 2025," Georgia announced in a statement. Stockton gave the Bulldogs a spark against Texas in the SEC title game, despite finishing 12-of-16 for 71 yards. The Sugar Bowl will be Stockton's first career start.

2. Gunner prep: With Beck out, Notre Dame has to plan for Stockton. Easier said than done. There isn't a lot of game tape to view of Stockton, who has not thrown a significant number of passes in his two years at Georgia. "You evaluate, obviously, schematically, what they've done all season," Notre Dame coach Marcus Freeman said. "Then you have a separate tape of what Stockton, the new quarterback, has done. I think we have 80-something plays of him playing quarterback. He can run their offense. He does some things a little bit differently. He can extend plays with his legs. He's a good athlete."

3. Fully loaded: Notre Dame has three options in the run game, and all three are effective. Running back Jeremiyah Love leads the way with 1,057 yards and 16 touchdowns. Quarterback Riley Leonard is right behind with 751 yards and 15 touchdowns. Then there is running back Jadarian Price with 683 yards and seven TDs. "The running backs are incredible," Georgia coach Kirby Smart said. "Then you throw the skillset of Riley in there, it makes it that much tougher to defend. And they are committed to the run."

4. Help wanted: Georgia's got a hole to fill, or rather a leg to fill, before the New Year's Day game. Punter Brett Thorson was injured in the SEC title game with



Safety Malaki Starks and the Georgia defense, with the Bulldogs hurting on offense, will need to rise to the occasion against Notre Dame. [PHELAN M. EBENHACK/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

Texas and now the Bulldogs are left high and dry. "It's a day-to-day competition," Smart said. "We will decide as the game gets closer. Drew Miller has taken the majority of those reps but when the job is open we let everybody punt. We got 'em all out there punting. Gunner (Stockton) can punt, Ryan Puglisi can punt, we got some wide receivers that can punt. I've had to punt a couple of times. We will keep going until we run out of punters." Smart was half serious in his punting search. The job will likely go to Miller.

Key matchup

UGA QB Gunner Stockton vs. Notre Dame QB Riley Leonard

It's a battle of the inexperienced against the seasoned veteran. Stockton faces the daunting task of leading the Bulldogs in the playoffs in his first

start. He has just 25 completions in 32 attempts with no touchdowns. Leonard is comfortable running and passing the ball. He has 2,293 yards through the air with 17 touchdowns with just six interceptions in 325 attempts.

Player of the game

Malaki Starks, S

With the offense going through some personnel issues, it will up to the defense to lead the way. Starks is the Bulldogs' leading tackler with 73, one interception and three pass breakups.

By the numbers

4: In 58 red-zone trips, Georgia has failed to score only four times.

7.5: Sacks by Notre Dame's Rylie Mills, who is out for the game with Georgia due to an injury.

75: Georgia has a 75% success rate on fourth down (18-of-24). Notre Dame has a 76% rate (19-of-25).

39: Notre Dame averages 39 points per game. Georgia scores an average of 33 per game.

Prediction

Notre Dame 24, Georgia 17

The moment Carson Beck was ruled out the whole dynamic changed. Gunner Stockton is certainly capable at quarterback, but throwing an unproven youngster into a playoff game for his first start will prove to be overwhelming. The Georgia defense has to help Stockton out and stop Notre Dame's Riley Leonard. If it doesn't, it's going to be horrible start to the new year.

— Edwin Stanton

PEACH BOWL

Texas vs. Arizona State

When: Noon Wednesday

Where: Atlanta

TV: ESPN

Records: No. 4 Texas (12-2, No. 5 CFP), No. 10 Arizona State (11-2, No. 4 CFP)

The series: Texas leads 1-0.

Four-down territory

1. Long haul: Texas plays in Mercedes-Benz Stadium for the second time in a month for the quarterfinal game. The Longhorns lost to Georgia on Dec. 7 in the SEC championship game. The game is supposed to benefit the “home” team, but both teams, and their fans, have a long trip to make. It’s about 1,800 miles from Tempe, Arizona, to Atlanta. For Texas, it’s a 900-mile trip.

