

2006-07 College Football Top Ten Non-Conference Games: BY MATTHEW HATFIELD

There are a number of good non-conference battles in College Football every year. Last season had two of the best with Texas defeating Ohio State in Columbus, and USC going into South Bend and winning in dramatic fashion over Notre Dame. Simply, the 2005-06 campaign was one of the most memorable the sport has ever seen. Topping it in 2006-07 would be amazing. Can it be done? Here are the Top Ten non-conference games I'll be checking out – ordered not by rank, but by date.....

***** Notre Dame @ Georgia Tech (September 2nd)** – For my money, it is the most highly anticipated game of the start of the College Football season. Not just because there's a lot of buzz surrounding Notre Dame, fresh off a somewhat successful first year for Charlie Weis as Head Coach of the Fighting Irish. But also because they are facing a Yellow Jackets team on the road that won at Auburn last year, also won at Miami, and has one of the country's finest receivers – if not the very best – in junior Calvin Johnson. I personally feel it may be the toughest game for ND to conquer on their quest for a national title.

***** California @ Tennessee (September 2nd)** – Don't sell Jeff Tedford and the Bears short going into Knoxville. Over the last few years, Cal has been a perennial bowl team and on the cusp of cracking the BCS. With a strong running game and a defense that could be considered one of the nation's most underrated, they have a great shot on the road to beat a Tennessee team that is coming off one of their worst seasons in recent memory. Should be a good one, plus a nice way to lead into that primetime game on ABC that was talked about above.

***** Ohio State @ Texas (September 9th)** – The three best games my eyes saw all of last year were Texas-Ohio State; USC-Notre Dame; and Texas-USC. Remember, Troy Smith didn't start last year's game. Now he will, and the Longhorns don't have Vince Young to lean on. However, Texas is at home and the Buckeyes will be without their star studded linebacking core of A.J. Hawk, Bobby Carpenter and the oft-forgotten Anthony Schlegel. Which way do we go on the re-match? May have to break out the Tostitos and Vault [*it's a new soft drink I've taken a liking to lately*] early that night.

***** Oklahoma @ Oregon (September 16th)** – A re-match of last December's Holiday Bowl that went down to the wire and was clinched with a Clint Ingram interception with the Ducks driving down the field for the potential game-winning score, Oklahoma's visit to Oregon is high up there on my 'must-see' list. While OU breaks in a new quarterback due Rhett Bomar being kicked off the team in the summer, OR has to replace some key defensive guys as well as receiver Demetrius Williams. What I'll be watching is the battle between Sooners junior running back Adrian Peterson and super soph. Jonathan Stewart, who Oregon Head Coach Mike Bellotti will become fond of very quickly. This is clearly the hardest road trip – being up in Eugene – for the Sooners.

*** **Miami of Florida @ Louisville (September 16th)** – A couple years ago, Louisville and Miami played a tremendous game to watch down in Florida. This time around, the Hurricanes travel to Papa John's Stadium and will either need to keep the Cardinals tandem of Brian Brohm and Michael Bush in check, or match them on the other end with their own offense. Since Miami usually has one of the most respected defenses in America and Louisville's offensive has explosive written all over it, we should have a good game in store for us.

*** **Nebraska @ USC (September 16th)** – Before setting the scene, I have to get this off my chest. September 16th is going to be a **GREAT** day of College Football. After all, three of my ten game picks are on that date. Others that didn't make the cut include Texas Tech against TCU; Iowa vs. Iowa State; and Notre Dame facing Michigan. Even the SEC bout between LSU and Auburn ought to attract a great deal of attention. Here we have two programs with great prestige, history and tradition. Don't believe me? Just check the numbers. Combined these two have won about 32 National Championships.

*** **Boise State @ Utah (September 30th)** – What is this game doing up here on the list? I kind of look at it as the 'non-BCS elimination game.' In other words, the winner continues to stay in the hunt to get there, while the loser is done, finished and can forget about earning a trip to one of the BCS bowl games. Two seasons ago, Utah – behind QB Alex Smith and Head Coach Urban Meyer – completed an undefeated run with a win over Pittsburgh in the Fiesta Bowl. That very same year, Boise was unbeaten heading into their bowl game vs. Louisville, where they lost by a close margin. What is key in this game is that it is not on the blue smurf turf, but rather at Rice-Eccles Stadium.

*** **Fresno State @ LSU (October 21st)** – Pat Hill, famous for producing 'off-the-radar' players on to the NFL level, has a history of getting his team geared up for a big, non-conference showdown, whether it's at home or on the road. A couple seasons back they won at Kansas State, nearly beat Oregon at their place last year and who could forget that USC game? LSU isn't unbeatable on their turf as Oregon State almost won the 2004 season opener in Baton Rouge, and would've if not for some kicking blunders.

*** **Florida @ Florida State (November 25th)** – Isn't as glamorous as you think it would seem, considering we're talking about two Florida schools here. Having that said, there will be a ton of speed out on the field when the Gators, coached by Urban Meyer, and the Seminoles, under veteran sideline general Bobby Bowden, get together.

*** **Notre Dame @ USC (November 25th)** – Although we shouldn't expect the kind of classic seen in 2005, this should be nothing less than a huge matchup. Last year QB Brady Quinn watched then SC senior Matt Leinart lead the Trojans down the field in the fourth quarter in South Bend to pull out a come-from-behind thriller. Is it now Quinn's turn to do the same at the Coliseum?