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Forecast: Cal vs OSU



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As Jack Clark told his rugby team after they lost to an American school for the first time in 100 games, "Tomorrow we start winning again." So it will go for the Bears this week, as they look to become bowl-eligible against the visiting Oregon State Beavers.

A first look at OSU's schedule says they will not fear playing the Bears. Losses to [Louisville](#) and [Arizona State](#), and wins over [Boise State](#), [Washington State](#), and Portland State have the Beavers confident they've faced some difficult foes already.

Add to that, many Beavers are still smarting from last year's shellacking at the paws of the Golden Bear, a demoralizing 49-7 loss in which the Beavers gave up 21 points in the first quarter. The Beavers have motivation to spare – and are coming off a bye week after a terrific come-from-behind win over Washington State - but talent, statistics, and even fate are aligned against them.

The Beavers are facing two large quasi-celestial obstacles this week.

First is the fact that they are riding an 8-game losing streak against ranked opponents, and OSU is just 1-6 in games aired on ABC (statistics taken from Dan Noorz' article at <http://oregonstate.scout.com>).

Second is the streakiness of the series: Cal won last year, and if recent history is any guide, they have five more wins coming. Beginning 23 games ago, Cal won 6, then OSU won 5, then Cal won 6, then OSU won 5 ... and Cal won last year to (perhaps) start the cycle again.

But the larger problem for the Beavers is that Cal is simply the better team. The pollsters think so (Cal ranked #16, [Oregon State](#) unranked); Sagarin thinks so (Cal is a 7-point favorite and 24 spots better than the Beavers); and the wagering public thinks so (Cal is a 16-point favorite).

Make no mistake: OSU is a young team with talent, and they are a worthy opponent for a Pac-10 team – unlike (say) UC Davis - but listen to coach Mike Riley as he speaks frequently about how they have to keep growing, how they have a long way to go. Typical coach-speak, sure, but the Beavers start four sophomores and one freshman on both sides of the ball (ten underclassmen). Compare this to Cal, which starts just six underclassmen total and is also considered a young team.

OSU is not without its strengths. On the contrary, the Beavers have the #3 pass offense in the Pac-10, 5th nationally. They also are the best rush defense the Bears have yet faced (#5 in the Pac-10). They have an outstanding combination in QB [Matt Moore](#) and WR [Mike Hass](#): Hass has nine straight 100-yard receiving games and is the national leader in yards, and #2 nationally in receptions. In addition, the Beavers have the league's #1 and #4 tacklers in senior linebackers [Trent Bray](#) and [Keith Ellison](#), and their offensive line is the biggest Cal has faced this season. The Beavers are no patsy pushover cupcake.

Unfortunately for the Beavers, these facts do not paint the picture of a dominating powerhouse. OSU has allowed 27 or more points in four of its six games; it has allowed 40 or more points twice, and one of those was Louisville's 63. The Beavers *are last in the league* in pass defense, total defense, and scoring defense. Although they are 5th nationally in passing, they are only 9th in the Pac-10 in rushing and 7th in scoring.

The story gets worse the closer you look. Although they are 5th in pass offense, that ranking is based on yardage alone. The Beavers are just 9th in the Pac-10 in pass efficiency, scoring only eight touchdowns and giving up seven interceptions. Their 57.8% completion rate is not bad, but it's only sixth in the conference. Finally, their 7.3 yards per pass is 8th in the conference; only [Arizona](#) and [Stanford](#) are worse.

Pit this against Cal, which not only has the top scoring defense in the Pac-10 (16.7 points per game) but also the league's 2nd ranked pass defense (201 yards per game) and the league's most efficient pass defense. The Bears have collected 6 interceptions and allowed only four touchdowns through the air, and they allow only a 51.1% completion rate (best in the league). Additionally, the Bears allow a miniscule 5.5 yards per pass attempt, the only

team in the Pac-10 under 6.6.