2. What a load of bull: Bevo, the nearly 2,000-pound steer and Texas mascot, won’t make the trip to the Peach Bowl, just as he wasn’t allowed to the SEC title game. Safety concerns were cited for the putting the nix on bringing Bevo to the stadium. According to a statement released by the Peach Bowl, “We love all of the great traditions of college football and no doubt, Bevo is one of the best, but the unfortunate reality is there is simply not enough room on the sidelines of Mercedes-Benz Stadium.”

3. Skat back: The Longhorns are one of the best teams in the nation at stopping the run, allowing just over 100 yards per game. That includes a 76-yard effort last week in a first-round win over Clemson. Arizona State presents a challenge with Cam Skattebo, who has 1,568 rushing yards and 19 touchdowns. “He’s got a ton of fans in our building I can tell you that,” Texas coach Steve Sarkisian said. “He’s a monster and now we’ve got to figure out a way to stop him.”

4. Winning formula: Texas had two weeks to prepare for Clemson coming off the SEC title game. The Longhorns look some time off during that stretch to give the team time to relax. It helped. “We felt that was the winning formula for us,” Sarkisian said. “We felt fresh and felt fast. So coming out of that game, going back to work Sunday and Monday, and giving everybody a couple of days off for Christmas, felt like the right thing to do.”



Texas receivers Ryan Wingo and Matthew Golden seek some more touchdown celebrations against Arizona State. [ERIC GAY/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

Player of the game

Jaydon Blue, RB

Blue’s 77-yard run in the fourth quarter was the score that killed Clemson’s momentum in the first-round playoff matchup and sealed the win for Texas. He’ll be needed again against Arizona State to provide a spark and carry Texas into the semifinals.

Key matchup

Texas WR Matthew Golden vs. ASU WR Jordyn Tyson

Golden is a key target for Quinn Ewers. He leads the Longhorns with 787 receiving yards and eight touchdowns. Tyson

is the big dog for the Sun Devils. He’s got 75 catches for 1,101 yards with 10 touchdowns, all team highs.

By the numbers

5: The 2024 Longhorns are the fifth team in program history to compile 12 or more wins in a single season.

6: Six players from Arizona State are transfers from Texas.

22: Texas has forced at least one turnover in 22 consecutive games and ended a streak (against Clemson) of eight straight games with multiple turnovers.

1: Texas is tied for the top spot in the nation for most interceptions for an FBS

team with 20.

Prediction

Texas 35, Arizona State 21

Texas has clearly moved on from its SEC title game loss and is focused on the playoffs. Arizona State has lost just eight turnovers this season, which is the second-lowest total in FBS. Texas has forced 29 turnovers, tied for No. 1 in FBS. If Texas can get a turnover or two, this game should go its way. Texas is the better team on paper, but that doesn’t mean the Longhorns should take ASU lightly.

— Edwin Stanton

Longhorns not skittish to face Skattebo

By Jim Vertuno
The Associated Press

AUSTIN, Texas — The Texas defense seems to have built a big burnt orange wall at the goal line.

Late-game goal-line stands have helped keep the Longhorns moving toward a possible national championship. The latest was in a 34-28 win over Clemson in the first round of the College Football Playoff.

“We’ve got big people, and they know how to play a physical brand of football,” Texas coach Steve Sarkisian said. “When we get challenged like that ... I think that’s part of our identity.”

So here comes Cam Skattebo, Arizona State’s 5-foot-11, 215-pound All-American wrecking ball of a running back to try to knock it down.

Texas’ win over Clemson sent the No. 5 seed Longhorns (12-2) to the quarterfinals against the Big 12 champion and No. 4 seed Sun Devils (11-2) in the Peach Bowl on New Year’s Day.

Skattebo put on a show the last time the Sun Devils were on the field. He scored three touchdowns, had 170 yards rushing and 208 all-purpose yards in Arizona State’s 45-19 win over Iowa State in the Big 12 championship game.

Skattebo bounced off tacklers, ran through others and outraced some more. He struck the Heisman Trophy pose a few times, then had a few things to say about it all afterward.

“Nobody respects the fact that I’m the best running back in the country. And I’m going to stand on that,” he said after the game. “I’m going to keep proving people wrong. And whatever NFL team takes me is going to get a gem.”

Skattebo brings some gaudy numbers to Atlanta to back it up.

