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Forecast: Cal vs. USC

Photo: Michael Pimentel
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By Peter Dudley
Guest Contributor
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When USC comes to town, the Bears have some history to preserve. With a win, USC would tie the record for consecutive conference wins at 22. Right now, Cal's 1948-1950 teams hold that record alone. The Bears also were the last team to defeat the Trojans: 2003's triple-overtime Cal win was the last time USC lost a game.

There are four reasons that USC is No.1 in all the polls. Their offense, their defense, their special teams, and their coaching. Just for starters. But it bears noting that Cal's three losses this year have been by 7, 3, and 7 points, the last one coming in overtime. In all three of those games, the Bears could have won if a few breaks had gone their way. (It also bears noting that the Bears could have lost to Washington State if a few breaks had not gone their way.)

The casual observer will gleefully point out that Cal's sprint out of the gates to a 5-0 start was against inferior competition. But there's a simpler story that tells the difference between the first five games and the next four. In their first five games, the Bears turned the ball over just seven times ... four interceptions and three fumbles. In their last four games, they've committed 13 turnovers, 12 of those in the last three games.

It is nevertheless clear that Cal's record could be 9-0 if they had not committed those turnovers. During those first five games, prior to UCLA, the Bears allowed a total of 53 points, shutting out Arizona and holding Sacramento State to one field goal. In their last four games, the Bears have twice given up 35 or more points and opponents are averaging 33.75 points.

There are other factors that have gone into the Bears' losses ... dropped passes, poorly thrown balls, big plays given up on special teams, failures of pass protection. Simply stated, however, an opponent can't score if they don't get the ball. Turnovers are doubly costly because they make the defense come on the field cold and unprepared. (See Whitehead's TD run last week for an example.)

USC comes into Berkeley not only a 19-point favorite but also the Pac-10 leader in turnover ratio at +12. The Trojans have given up only four fumbles and 11 interceptions in nine games. Meanwhile, they are second in the league in interceptions with 14 - after taking three from Stanford in the rout last week.

Coach Tedford noted turnovers in this week's press conference: "You cannot turn the football over ... we have always talked about winning the turnover ratio and we are minus 3... that is key because you can't give [USC] a short field."

So, if the Bears hold on to the ball, can they win this game?

Cal is also a talented team, but they suffer from inexperience on offense. The Cal defense has been strong, a few big passes by Washington State notwithstanding. I think the Bears will come to play and will perform well in front of a full, loud Memorial Stadium crowd. But the statistics say that USC has the upper hand and probably wins this game 9 times out of 10.

Southern Cal has scored 50 or more points in each of their last three games. It's generally a bad idea to schedule Pete Carroll's team in November; that's when they hit their stride. The fewest points USC has scored this year is 34, on the road against Notre Dame. ASU was the only other team to hold the Trojans under 40 (they got only 38 that game). Even Oregon's tough, fast, and physical defense gave up 45 to USC.

Only Notre Dame (31), ASU (28), and Washington (24) have scored more than 21 points on the Trojans. They have been remarkably consistent throughout the season on defense, and although they are only 5th in the league in passing defense, they really don't have a weakness.

On offense, the Trojans don't have a weakness either. Their offensive line is outstanding, among the best in the nation. They have tremendous talent,

experience, and depth at all the skill positions. USC is the only Pac-10 team with two running backs averaging over 100 yards per game. USC leads the nation in passing efficiency, total offense, and scoring offense. They average 6.4 yards per rush and 9.4 yards per pass, both best in the conference. They've scored 62 touchdowns, 15 more than second-place UCLA and 19 more than 4th-place Cal. Of those, 31 were rushing touchdowns and 27 were passing.

USC has 260 first downs, 171 more than Cal in the same number of games.

They are best in the conference in 3rd down conversion at a whopping 53.6%, and they have the fewest 3rd down attempts per game of any Pac-10 team. This means they get their first downs with two tries instead of three, and when it takes them three tries they usually start from third and short. USC has also given up the fewest sacks of any Pac-10 team: just 10 in 9 games. They've been to the red zone 50 times and scored 36 touchdowns, both league highs.

In short, they are quite simply the best offense in the country.

The Bear defense is no pushover, however, and the Trojans will be forced to earn everything they get. Cal is 3rd in rushing defense, allowing only 3.6 yards per carry. They are 2nd in scoring defense, having given up only 20.9 points per game overall. Cal's Donte Hughes and Tim Mixon are No.1 and No.2 in the league in passes defended, and between them they have seven interceptions. They are the main reason that Cal has the No.1 pass defense efficiency in the league. Cal and USC are the only Pac-10 defenses with more interceptions than passing touchdowns allowed.

The Bears also allow the fewest first downs in the Pac-10 and hold opponents to just 35% conversion on third downs. They allow a league-low 4.9 yards per play and have given up the fewest offensive touchdowns in the Pac-10.

This, ladies and gentlemen, is a legitimately good defense.

I think they will perform well against USC and possibly hold the Trojans under 40 points for just the third time this season. They may even outdo Notre Dame and hold the Trojans to 33.

Cal's offense, as we have all seen, has been erratic and inconsistent. Statistically, they are an awesome running team with two running backs in the top six in the Pac-10 and both averaging over 6 yards a carry. Cal would join USC with two running backs averaging 100+ yards, but with fewer carries against Oregon, Justin Forsett dropped to 99.9 yards per game.

Cal's passing offense, however, is the worst in the conference. With seven interceptions in the last three games, they've also dropped from the top passing efficiency offense to No.9 in that category in the Pac-10. They are the only team not averaging at least 50% completions, and their 7.1 yards per pass is second-to-last.

USC's defense, meanwhile, is also legitimately good. They are the No.1 scoring defense in the Pac-10, allowing just 20.6 points per game. And they've played a tough schedule this year. They're best in the conference in total defense as well, and they're No.2 against the run, allowing just 3.2 yards per carry and 111 yards per game. They are also good against the pass ... although they're only 5th in the conference in passing yardage given up, they are 3rd in pass defense efficiency with 14 interceptions and just 6.8 yards per pass. Their defense also gets to the QB with 25 sacks in nine games.

All in all, the Bears will have to have a flawless game with super energy to win. Are they capable of beating No.1 USC?

You bet they are.

The Bears are a good team with an outstanding defense, but they've hurt themselves with turnovers, and their passing game has let them down due to inconsistency and inexperience. This game will ride on the performance of Cal's ability to run the football and control the clock. If the Bears can run on USC, which is not at all a given, and if they hold on to the football, then this game will be close at the end, and the Bears will have a chance to win. If they go three and out too often or turn the ball over, USC will take advantage and will dominate the game.

Even De La Salle lost a game.

USC has been on the verge a couple of times this year. I am predicting an upset based on the fact that the Bear will not quit and the Bear will not die. I am predicting that Cal's players and coaches will not be in awe of their opponent this week. I am predicting that this, like the game two years ago, will become an "instant classic" and will feature the best offensive line play by the Bears this year. I'm predicting that this game will not go into overtime. I'm predicting that the Bears will emerge triumphant and will knock the Trojans out of the national championship picture.

Final score: Cal 34, Southern Cal 33.

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