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Fearless Forecaster: Cal vs. Stanford

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Both teams believe they can win this year's Big Game, and their fans feel the same way. The trends are clear: Stanford has won four of their last six while the Bears have lost four of their last five. Stanford's defense came alive last week against Oregon State, recording six sacks and allowing just 62 yards rushing.

Stanford has won five games for the first time since the 2001 season.

Meanwhile, the Bears are a late rally from being oh-for-five in their last five games; they committed six turnovers and were stagnant on offense in their last game, scoring their only offensive touchdown in garbage time. And, we know about the quarterbacks: Stanford's Trent Edwards has a bruised (non-throwing) hand but is practicing with the first team this week. Cal's Joe Ayoob has a bruised (throwing) psyche but also is practicing with the first team this week.

We know those trends because the media focus on them. Most reports focus on these just-skin-deep subjects for six consecutive days (this week) and then on the history of the rivalry and feature stories about particular players.

But there is another story in the stats, and I'm here to tell it.

If the game were simply a statistical comparison, the Bears would win. Of course, it's never that simple, particularly the Big Game. And this Big Game has a lot riding on it: If the Bears lose and both Arizona State and Oregon State win their final games, Cal could be bowl-eligible but go uninvited. (The Pac-10 has six bowl arrangements, and that scenario would make seven teams eligible, with Cal at the bottom. The only possibility for a seventh bowl would be a surprise BCS at-large berth by Oregon.)

Similarly, if Cal should win, Stanford would then need an improbable victory over Notre Dame in their season finale to become bowl eligible.

What many Cal fans might not know is that all but three of Stanford's games have been nail-bitingly close. The blowouts were losses to USC and Oregon, and a win over ASU wherein ASU closed to within 10 in the 4th quarter after Stanford gained a huge lead.

What many Cal fans may not know is that Stanford is 1-4 against teams with a winning record and 4-0 against teams with a losing or even record. Although everyone knows that Stanford lost to UC Davis early in the season, most of us forget that Trent Edwards was knocked out in the first quarter with an injury, and Davis had to come back from 17-0 down to win, 20-17. Most of us may remember the 21-point UCLA rally in the fourth quarter to beat the Cardinal in overtime, 30-27, but we might not know that on the season, Stanford has scored only 33 points in the 4th quarter while giving up 84.

Cal fans might not realize that six of Stanford's nine games have been decided by four points or fewer. Cal fans might not realize that only USC and Oregon held halftime leads over the Cardinal or that on aggregate, both Stanford and their opponents have scored 131 points in the first half this year. The only halftime scores that were not close were the ASU game (Stanford led 31-7) and the USC game (USC led 42-7).

We might also not realize that Stanford has scored more than 24 points just twice, in wins over Navy and Arizona State. Against good defenses, the Cardinal hover right around 20 points. Against mediocre or poor defenses, they hover around 24 points (not counting the ASU or Navy games). They scored 20 on Oregon and 21 on USC. Cal's defense is equal at least to those teams and possibly better. (More below.)

And what do Stanford fans not know about the Bears? They might not know that in the Bears' first five games, all wins, Cal committed just seven turnovers. In their last five games (4 losses and one win), the Bears committed 19 turnovers. They might not know that in the first five games, no Cal opponent scored more than 20 points, and Cal held Sac State to three and shut out Arizona; in the last five games, however, no Cal opponent has scored fewer than 23 points, and the Bears are averaging 34 points per game allowed. They might not realize that three of Cal's four losses were by 7, 4, and 7 points, and that the Bears were one or two plays away from winning each of these games despite the rash of turnovers.

Stanford and Cal have six common opponents this season. Against them, the Bears are 2-4 and the Cardinal are 3-3. Both teams lost to USC, UCLA, and Oregon, and both teams beat Arizona and WSU. Stanford beat Oregon State, 20-17, while Cal fell to the Beavers by the same margin, 23-20. Seems remarkably close, right? Well, it is in general.

- Both teams got blown out by USC; Cal committed six turnovers and Stanford committed five. The difference? Cal held the Trojans to their second-lowest point total of the year, but the Cardinal went into halftime looking up at a 42-7 deficit.
- Both teams suffered a frantic UCLA comeback in the fourth quarter after leading by double digits. Stanford gave up 21 points in the final period and lost in overtime while the Bears gave up a 12-point lead and turned the ball over on their last-ditch attempt to tie the score.
- Both teams played Oregon State close, but Stanford's defense rose up while Cal's offense sputtered. OSU beat Cal by three but lost to the Cardinal by the same amount. In both games, both teams scored in the 20-point range.
- Arizona turned the ball over five times in a close loss (20-16) to Stanford. The Bears shut out the Wildcats, using a solid goal line stand to keep them from scoring a meaningless touchdown late.
- WSU was tied with Stanford at halftime, 14-14, but lost 24-21 in Pullman. Against Cal, WSU benefited from three long TD passes but then allowed the Bears to win with a well-executed rally, 42-38.
- Oregon held a slim lead over Stanford at halftime but cruised the rest of the way for a 44-20 win. The Bears held Oregon close with smothering defense but committed four turnovers to hand Oregon the close win, 27-20.