The Bears were able to bottle up [Marcedes Lewis](#) last week (too bad they couldn't contain Maurice Jones-Drew as well); there is reason to believe that they could break Hass' 100-yard streak at nine games. No one says of the Beavers, "They have so many weapons!" If the Bears shut down Hass, it's unclear who steps up to win the game for OSU. *Advantage: Bears.*

When the Beavers run the ball, they bring the league's second-worst rushing offense against the league's second-best rushing defense. The Beavers gain a pathetic 2.6 yards per carry and a woeful 92 yards per game on the ground. They have, however, scored 10 rushing touchdowns. The Bears, though, allow just 3.2 yards per carry (3rd best in the league) and only 105 yards per game. *Advantage: Bears.*

On the other side, the Bears have a monstrous rushing game, but their all-world offensive line is banged up. [Marvin Philip](#) should play, though he missed nearly a quarter of the [UCLA](#) game with a re-occurring rib injury. [Ryan O'Callaghan](#) has a broken wrist but expects to play; he played nearly the entire UCLA game after he broke it, with no cast. The Beavers have the biggest D-line Cal has faced yet, so Cal's running game may not dominate. Still ... the Bears have the league's second-best rushing offense, 5th nationally at 271 yards per game. They get an eye-popping 6.6 yards per carry, and the backup running back is 9th nationally at 123 yards per game. The Bears have scored 19 of their 32 touchdowns on the ground. The Bears will be facing the Pac's 5th ranked rush defense: OSU allows only 120 yards per game and 3.5 yards per carry, both good statistics but not enough to counter Cal's outstanding O-line and running backs. *Advantage: Bears.*

When Cal passes, it's weakness against weakness. The Bears are 9th in the conference in passing at 202 yards per game; they protect the ball well, however, giving up just five interceptions to 12 touchdowns and managing a respectable, if not good, 7.8 yards per pass (6th in the conference).

The Beavers, however, are dead last in both pass defense and pass defense efficiency, despite their four second-half interceptions that keyed the comeback win over Washington State. *They allow a remarkable 349 yards per game in the air* and a stunning 9.1 yards per pass attempt (seven Pac-10 teams allow 6.9 or fewer yards per pass). They have seven interceptions but have allowed 15 aerial touchdowns.

With Cal's powerful running game as the base, the Bears can be choosy about passing situations. The only question is whether OSU's four interceptions against WSU represents a corner turned by the Beavers or a complete meltdown choke by the Cougars. If Ayoob continues to avoid interceptions, it's *Advantage Bears.*

The two teams' red zone statistics are telling. The Bears show up in the red zone 4.7 times per game, and they've scored 19 touchdowns in 28 tries. The Beavers visit the red zone a surprising 5.0 times per game, but they've managed just 11 touchdowns in 25 tries. Defensively, the Bears only allow opponents to see red 2.7 times a game, and they've been stingy in giving up just 7 touchdowns in 16 tries. The Beavers, though, are much more accommodating, welcoming their opponents to the red zone 4 times a game and giving up 13 TDs in 20 tries. *Advantage: Bears.*

Other notes and statistics to round out the picture:

- OSU's opponents have tried six 4th downs and converted just one.
- OSU leads the league in time of possession, which is odd for such a pass-oriented team. Cal is one of only two other Pac-10 teams with more than 50% of the time of possession. As they say, "Something's gotta give."
- OSU is -5 in turnovers. In five games, they've lost 8 fumbles and seven interceptions. The Bears are +2 in turnovers with just three fumbles lost in six games.
- Cal's quarterback has been well protected with the O-line giving up just 1.7 sacks per game. Moore is not so lucky, getting sacked a painful 4.0 times per game (worst in the league by a large margin).
- Cal's punt return squad is 2nd in the Pac-10 with two touchdowns and 21 yards per return. Oregon State's coverage team has needed some shuffling of players during the bye week, according to Riley.

This match-up favors the Bears in nearly all respects: *Advantage Bears.*

On any given Saturday ... as they say ... any team can win (ref. Davis, UC). For the Beavers to win, however, cruel fate would have to be on a serious mission. As always, turnovers could spell doom. If the Bears fail to protect the ball, the Beavers could pull out the upset. Additionally, on offense the Bears have not played as well at home as they have on the road, and OSU is a better team than [Illinois](#). If Cal is overconfident or just plain flat, the Beavers have a better chance. Finally, injuries could cause problems for Cal; if a key player or two from the offensive line can't go, the Beavers have those terrific linebackers who could disrupt Cal's running game.

Still, this game appears to be a good match for a Cal team eager and determined to return to the Win Column. I think they'll get there. Final gun: Cal 35, OSU 21.

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