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Cal vs. Virginia Tech at the Insight Bowl

By [Peter Dudley](#)

Guest Writer

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Virginia Tech and Cal are evenly matched in published strength ratings. Sagarin has Virginia Tech #32 and Cal #31. Virginia Tech slipped into the "others receiving votes" categories of both the AP and coaches polls, but Cal did not receive any votes.

But are they in fact evenly matched? As always, the devil is in the details.

Tech played a fairly soft schedule, with wins over such powerhouse programs as Central Florida (3-9, 2-6 in the AC), James Madison (1-AA team with a 6-6 record), Connecticut (an unimpressive 9-3), Rutgers (5-7, 2-5 in the Big East), Syracuse (6-6, 2-5 in the Big East), Temple (1-11, 0-7 in the Big East), and Texas A&M (4-8, 2-6 in the Big 12). Their other win was over Miami, when Miami turned the ball over four times.

Tech's losses were at West Virginia (8-4, 6-1 Big East), at Pitt (8-4, 5-2 Big East), at home to BC (7-5, 3-4 Big East), and at Virginia (7-5, 4-4 ACC).

Sagarin rates Tech's schedule as 70th most difficult in the country. A few interesting notes about Sagarin's schedule strength and the Big East versus Pac-10: Sagarin rates the Big East as 5th strongest, one spot ahead of the Pac-10 at 6th-strongest conference. Yet the Pac-10 has an average schedule strength ranking of 33.4, while the Big East's average schedule strength ranking is 57. No Pac-10 team has a schedule weaker than #61, and only three Pac-10 teams' schedules are ranked weaker than 40. The Big East, however, has ALL EIGHT teams' schedules ranked as softer than 40, with three of them over 60. [Virginia Tech's](#) schedule is deemed softest of all these teams.

Cal, on the other hand, had the 17th toughest schedule in the country according to Sagarin, and that was the second toughest in the Pac-10.

All the media coverage about Tech centers, of course, on junior running back [Kevin Jones](#). He gained a school record 1,494 yards this season with 20 rushing touchdowns. He is a finalist for the Doak Walker award. They will also talk about junior QB [Bryan Randall](#), 5th all time at Tech with 4,869 career all-purpose yards. He also was twice nominated Big East player of the week. Some might also note that senior center [Jake Grove](#) is one of the finalists for the Rimington Trophy for best center in America.

What concerns me most about Virginia Tech is the fact that their coach has been in place for 17 years, and that the Hokies have gone to 10 straight bowl games. Cal, on the other hand, has young players who have not been through the bowl experience. This should not be discounted, it will definitely play to Virginia Tech's benefit. At least Tedford has been to bowls before, and hopefully can overcome this issue with his players.

Virginia Tech, statistically, is very similar to Cal. Here's a stat-by-stat comparison:

	VaTech	Cal
Scoring Offense, points per game	34.2	31.2
Scoring Defense, points per game	20.6	22.5
Rushing Offense, yards per game	214.0	170.8
Rushing Defense, yards per game	136.0	132.2
Rushing per Carry, yards per carry	5.3	4.4
Passing Offense, yards per game	175.3	254.7
Passing Defense, yards per game	217.9	239.8
Yards per Pass Attempt	7.8	7.9
Yards per Catch	13.4	13.2
Pass Attempts per Game	22.4	32.1

Opponents Pass Attempts per Game	30.8	33.3
Total Offense	389.3	425.5
Total Defense	353.9	372.1
Rushing Attempts per Game	40.8	38.5
Opponents Rushing Attempts per Game	39.0	36.5
Rushing TD's	31	23
Rushing TD's Allowed	15	14
Passing TD's	13	26
Passing TD's Allowed	17	21
Interceptions Thrown	15	8
Interceptions Gained	15	14
Sacks Surrendered	1.3	2.1
QB Sacks Obtained	2.5	2.8
Season Turnover Margin	-1	+3
3rd Down Conversion	43.8%	38.8%
Opponents 3rd down Conversions	37.1%	33.3%
4th Down Conversion	40.0%	46.2%
Opponents 4th Down Conversions	66.7%	50%
Time of Possession, minutes	29.17	31.22

Remarkably similar, with the exception that Tech is much more run-oriented, and Cal is more pass-oriented yet balanced. For me, the most revealing statistic is a combination of 5.3 yards per carry, 31 rushing TD's, and a time of possession of 29:17. That says their running game may be even more powerful than it looks at first blush, particularly with such a high scoring offense.

Yet the Bears won't be scared by a strong rushing attack. Kansas State, Oregon State, and Colorado State all have very strong rushing attacks, so it's not new to the Bears. We have to admit, though, that all three of those teams beat Cal, so maybe it should be a concern.

In the Red Zone, Virginia Tech is very efficient; in 41 attempts, they've scored 24 TD's and 11 field goals (85.4% conversion). Cal is also reasonably efficient, scoring on 81.4% of chances (29TD's and 10 field goals in 48 opportunities). The Bears are also very efficient defensively in the red zone, allowing 69.6% conversion of opponent opportunities (23 TD's and 9 field goals in 46 attempts). The Big East release does not have red zone defense stats.

On special teams, both Cal and Virginia Tech have strong punt return teams. Tech has returned three punts for TD's, Cal has returned two for TD's. Virginia Tech generally has very strong special teams, leading their league in field goal percentage and punt returns.

All in all, there is nothing in the statistics that can forecast a clear winner. This is not like comparing Cal to Stanford or Arizona. It may come down to the intangibles and to a few plays or players stepping up.

I think this game looks good for Cal. The worry is Tech's running game and the fact that the Bears have lost the three games where they've faced outstanding running backs (Oregon State, Kansas State, Colorado State (Van Pelt in this case)). Yet week by week the Bears' has defense improved and is now looking solid.

The big question is whether Virginia Tech is for real. They were ranked #3 in the country for two weeks after their 6-0 start, but those six wins were against teams with an average Sagarin rating of 96 (currently). Three of those teams are now ranked below #120. Presumably, much of the Hokies' statistical prowess was built against those teams. Cal, meanwhile, has prepared all year by playing very difficult competition, and many of those games were within one or two plays of going the other way (Oregon, UCLA, Colorado State) (oh, and Illinois...)

My guess is that Cal is better prepared for a bowl opponent than Virginia Tech is. Yet Virginia Tech is better prepared for a bowl game, as they've been to ten straight. They've never played in the state of Arizona, though, and no Big East team has played a Pac-10 team this year. Their skill positions are juniors generally, so they have a little more experience than the Bears, but Cal got one and a half seasons under their belts this year, so the youth factor is no longer that significant. The Bears are more balanced, also, and have "many weapons" of their own.

I think that Cal has the upper hand in this one and will come away with a win. My gut tells me that Virginia Tech is 8-4 because of their schedule and would not have made it to a bowl game if they'd played Cal's schedule. I think the game will depend on the first quarter. If the Bears come out strong and fast, they will win by 10 or more points. But if they stall, or if they allow Tech to get the early momentum or early lead, then it will be close, and I think the last team to hold the ball will win. My guess is that the Bears will come out excited, start fast, and execute well.

My prediction: Cal 36, Virginia Tech 24.

Go Bears!

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