The AP All-American’s 19 rushing touchdowns and 22 overall are both tied for school records. He needs 75 yards to break the program’s single-season rushing record of 1,642.

He was twice the AP national player of the week. The first time was for his career-high 262 yards rushing amid his 297 all-purpose yards in Week 2 against Mississippi State. The second was for his game against Iowa State.

Texas players say they are ready for the Sun Devils’ battering ram.

“Yeah, I’m excited,” Longhorns defensive tackle Barryn Sorrell said. “My time being here, I feel like I’ve heard that a lot,



Arizona State's Cam Skattebo, who is closing on a school rushing record, seeks to get a few drops on Texas in the playoff quarterfinals. [JULIO CORTEZ/ THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

that a team is going to come in here and run the ball on us, and I'd like to say there was a different result a lot of those times.

“Just looking forward to that challenge again,” Sorrell said.

Sorrell was in the middle of fourth-quarter goal line stands that helped save wins against Texas A&M and Clemson.

Texas was clinging to a 17-7 lead in College Station when the Longhorns stuffed four consecutive runs inside their own 5. The win sent Texas to the

SEC championship game.

Clemson had a chance Saturday to get within a touchdown in the final 8 minutes. A touchdown could have completely swung momentum their way.

But after reaching the Texas 1, two straight runs failed to reach the goal line. Sorrell was in on the tackle that stopped Clemson’s Keith Adams Jr. just short of a touchdown on fourth down.

“We take pride in not letting guys score or get in our paint,” Texas safety

Andrew Mukuba said.

Texas is not perfect at the goal line, however. Georgia won the SEC championship in overtime when Trevor Etienne bowled into the end zone from the Texas 4.

But they’ve been close enough to it to keep charging deep into the postseason.

“It’ll be an amazing challenge,” Texas All-American cornerback Jahdae Barron said of facing Skattebo. “He’s a hard downhill running back.”

To Penn State, Jeanty simply ‘a beast’

By Travis Johnson

The Associated Press

STATE COLLEGE, Pa. — Penn State players have watched Ashton Jeanty make opponents look silly all season. They don’t want to be the next defenders Boise State’s star posterizes with jukes, spin moves, stiff arms and heavy shoulders.

But they also know that slowing down Jeanty, who finished second in Heisman Trophy voting, will be their toughest task yet when the two teams meet in the College Football Playoff quarterfinal Fiesta Bowl.

“In any other year, I think the guy wins the Heisman,” Penn State coach James Franklin said. “You could make the argument that he should have won it this year. He is hard to tackle. He is compact, 5-(foot)-10, he has the ability to run away from you. He has the ability to make you miss.”

Jeanty led the nation with 2,497 rushing yards on 344 carries this season. He scored more touchdowns (30) than any player since Najee Harris scored 30 times with Alabama in 2020.

Additionally, Jeanty’s yards after contact (1,889) exceed every FBS running backs’ rushing total since Oklahoma State’s Chuba Hubbard led the NCAA with 2,094 total rushing yards in 2019. Jeanty also forced an NCAA-record 143 missed tackles this season.

The junior did it all behind an offensive line that has been forced to shuffle its parts in the wake of numerous injuries. Only left tackle Kage Casey and left guard Ben Dooley have started every game up front for the Broncos this season.

“He’s a beast in terms of his production on the field, but then also his durability,” Franklin said. “There’s not too many people that are able to get clean shots on him. All of it is super impressive. But I think the stat that I mentioned earlier, the most impressive stat is the yards after contact.”

This could be Jeanty’s biggest challenge to date, too.

Although he’s helped Boise State churn out 250 rushing yards per game, good for fifth among FBS programs, the Nittany Lions are well stocked to defend the run.

Their defense is seventh nationally allowing just 100 rushing yards per game and has tightened up down the stretch. In its last six games, Penn State



Boise State’s Ashton Jeanty has scored 30 touchdowns this season, the most for any FBS player since Najee Harris for Alabama in 2020. [DAVID ZALUBOWSKI/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

is allowing just 2.7 yards per rush and has only given up three rushing touchdowns, two coming in the Big Ten championship game against No. 1 Oregon.

“They’ve had our backs throughout the whole year,” Penn State quarterback Drew Allar said. “They have made me a lot better throughout the year, just going against the best defense in America and just glad I got to go against them every day in practice and not against them out on the field in a game setting.”

