

EXECUTIVE BRIEF

CONFERENCE RANKINGS

A Conference-First System for Ranking and Forecasting FBS Football

TO	Executive Review Committee
FROM	Conference Rankings Project
DATE	August 12, 2026
SUBJECT	Finalized methodology and 2026 operating standard

DECISION STATEMENT

Adopt a two-output system: one rating measures which teams have earned playoff selection; a separate predictive rating estimates who is most likely to win next. Conference strength is earned through nonconference competition and influences the team ranking without controlling it.

Executive Summary

Conference Rankings (CAR) ranks every Football Bowl Subdivision program, updates weekly, and produces calibrated game, playoff, and national-championship probabilities. It is independent of the AP poll and ESPN rankings. The model rewards résumé quality—especially wins over strong matrix-rated opponents—while retaining a distinct, personnel-aware forecast of current team strength.

- Selection output: who has earned a playoff place based on results, schedule, and conference performance.
- Predictive output: who is most likely to win today, including quarterback and other material availability changes.
- Coverage: all 138 FBS teams in the 2026 season; FCS games are handled by a special asymmetric rule.
- Release cadence: preseason projection, first official earned ranking after Week 1, then weekly updates.

1. Purpose and Design Principles

The system begins with a simple premise: conference quality should be demonstrated on the field against other conferences, and team quality should be judged in the context of the opponents actually played.

Principle	Operating rule
Conference-first evidence	Conference strength comes from nonconference games, adjusted for opponent and location.
Every FBS team ranked	The published matrix contains all FBS programs, not only a Top 25.
No circular poll input	AP and ESPN rankings are comparison benchmarks, never model inputs.
Pregame information only	Opponent rank and availability are frozen before kickoff; no hindsight credit.
Separate deserving from best	Selection and predictive ratings are published side by side.
Transparent and testable	Weights, data cutoffs, validation, and changes are documented by version.

2. The Two-Rating Architecture

2.1 Selection Rating — playoff résumé

The finalized selection score uses four components:

Component	Weight	What it captures
Matrix Résumé	35%	Game-by-game quality points using the opponent's frozen continuous matrix strength.
Predictive Strength	30%	Opponent-adjusted estimate of current on-field quality.
Record Quality	25%	Win percentage, schedule difficulty, and the quality of wins and losses.
Conference Strength	10%	The team's conference performance against outside conferences.

FINAL SELECTION FORMULA

CAR Selection Score = 0.35(Matrix Résumé) + 0.30(Predictive Strength) + 0.25(Record Quality) + 0.10(Conference Strength)

Conference championships are applied through the playoff's automatic-qualification rules, not as a fifth scoring component. This prevents a championship from being counted twice.

2.2 Predictive Rating — probability of winning

The predictive engine is fitted to historical games rather than assigned a fixed opinion-poll weight. Its feature set emphasizes opponent-adjusted efficiency and current roster reality:

- Opponent-adjusted expected points added (EPA) and success-rate efficiency.
- Pregame Elo, capped scoring margin, opponent quality, and game location.
- Recent four-game form, with safeguards against overreacting to one result.
- Quarterback and other high-impact personnel availability, with timestamped status and uncertainty.
- Turnover luck and special-teams effects regressed toward sustainable levels.
- A modest conference prior early in the season, which decays as current evidence grows.

3. Matrix Quality Points

Every opponent has a continuous pregame matrix strength S between 0 and 1. Every game also has a pregame win probability P for the rated team. A win over a strong opponent produces more credit; an expected win over a weak opponent produces little credit. Upsets earn additional credit.

GAME-LEVEL OPERATING EQUATIONS

Win points = $2 + 8S(\text{opponent}) + 6[1 - P(\text{team})]$

Loss points = $-[2 + 8[1 - S(\text{opponent})] + 6P(\text{team})]$

Game context	Multiplier	Reason
Interconference game	1.15×	Creates the direct evidence used to compare conferences.
Neutral-site game	1.20×	Reduces home-field distortion in high-information matchups.
Standard in-conference or home game	1.00×	Baseline résumé treatment.

The exact continuous rating—not a rounded ordinal such as “No. 5”—is used in the calculation. This avoids artificial jumps between adjacent ranks and keeps credit proportional to actual strength.

4. Conference Strength

A conference rating is the opponent-adjusted result of its nonconference games. Each result is evaluated against the opponent's pregame strength and the expected home-field advantage. Strong road and neutral wins matter most; weak losses carry the greatest penalty.

- Only games outside the team's conference create direct conference-comparison evidence.
- Conference ratings update weekly and feed 10% of the team selection score.
- Independent Notre Dame is treated as its own scheduling entity for conference-comparison purposes.
- The conference prior shrinks during the season so teams can separate from their league's average.

5. FCS and Lower-Division Games

Result	Selection / conference treatment	Predictive treatment
FBS defeats FCS	Zero résumé points and zero positive conference points.	May reduce strength if performance is substantially below expectation.
FBS loses to FCS	Full, substantial deduction; conference also receives a negative result.	Immediate strength reduction, scaled by opponent quality and game context.
FCS opponent	Not published in the FBS ranking.	Internally rated so win probability and upset severity remain coherent.

WHY THE RULE IS ASYMMETRIC

An FBS program is expected to defeat a lower-division opponent, so the win does not demonstrate playoff quality. A loss is highly informative and must be penalized.

