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Forecast: Cal Over UCLA

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Cal and UCLA bring perfect records to the Rose Bowl this Saturday. The poll voters think Cal is a better team at No. 10 than UCLA at No. 16, but the betting public makes UCLA a 1-point favorite. Sagarin says UCLA should win by seven points at home and ranks the Bruins (No. 17) four spots better than Cal (No. 21).

I think you could study these teams for a week and still come up wondering what to expect on Saturday.

On the one hand, both teams are undefeated, score more than 40 points a game, and are ranked in the top 20. On the other hand, Cal's schedule has been filled with weaklings and UCLA had to overcome a 17-7 fourth quarter deficit to abysmal Washington at home last week. Fans of both sides are hoping the opponent is overrated, but I don't think that's true for either team.

If you're reading this, you already know that Cal has completely dismantled five weak teams, amassing some very impressive statistics in the process. The Bears have not allowed an offensive touchdown in ten straight quarters. The Bears have had a 100-yard rusher in 17 straight games. The Bears are No. 7 nationally in rushing offense at 259 yards per game and first in the Pac-10 in scoring defense, allowing just 10.6 points per game. "But," the experienced Cal fans among us think, "that was against weaklings. Cream puffs. A slate that has a combined 5-19 record, for goodness sake."

And the Bruins beat Oklahoma while Cal was visiting New Mexico State!

Let's not get carried away, though. The Bruins also beat Rice, San Diego State, and Washington. Pretty comparable to Arizona, Illinois, and, well... Washington. The Bruins' slate has a combined 5-12 record, only slightly better than Cal's opponents. Oklahoma, meanwhile, is probably the most overrated 2-2 team in the nation. They struggled with Tulsa, leading only 14-9 going into the fourth quarter. They lost to TCU in their opener. And though they demolished Kansas State, KSU is only 3-1 because they played Marshall, Florida International, and North Texas.

To effectively understand this matchup, then, I think we can examine three things: (1) the overall statistics since the two schedules are not that disparate; (2) the Oklahoma game specifically; and (3) the two UW matchups. Let's take them in reverse.

Cal destroyed UW on the road, early in the season.

UCLA avoided catastrophe last Saturday with two fourth-quarter touchdowns as they rallied from 10-0 at the half and 17-7 going into the fourth quarter to beat lowly Washington. UW gained 213 yards rushing on the Bruins and averaged 5.2 yards per carry, including a 49-yard scamper and a 20-yard TD run. UCLA's running game was crushed, though, netting just 65 yards; Maurice Drew was held to 33 yards on 14 carries. This is not because UW put everyone in the box; instead, they played a pretty traditional defense. In addition, UCLA had their first two turnovers of the season in this game: two first-half interceptions by Drew Olson.

Washington, however, handed the Bruins two fumbles of their own to even the turnovers in the game. For their part, the Bears dismantled Washington with ease after a rocky start, running over the Huskies to the tune of 286 yards and cruising to a 28-10 halftime lead. The Bears held UW to 69 yards rushing but gave up over 300 yards passing, including 56- and 39-yard touchdown receptions.

It is pretty clear the Bruins were ripe for a letdown game and managed to do just enough to overcome an abysmal first half and hold on to the win. They were coming off a famous victory over Oklahoma followed by a bye week, they were facing a true walk-over gimme, and they had top-10 Cal on the schedule the next week. Definitely let-down material. So I view their terrible performance with a bit of skepticism and think they learned from it and will come out ready to play.

The Oklahoma game was an impressive win, though when you peel back the veneer it is not as impressive as it looks up front. The story of this game was turnovers: UCLA protected the ball while the Sooners lost three fumbles, one returned for a defensive TD. The other two led to 10 more points; the 17 points off turnovers was the difference in the final score (41-24). Both teams focused on stopping the running game, and both were successful. OK's Petersen was held to 58 yards and just 2.5 yards per carry while UCLA's Drew was held to 69 yards including one run for 38 (4.6 yards per carry overall, 2.2 yards per carry if you take away that 38-yarder). UCLA led 20-17 to start the fourth quarter, then pulled away. In all, I think Oklahoma is not worthy of their No. 27 Sagarin rating, but this definitely was a solid win for the Bruins.