In the opening round of the CFP, Penn State held SMU to just 58 rushing yards on 36 carries. Meanwhile, the Nittany Lions notched 11 of their 50 tackles for loss over the last six games against the Mustangs.

Most of those came from a defensive line that regularly rotates run-stuffing tackles Zane Durant, Dvon J-Thomas and Coziah Izzard between dynamic ends Abdul Carter and Dani Dennis-Sutton.

Carter alone has 21 ½ of his team’s 102

stops behind the line of scrimmage this year.

He’s hoping to add a few against Jeanty and stay off the star back’s own long-running highlight reel.

“I’m living in my dreams,” Carter said. “I’m having the most fun I ever had playing football and I’ve been playing since I was 8 years old. I’m very blessed. I’m just very humbled to have this opportunity. I just want to keep taking advantage of all the opportunities that I have.”

Buckeyes get their rematch with Ducks

By Mitch Stacy
The Associated Press

COLUMBUS, Ohio — Ohio State players had been thinking about a rematch with Oregon long before the Buckeyes crushed Tennessee in a first-round playoff game.

Their first chance to avenge the Oct. 12 loss to the Ducks looked to be the Big Ten championship game, but that slipped away when the Buckeyes lost to Michigan and gave up their spot in the title game.

Now, by virtue of their 42-17 win over Tennessee, the Buckeyes will see the Ducks again in a quarterfinal game on a grand stage — the Rose Bowl on New Year's Day.

"It's going to be a heck of an opportunity for all of us," Ohio State quarterback Will Howard said. "I think we've all been looking forward to this one, another crack at these guys. The way the last one ended didn't sit right with me."

In the first game, the Buckeyes led twice in the second half but couldn't hold it. They were driving in the final minute. After a questionable interference penalty on freshman receiver Jeremiah Smith, Howard scrambled out of the pocket to extend a play and slid as time ran out, ending the 32-31 shootout on a mental error.

It would be the closest game of the season for top-seeded Oregon (13-0).

"We're looking forward to the opportunity because it was not a great game for us," Ohio State defensive coordinator Jim Knowles said. "And I know, quite frankly, the guys got a little pissed off. They used that game as motivation. So, I'm sure they're looking forward to another opportunity."

The Ohio State defense — now statistically the best in the nation — allowed Heisman Trophy finalist Dillon Gabriel and the Ducks to pile up 496 yards.

"You get to watch yourself play, and watch the mistakes that you've made, and you see how they attack you," Ohio State linebacker Cody Simon said. "But also, there's a lot of football played in between that. They've changed. We've changed, and we're just, we're going to look at what we need to do, and trust the game plan the coaches have, and we'll go and tackle them."

Nearly everything was working right



Quinshon Judkins and the Ohio State Buckeyes, after discarding Tennessee in the first round, now meet No. 1 Oregon. [JAY LAPRETE/THE ASSOCIATED PRESS]

inside the frigid Horseshoe last weekend, the first December college football game in the history of the 102-year-old stadium.

Howard threw two touchdown passes to Smith and compiled 311 passing yards — his highest total since the Oregon game. TreVeyon Henderson and Quinshon Judkins rushed for two touchdowns apiece. The defense sacked Tennessee quarterback Nico Iamaleava four times and limited him

to 104 passing yards, his lowest total of the season.

Oregon coach Dan Lanning recognized the Buckeyes' ability to be explosive.

"That's an elite football team that we just played," Lanning said after the October game. "They're really, really talented. They don't have weaknesses."

Lanning was just as sure after the first round.

"I think you could probably argue

that Ohio State's best game was the game they just played," Lanning said. "So it's important at this point in the year that you're playing really good football. Sometimes you don't know that until you step on the field."

"That's your job as a coach to get you ready for those moments, get our players ready for those moments, but certainly hope that we put our best foot forward when we play in this Rose Bowl."



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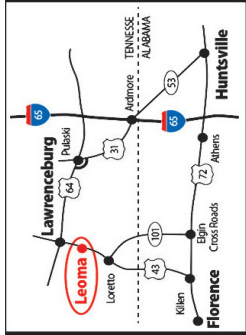
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