6. Weekly Operating Cycle

Step	Action	Control
1	Freeze pregame matrix ratings, win probabilities, location, and availability.	Timestamp before kickoff.
2	Ingest final scores and efficiency data after the week is complete.	Reconcile neutral sites and conference labels.
3	Recalculate conference ratings from nonconference evidence.	Opponent- and location-adjusted.
4	Calculate game quality points and update all FBS team ratings.	No AP/ESPN input.
5	Fit current win probabilities and simulate the remaining season.	Calibration monitored weekly.
6	Publish rankings, probabilities, changes, and material QB adjustments.	Versioned release and audit trail.

6.1 Preseason-to-current-season transition

Release	Preseason share	Current-season share
Preseason	100%	0%
After Week 1	80%	20%
After Week 2	65%	35%
After Week 3	50%	50%
After Week 4	35%	65%
After Week 5	20%	80%
After Week 6	10%	90%
After Week 7+	0%	100%

The preseason release is a projection, not an earned ranking. The first official earned CAR ranking is published after Week 1. Preseason influence disappears after Week 7.

7. Win, Playoff, and Championship Probabilities

7.1 Week-to-week game prediction

For teams A and B, the model converts the difference in predictive features into a probability using a logistic function: $P(A \text{ wins}) = 1 / [1 + \exp(-Z)]$. Z includes rating difference, venue, recent efficiency, QB/personnel adjustment, rest, and other validated inputs. The published game line includes win probability, expected margin, and a confidence band.

7.2 Season simulation

Each weekly release simulates the remaining schedule thousands of times. Every simulation resolves games, conference standings, championship games, automatic qualifiers, at-large selection, seeding, and the playoff bracket. The model then reports each team's probability of:

- winning its next game;
- winning its conference;
- making the College Football Playoff; and
- winning the national championship.

8. Historical Validation

Evaluation period	Games	Win accuracy	Brier score	Log loss
Training: 2014–2021	6,338	75.3%	0.169	0.510
Validation: 2022–2024	4,513	67.5%	0.203	0.590
Untouched test: 2025	1,657	70.3%	0.193	0.566

Lower Brier score and log loss are better; a constant 50/50 forecast has a Brier score of 0.250. The untouched 2025 result indicates useful out-of-sample predictive power while leaving room for better personnel data and probability calibration.

8.1 Playoff-selection backtest

Period	Correct playoff selections	Match rate
2014–2021	29 of 32	90.6%
2022–2024	11 of 12 equivalent places	91.7%
2025 holdout	10 of 12	83.3%

In the 2025 holdout, the model selected BYU and Notre Dame instead of Alabama and Miami. Indiana finished No. 1 in the frozen selection ranking. Miami was No. 22 in selection but No. 8 in predictive strength—a critical demonstration of why the two outputs must remain separate. Indiana won the championship and Miami’s playoff performance was substantially stronger than its résumé rank implied.

9. 2026 Initial Preseason Matrix

The 2026 launch matrix covers all 138 FBS programs. The following Top 25 is the initial preseason projection; it becomes an earned ranking only after games are played.

Rank	Team	Rank	Team
1	Ohio State	14	Tennessee
2	Oregon	15	Ole Miss
3	Notre Dame	16	Penn State
4	Georgia	17	Michigan
5	Indiana	18	BYU
6	Texas	19	Florida
7	Texas Tech	20	Washington
8	Miami	21	Missouri
9	Texas A&M	22	Iowa
10	LSU	23	James Madison
11	Alabama	24	Clemson
12	Oklahoma	25	South Carolina
13	USC		

The complete 1–138 launch ranking is maintained as the model's operating matrix and accompanies the weekly publication package.

10. Standard Weekly Executive Report

- Conference ranking and week-over-week movement.
- Full 1–138 FBS selection ranking, with matrix résumé points and opponent-quality changes.
- Predictive Top 25 and the largest differences between predictive and selection positions.
- Next-game win probability, expected margin, and confidence range for every scheduled FBS game.
- Conference-title, playoff, and national-championship probabilities.
- Material QB/personnel adjustments, status timestamp, and uncertainty notation.
- Model accuracy, Brier score, and calibration by probability band.

11. Governance and Change Control

Control	Standard
Annual freeze	Core formula and selection weights are frozen before the season begins.
Pregame freeze	Opponent matrix value and personnel information are timestamped before kickoff.
Corrections	Data errors may be corrected with a published note; football judgments are not revised after outcomes.
Model changes	Material changes require a new version, historical re-test, and written rationale.
Independence	AP, Coaches, CFP committee, and media rankings are excluded from calculations.
Auditability	Inputs, calculations, validation, and weekly outputs are retained by season and version.

RECOMMENDED ADOPTION

Approve Version 1.0 as the 2026 operating standard. Publish the preseason projection before Week 1, release the first earned ranking after Week 1, and issue the full weekly executive report thereafter.

Appendix A — Definitions

Term	Definition
CAR	Conference Rankings, the overall system described in this brief.
Matrix rating	Continuous team strength used to value opponents and calculate quality points.
Selection rating	Résumé-oriented score used to evaluate playoff qualification.
Predictive rating	Current-strength estimate used to forecast games and simulate championships.
Record quality	Opponent-adjusted value of wins and losses, not raw winning percentage alone.
Brier score	Mean squared error of probability forecasts; lower is better.
Calibration	Whether events forecast at a given probability occur at approximately that rate.

Appendix B — Data and Benchmark Notes

Historical game and play-level inputs were assembled from reproducible college-football data sources and reconciled to official schedules and postseason results. CFP, AP, and ESPN outputs are used only for external comparison. All reported validation statistics refer to the frozen model run described in this brief; future versions must preserve a true out-of-sample test season.

Primary reference points:

- SportsDataverse / college football data releases for historical schedules and play-by-play inputs.
- Official College Football Playoff records for qualification and bracket outcomes.
- Official school and conference reports for quarterback and material player availability when published.