So we see that the Bruins have had their Big Win and their Letdown games already, and they are probably ready to get down to business and fight through the remainder of the season. This is their fourth home game in a row after opening "away" in San Diego, and clearly their biggest test of the

season.

When you look at these two teams, you can see how they have gotten to this point undefeated. The Bruins are +7 in turnovers with just two interceptions and no fumbles. They score 42.2 points per game and are very balanced with 10 rushing TDs and 10 passing TDs. Their passing game is their strength, however, with 8 touchdowns and just two interceptions (both against UW), and an Aaron Rodgers-like 69.3% completion rate. They are the only team besides Cal to have two punt returns for TDs (would have had a third against UW but for a penalty flag), and they are No. 1 in the conference in red zone offense at 94.4%: In 18 appearances, they have scored 15 touchdowns and two field goals.

The Bears, meanwhile, have a monster running game, a competent passing game, and a dominant defense. In five games, the Bears have allowed just four offensive touchdowns, and none in the last 10 quarters. Cal is second in the Pac-10 in rushing defense, allowing just 92 yards per game and 2.8 yards per carry and just two rushing touchdowns. In addition, the Bears lead the conference in total defense with just 4.1 yards per play and a solid 289 yards per game. Cal is 3rd in the Pac in passing defense and tops in pass defense efficiency, gathering six interceptions while allowing just two touchdowns and a stingy 50.1% completion rate. In addition, they hold opponents to a league-best 5.2 yards per pass attempt.

On defense, the Bruins are not as hot, though they are far from weak. Their rushing defense is suspect at 4.0 yards per carry and 180 yards per game; in addition, they've given up 10 rushing touchdowns. Additionally, they are losing starting DE Dragovic to a knee injury and replacing him with a first-time starter in redshirt sophomore Snead. In the air they're stronger, allowing just 185 yards per game and only one passing touchdown while collecting two interceptions. They do allow a fairly high 60.6% completion rate, though.

It is worth noting that Cal has not yet allowed an opponent to score more than 20 points; meanwhile, the Bruins have held only one opponent (UW) under 21.

In terms of personnel, the Bruins have a mix of experience and youth, and although they are not huge on the lines they are big and athletic and well conditioned. Their O-line starts two seniors and three sophomores and averages 305 pounds thanks to 346-pound senior tackle Ed Blanton. Marcedes Lewis completes the line nicely as a 6' 6" senior weighing over 250 pounds. The defensive line averages just 265 and is young with one freshman, two sophomores, and a junior. Justin London and Spencer Havner are the anchor of their defense - a pair of seniors at inside linebacker who are the No. 1 and No. 2 tacklers on the team.

Cal's offense matches up well with a solid offensive line and very mobile, athletic, strong receivers and running backs. The trick for the Bears will be to avoid turnovers at all costs; no doubt Coach Tedford is preaching this every day to Marshawn Lynch, who has a tendency to stay up longer than he should, turning himself into a target.

While I believe the Bears could go all day with their running game and come out with quite a few points, they will need to mix in a good amount of passes, screens, and even a few deep balls to keep UCLA from putting everyone on the line. This is not news to any of us; the Bruins are likely to focus on Cal's amazing running game and force Ayoob and his talented receivers to beat them.

UCLA's offense, too, will challenge the Bear defense like no other team yet has. Their run offense has sputtered the past two games after churning out over 200 yards against SDSU and Rice. They've made a serious mission this week of getting back to the big rushing game. They have not been weak in the passing department, though. The Bears have faced some decent offenses and tricky matchups in the spread option, and Arizona looked like an improving team, but I expect Cal's defense to have a good showing against a talented but not entirely complete offense.

All in all, these teams are closely matched, and I think neither is overrated. This should be a very fun game to watch, and it definitely falls into the "on any given Saturday..." category. I think both teams will be keyed up for this game, and neither will come out flat. And, no matter what the score is at the beginning of the fourth quarter, don't count either team out until the final gun.

I think the Bears are slightly better than UCLA and win this game seven out of 10 times. Cal's defense is the best UCLA has yet seen, and if Cal's passing game is going well, the Bears should do fine there also. The question is turnovers; if the Bears lose two fumbles, UCLA will win. If the Bears hold on, Cal will win.

My wild guess at the final score: Cal 34, UCLA 20.

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