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Forecast: Cal vs. Arizona

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The Bears' schedule starts to get more difficult now as the Arizona Wildcats come to town for Cal's Homecoming game. The season is still early enough for serious questions such as these: Can Cal's offense put together a complete game? Is the young Bear defense up to beating an improving Pac-10 quarterback? Is the Arizona running game as bad as it looks? Is Cal for real, or has a weak schedule allowed them to become the ultimate poseur?

The latter is the real question, and only four quarters (or perhaps eight quarters) of Pac-10 football can answer it convincingly. The rest of us have to settle for now with some combination of gut feel, solid statistical analysis, and examining the entrails of a goat. [Editor's Note: No animals were harmed in the production of this article.]

The conventional wisdom says that 12th ranked Cal (11 in the Harris poll) is a 16-point favorite over the visiting Wildcats, who are 1-2 after losing a tough game to current 22nd ranked [Purdue](#) and are coming off a bye week. The Sagarin rating system posts the Bears as an 18-point favorite. Antsy and anxious Cal fans divide into two categories – seeing the game either as a "major blowout" or as a "possible devastating upset."

It all comes back to whether Cal's demolition of four weak teams means anything or not.

(By the way, does anyone else find it ironic that the BCS would choose to use a poll (Harris) whose name invokes images of hanging chads, recount demands, and allegations of voter fraud?)

This game will be a return to normalcy for both teams as they finally get to play against conventional offenses. Cal has too often had to face the spread offense recently, and [Arizona](#) has faced two option-oriented teams. That lends this game a "mano-a-mano" feel, a simple, straightforward elegance that a real football fan can sit back and enjoy.

The Wildcats on paper appear to have an atrocious running game and an even worse run defense. They're 9th in the conference with just 101 rushing yards per game and an abysmal 3.0 yards per carry. Only [Oregon State](#) is worse. Defending the run has been difficult for the 'Cats young defensive line that has been beset by injuries. The Wildcats have allowed 202 yards per game on the ground and a staggering 5.1 yards per carry, and they've given up five rushing TDs in three games. That's good news for Cal fans because the Bears are tops in the conference in rushing offense - 6th nationally - with 276 yards per game, 13 rushing TDs, and an amazing 6.9 yards per carry. [Utah](#) and Purdue both racked up well over 200 rushing yards against Arizona, and Northern Arizona even joined the fun with 141 yards on the ground.

However, Bear fans should check these caveats before drifting off into daydreams of Marshawn Lynch's triumphant return: UA has a young defensive line which includes a freshman and two sophomores, and they've had injuries to both the D-line and linebackers. It is likely that some of those injured players will return this week after the bye. Moreover, Arizona probably will be the most physical team the Bears have played yet, so pushing them around for four quarters is going to be more difficult than pushing around, say, [New Mexico State](#). Says coach Tedford, "You can't just pound on these guys all day, they're too physical."

Bear fans should also note that Arizona is 1st in passing defense in the conference. They have allowed only 164 yards per game, just two passing TDs in three games, a stingy 50% completion percentage, and a miserly 6.0 yards per attempt. This bodes ill for the Bears, as Cal is a lowly 9th in the conference in passing yardage, although pass efficiency is better because of Cal's 8:3 TD-to-interception ratio. The Wildcats have a strong pass defense primarily because they have two experienced senior safeties, though their corners are both sophomores.

When the Wildcats have the ball, they'll be facing arguably the league's best defense, at least statistically (again with a nod to the weak early schedule). 2nd ranked in total defense, the Bears allow just 309 yards of total offense. They're 2nd in the Pac-10 in run defense with just 106 yards per game, and they're tops in scoring defense allowing just 13.2 points per game.

The defense has six takeaways, and they've allowed just two TDs in nine stands inside the red zone. (Arizona has allowed four TDs in five stands inside their red zone.) Cal's red zone defense (78%) is third in the conference, and they've let opponents get into that area only nine times in four games - better than any other team except Arizona who has allowed only five red-zone appearances in three games. The Bears, in addition, have allowed just four offensive TDs, two of which were long pass plays by [Washington](#) (56 and 39 yards).

Arizona had not allowed an opponent to score in the fourth quarter yet this year. This speaks well for their conditioning and fitness and their ability to play physical football from gun to gun. Unlike Cal's other games, when fans could begin to feel comfortable midway through the third quarter, it may be well into the fourth quarter before this game is settled.

Mostly, though, Bear fans worry that the Cal offense has sputtered and the defense has given up too much yardage to weak, incomplete teams.

Despite beating opponents by an average of 30 points per game, Cal fans are concerned that the defense has been inefficient in allowing too many third-and-long conversions, giving up too many penalties, and frequently not getting pressure on opposing quarterbacks. Part of this is due to youth that has now benefited from four games of experience. Part is due to injuries, and part is due to the 3-4 scheme used against the spread offense. Expect the Bears to be more aggressive - and interesting - on defense this week, and to focus more on forcing turnovers.

Cal fans also worry that the offense grinds to a halt too often, turning a second-and-five into a third-and-long, or dropping out of field goal range, or failing to get into the end zone after a key interception. Yet the fact remains that the Bears have not given up a turnover in two games, and in every game so far they have had at least two drives of 75 yards or more that resulted in points. In fact, in four games they've had 14 drives of 75 yards or more for scores. Finally, the Bears have scored in every quarter except two, and in both of those they missed field goals.

Taken all together, the Bears should win this game going away. They have the power and speed in the running game to get more yards on the ground than did Purdue. They have a solid pass defense that will counter the improving pass offense presented by Arizona.

Maybe the biggest "problem" facing the Bears is playing at home. Ayoob has shown more poise, creativity, skill, and control on the road than he has at Memorial. Perhaps he needs a "Homecoming" as well.

Although the Wildcats will put up a fight and will play a good game, expect the Bears to leave the stadium 5-0. If the Wildcats are to win, they need help from Ayoob and the Bears in terms of turnovers; the only way Cal does not score more points is if they keep handing the ball over.

I think the Bears will push 40 again but not quite get there. The Wildcats will scratch and scrape for 28 of their own points. I think their running game is not as bad as it looks on paper, and their passing game is improving.

Final score: Bears 38, Wildcats 28.

Go Bears!

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