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Preview: Cal vs. BYU at Las Vegas



BYU QB: John Beck

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**By now, everyone interested in the Las Vegas Bowl probably already knows a lot about both teams. Like Cal's recent games against Oregon and Stanford, fans of both schools have reason to believe their team will win the game.**

Most rating services make Cal a slight favorite over the Cougars. Sagarin ranks Cal #34 and [BYU](#) #49. Cal is favored by the odds makers. The Bears are #28 in the Harris poll (used by the BCS rankings) and received a handful of votes in the AP and USA Today polls while BYU did not.

On the other hand, the Mountain West Conference is sending four teams to bowl games this year (a record) while the Pac-10 failed to fill its available bowl slots by producing just five bowl-eligible teams.

[TCU](#), the MWC champion, is ranked #14 in the country. Compare that to the Pac-10, which has two teams in the BCS top five and another at #16. Sagarin rates the Pac-10 as the third strongest conference with a 77.78 rating while the MWC is only #8 (behind even the Big East) with a score of 69.54 - an 8 point differential.

BYU finished 6-5 overall and 4-4 in the Mountain West. They beat 1-AA Eastern [Illinois](#), [New Mexico](#), [Colorado State](#), [Air Force](#), [UNLV](#), and [Wyoming](#). They lost to [Boston College](#), TCU, [San Diego State](#), [Notre Dame](#), and [Utah](#). Their 1-A wins came against teams with a combined record of 22-28, and their losses came against teams with a combined record of 32-18. (These numbers do not count BYU's games against those opponents.)

BYU fans will look at their team's performance over the season and see that the team seems to have improved. In their first four games, the Cougars went 1-3 with their lone win over 1-AA Eastern Illinois and large losses to BC and SDSU, along with an overtime, one-point stunner to TCU. In those four games, the Cougars scored more than 10 points just once, garnering 50 against TCU.

After that fourth game, BYU went 5-1 in conference play - and lost a blowout to Notre Dame. Their only loss was by a touchdown to local rival Utah, and in no game did BYU score fewer than 23 points. In fact, they pasted Air Force with 62, demolished UNLV with 55, and scored 35 on Wyoming and 34 on Utah. Those were their final four games.

How much of the improvement is due to a steady drop-off in opponent strength? Some, maybe, but certainly not all.

BYU appears to be a team with a legitimate claim to being pretty good, possibly better than their 6-5 record would indicate. Consider these statistics:

- 306 yards passing per game with 24 touchdowns and only 11 interceptions
- 157.6 yards per game rushing with 4.4 yards per carry and 23 rushing touchdowns
- 6.0 yards per play average
- 33.5 points per game, outscoring opponents 181-37 in the first half and 181-65 in the second half
- +4 turnover margin on the season

Over an 11-game season that includes three top-30 teams, stats that good mean something no matter how strong the conference may (not) be. In addition, Cougar fans will be excited because they run the spread offense - and can take inspiration from [Texas Tech](#)'s defeat of the Bears in last year's Holiday Bowl.

Also, one look at BYU's depth chart will keep Cal's rooters from getting too over-eager about playing a mid-tier team from a mid-tier conference.

BYU's O-Line is the biggest Cal has faced this year, averaging a whopping 329 pounds, with every starter over 300 lbs. Moreover, the line consists of

two seniors, two juniors, and a freshman. This may be why junior QB [John Beck](#) (64.3% completions, 3,357 yards passing, 24 passing TDs) and junior RB [Curtis Brown](#) (1,095 yards rushing, 5.5 yards per carry, 14 rushing TDs) have had such success this year.

Additionally, Beck and Brown have had success not only against the conference weaklings but against their entire schedule. Beck threw for 330 yards against BC and 517 yards and 5 TDs against TCU. He had 317 in the air against Notre Dame. It seems that BYU has been able to have a strong showing in either run or pass in every game, though they have been inconsistent in putting both together effectively. They've had more balanced success in their recent games than they had early in the season ... but again ... is that due to improved play or decreased opposition?

Whatever the cause, the Cougars have the eighth-best pass attack nationally and rank #13 nationally in total offense.

Cal's defense will be up to the challenge, however. The Bears have seen the spread offense three times this season and defended it reasonably well, allowing an average of 17 points in those three games (20 to Illinois, 7 to NMSU (not counting the kickoff return TD), and 20 to [Oregon](#) in regulation. BYU's offense may be better than Illinois and NMSU, but its doubtful they are better than Oregon overall.

The Bears have the Pac-10's #1 and #2 pass defenders in Daymeion Hughes and [Tim Mixon](#). Together, they have broken up 21 passes and collected 7 interceptions. This has helped Cal become the top pass efficiency defense in the league and #21 nationally. The Bears, along with BCS #1 [USC](#) and #5 Oregon, are the only Pac-10 teams with more interceptions than passing TDs allowed. Additionally, Cal is #2 in opponent pass completion, holding opponents to a 54.6% completion rate. When opponents do complete passes, they only get an average of 6.3 yards per pass, again #2 in the conference. Considering Cal's turnover woes (minus-8 on the season), the defense has performed exceptionally against quality offenses. Keep in mind that the Pac-10 has four of the top 20 pass efficiency offenses in the nation and five of the top 25 scoring offenses in the country.