Three of the games were remarkably similar, with similar score margins. The ones that stand out are USC, Oregon, and Arizona. Cal manhandled Arizona while the Cardinal needed five turnovers to pull out a close win. Against USC and Oregon, Cal's defense played very well while the offense coughed up the ball repeatedly; both those teams pulled away from Stanford, though, as the Cardinal were unable to score when it mattered. To me, this bodes well for the Bears: Against teams with exceptional defenses, Stanford is unable to mount much of a credible offensive threat. The Bears fall into that category.

Statistically, Stanford is much worse than their record would indicate. They are in the bottom three of the Pac-10 in all offensive categories and in the bottom half of the Pac-10 in all defensive categories. Let's look at how the teams match up head-to-head:

Rushing

The Bears feature the Pac-10's #2 rushing offense and two running backs that very well could both break the 1,000-yard barrier against Stanford. (If they don't, they may not get another chance this season.) The Bears are second only to USC with 235.6 yards per game on the ground, a staggering 5.9 yards per carry, and 22 rushing touchdowns. Stanford's rushing defense is 6th in the conference, giving up 140 yards per game and 3.7 yards per carry. Neither of those statistics is really bad, but against Cal's running game, mediocre might not cut it. Stanford also has given up 19 rushing touchdowns in 9 games, 2nd most in the conference.

On the other side of the ball, Stanford's #10 rushing offense will run into Cal's #3 rushing defense. The Cardinal gain just 112 yards per game on 3.1 yards per carry (worst in the Pac-10), and they've scored only 8 rushing touchdowns in their 9 games. They are the only Pac-10 team with fewer than 1.0 rushing TDs per game. The Bears hold opponents to 132 yards per game and 3.6 yards per carry - similar stats to Stanford's defense. But the Bears have given up only 14 rushing touchdowns in 10 games, and five of those were to USC, two of them when QB Matt Leinart had no one to throw to and scrambled in.

The overall advantage goes to the Bears.

Passing

Unfortunately for those of you who love to watch a beautiful aerial game, Saturday will pit the worst two passing offenses in the Pac-10 against each other. Cal is the worse of the two, not only in total yards but also in passing efficiency. The Bears gain just 194.5 yards per game (the only Pac-10 team under 200, and the only Pac-10 team averaging more yards rushing than passing per game) and are 9th in the conference at 7.0 yards per pass.

Where they really stink, though, is in their league-worst 50.2% completion rate and in their TD-to-interception ratio: 16 interceptions with only 18 passing touchdowns.

Stanford's pass defense is ranked 7th in the conference, allowing 286 yards per game and 7.8 yards per pass. Their 60.4% completion rate allowed is high, and they've gathered in only 9 interceptions while giving up 16 passing touchdowns. Again, not terrible numbers, but they are just mediocre. While Cal's passing offense is atrocious, Stanford's passing defense is simply mediocre. Compare this to the last two defenses Cal faced (USC and Oregon), and Cal fans have reason to believe that the number of interceptions will decrease this week.

Stanford's passing offense is not much better then Cal's. The Cardinal gain just 210 yards per game in the air (9th in the Pac-10) and 7.2 yards per pass. They've scored just 15 passing touchdowns while giving up 8 interceptions. They do complete 60.6% of their passes, though, which improves their efficiency rating to #6 in the conference.

They will be going against a defense that is #1 in the league in pass defense efficiency (#21 in the country). The Bears give up 230 yards per game in the air, but they allow only 6.2 yards per pass (2nd in the Pac-10 behind Oregon) and have allowed the fewest passing touchdowns (11) in the league this year. Cal and USC are the only defenses with more interceptions collected than passing touchdowns allowed. The Bears also allow the 2nd lowest completion percentage (53.6%) and Donte Hughes and Tim Mixon are in the league's top ten in both interceptions and passes defended.

Again, the overall advantage goes to the Bears. Cal's pass defense is on a par with Oregon's and USC's. Since both passing offenses are abysmal, I have to go with the defensive power.

There is a wildcard here, however. Stanford's starting quarterback has a bruised non-throwing hand. He's been taking snaps with the first team this week and is likely to start, but Stanford coach Walt Harris has been cagey on the topic.

Similarly, Cal coach Jeff Tedford has been noncommittal about his starter. The season-long QB for the Bears, Joe Ayoob, had a mental meltdown against USC and has thrown seven interceptions in the last two games. Meanwhile, unproven backup Steve Levy is a junior who has played fullback and could add a new dimension to the running game, but this means both teams have a question mark at QB. Frankly, with the quality of the quarterbacks we're discussing, it won't matter much in the overall team quality, but read the newspapers this week and I'm sure you'll find many stories of unknown, untested, unheralded backups coming out and dominating Big Game throughout history.