The Bears are probably the best pass defense BYU will have faced this season, bar none.

But Cal's defense is not one-dimensional. The Bears are #3 in the Pac-10 in rushing defense, holding opponents to 121.5 yards per game and a miniscule 3.3 yards per carry. This makes the Bears the #2 Pac-10 team in total defense with just 351.6 yards given up per game. Even better, they are the only Pac-10 team allowing opponents fewer than 5.0 yards per play overall (4.8). They also have allowed the fewest opponent touchdowns (25), which helps make the Bears the Pac-10's #1 scoring defense at just 20.5 points per game. When you see that six Pac-10 teams score 30+ points per game (and USC averages FIFTY per game), this statistic begins to have some significance.

On the other hand, Cal's defense was pretty good going into the Holiday Bowl last year too.

On the other side of the ball, the Cougars are clearly susceptible to a strong passing attack. Since Cal does not have one, however, we won't dwell on that one. Still, it is worth pointing out that BYU has allowed 273 yards per game passing and are #104 in the nation in pass efficiency defense.

With Cal's talented wide receivers, the Bears are just one reliable quarterback away from having a very good passing game to complement their exceptional running game. Can [Steve Levy](#) be that reliable QB in just his second collegiate start? Only 60 minutes of football will reveal the answer, but Bear fans should not be optimistic without cause. Levy has shown himself to be competent, but at this point the Bears should still be considered mostly one-dimensional on offense.

That one dimension, however, is pretty strong.

Cal's running attack, which accounts for 235 yards per game, is 10th nationally and 2nd in the Pac-10 behind USC. The Bears gain an eye-popping 5.9 yards per carry and should, at the game's end, have two 1,000-yard rushers. If pass defense is a liability for the Cougars, though, it stands to logic that run defense is their "strength." BYU allow 139 yards per game rushing (46th nationally) and have given up 15 rushing TDs. This is a pretty good run defense, statistically not that far behind the Bears. They would be the 4th or 5th best run defense in the Pac-10 this year with those statistics.

Overall, the Cougars have allowed 41 TDs on the year and give up nearly 29 points per game.

BYU plays a 3-3-5 defense with just three down linemen, three linebackers, and five DBs. How does a 3-3-5 defense have such a strong run defense and such a poor pass defense? Part of it may be blitzes, but probably more due to personnel. The Cougars have three seniors on their D line and two seniors and a junior in their linebacking corps. Their DBs, however, include three sophomores, one junior, and one senior.

As Cal coach Jeff Tedford has said - to no one's great surprise - his game plan will set up for a balanced attack but then adjust to take whatever the defense is giving. We can expect BYU to play their base defensive with experience up front, possibly having one of the DBs spy on the tailback hoping to not allow any long runs. If Levy can stretch the field, Cal's talented receivers may find some room to make plays.

Cal fans may be underestimating BYU's offense and their run defense. It's easy to look at the Cougars' 6-5 record in the weak MWC and then write off games against UNLV, Wyoming, and others. It's easy to look at the loss to Utah and think that the Cougars are overrated. It's easy to let the Big Game euphoria (We have the Axe!) spill over into the expectations for this bowl game.

And in fact, at the end, that's what my instincts tell me too. I see BYU's stats and am impressed with their offense but not convinced they are a complete enough team to compete with the Bears. I am in awe of Cal's defense, so young and so productive, rebuilding with just three returning starters, yet shutting down some of the country's best offenses time and again without much support from field position or offensive ball control. And my gut (or possibly my heart) tells me that the Cal defense will be dominant in this game. I think they will hold BYU to 20-23 points.

Cal's offense is the question mark. With a healthy offensive line and Lynch and Forsett, the Bears can gain 200 yards on almost any defense, even without a passing attack.

It would be easy for a Cal fan to look at BYU's pass defense and say, "Hell, I could get 200 yards passing on that defense. Levy definitely will do well." It would be easy for Cal fans to look at the Bears' talented receivers and think they can abuse the weak BYU secondary. It is tempting to say, "If the Bears can get a passing attack going, the running game can really let loose ... "

And while that statement would be true, the gut says that the Bears will not suddenly get a potent passing attack where there has been none this year.

Instead, it will be a struggle all game - like the Oregon game, with a tough run defense against a stout rushing offense.

I think the Bears will ultimately prevail, but I don't think this will be a pretty game.

I think the Cal defense will hold BYU's offense in check, but I also think Cal's offense will have to earn every yard against BYU's staunch front six. Though there will be lots of 4 and 5 yard gains on the ground, I don't expect Cal to break any really long runs. As a result, this will seem like a short game as both teams successfully move the ball between the 30s and keep the clock running.

At the end, I think the Bears end up on top: 28-20.

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