Overall Statistical Comparison

In the much-overrated "Total Offense" and "Total Defense" categories, Cal has the advantage again. The Bears are the #7 total offense going against the #7 total defense of Stanford, but Stanford brings its #10 total offense against Cal's #2 total defense. What this means is that if the statistics hold true throughout the game, Cal will average roughly 6.0 yards per play while Stanford will average roughly 5.0 yards per play. I, personally, think the total offense and total defense statistics are red herrings.

Other Miscellaneous Statistical Comparisons

I can hear you all now. "That's all well and good, but what about TIME OF POSSESSION? What about FOURTH DOWN CONVERSION RATE? What about KICKOFF COVERAGE?" Do not despair. Read on.

First, don't expect a lot of fireworks or excitement in the kicking games. On field goals, Stanford is 8th in the conference at 65% (13 of 20), and the Bears are last at 60% (9 of 15). It is possible the game will come down to a field goal, but don't expect it to be made.

On kickoffs, Cal's kickoff coverage and Stanford's return team are both middle-of-the-Pac, so it should be mostly basic stuff. Similarly, Cal is 8th in kickoff returns and Stanford is 3rd in kickoff coverage, so expect the Bears to start on their own 15 more often than not. Same thing with punting: Cal is #2 in punt returns, but punting is a Stanford forte. Stanford stinks at punt returns, but Cal is just #6 in punting. These appear to cancel each other out. Both teams, however, have scored touchdowns on punt returns (Cal twice, Stanford once).

On third and fourth down, Stanford really stinks, but Cal isn't much better. The Bears convert just 34.4% of their third downs while Stanford is about the same at 34.7%. Cal does hold opponents to just 36.5% conversion, though, while Stanford allows a league-worst 45.5% conversion by opponents.

The fourth down stats are not much different, and there have not been enough of them to be statistically significant in the analysis of either team. The only interesting bit is that Stanford has tried only four times to convert on 4th down and made it only once). Cal is the only other team to try fewer than 10 4th downs (making 5 of 9); the average for the other Pac-10 teams is about 16 attempts.

To those of you who love to see the referees on camera - you might want to watch a different game. Stanford and Cal are the two least-penalized teams in the conference, so expect a clean game.

All the fluff aside, there are two interesting categories where I think one team has a clear advantage. In both cases, the advantage goes to the Cardinal.

Stanford is No. 1 in the league in sacks per game, getting to the opposing quarterback an average of 3.2 times per game. The Bears don't get the same pressure: they rank No. 7 at 2.2 sacks per game. Cal's O-line is better than Stanford's in this area, though: The Bears give up just 2.0 sacks per game (ranked 4 in the Pac) while Stanford gives up 2.9 per game (ranked 8). With weak passing games, the better pressure from Stanford may make a difference.

The biggest differentiator between the two teams, though, is turnover ratio. Stanford is plus two overall while Cal has fallen to minus eight in recent games. The Bears have committed ten turnovers in their last two games alone, and they have thrown 16 interceptions (2nd most in the Pac-10).

It is interesting that Cal is the only Pac-10 team with a negative turnover ratio and a winning record. It is also interesting to note that USC, UCLA, and Oregon (combined record of 28-2) are Nos. 1, 2, and 3 in the Pac-10 in turnover ratio. This season is littered with games where the loser gave up four, five, or six turnovers. Stanford has the big advantage here.

And for the fringe out there who are still wondering when I'm going to get to the Red Zone stats: Both teams are mediocre, though Stanford is slightly better on red zone defense and slightly worse on red zone offense, probably because they can't get any running game to punch into the end zone when the field is short.

At last, The Prediction:

This will be a fun game to watch. I have always been a fan of good defense and a good running game, and I think those two aspects of the Cal team will help them rise slightly above the Cardinal this year. Stanford is not to be taken lightly. In fact, Sagarin projects Stanford as the favorite for this game, though the betting public likes Cal by about three points.

As I've said for the last four games, or maybe it was the last four years, Cal needs to protect the ball. If the Bears turn it over, Stanford will have a serious advantage. The Cardinal have found a way to win close games despite the UCLA and UC Davis comebacks.

I look for the Bears to get very creative in the running game and to use the quarterback on more running plays. Why not? There will be several weeks to heal up for a bowl game, and by then Nate Longshore might be ready to play. I think that both Lynch and Forsett will break the 1,000-yard barrier in this game (Lynch needs just 71 yards and Forsett needs just 88 yards), and if the Bears are truly on the top of their game, we could see three backs with 100+ yards on the day. Don't count on that - I'm just saying it's possible.

I think the Cal defense will continue to be superb and will hold Stanford under 20 points. (Unless, of course, turnovers give Stanford a short field again and again and again.) In fact, I would not be surprised to see Stanford held to just 10 points. I hope the Bears are gunning for a shutout; I don't think that's really possible, but the way they've been playing recently against some very good offenses, it's not entirely out of the question.

Overall, I think Cal's running game does just enough to pull ahead at halftime, and the Bears pull farther away in the fourth quarter. I think the final score is Cal 28, Stanford 10.

Has any division 1-A football team ever been beaten by three UC schools in one year?

Go Bears! Keep the Axe!

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