



SEC owns bragging rights over Big 12

By Berry Tramel The Oklahoman
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In just over a month, the Oklahoma State-Georgia contest at Boone Pickens Stadium in Stillwater offers a rich college football culture clash.

Midwest vs. Deep South. Upstart vs. old power. Orange vs. red.

None match the duel of offense vs. defense. Southeastern Conference has the defense; Big 12 has the offense.

That's the college football stereotype as we near the end of the first decade of the 21st century.

Trite. But true.

There are exceptions, but SEC teams do indeed play better defense. The Big 12 does indeed produce better offense. And on the biggest stage, defense wins.

The SEC has won three straight national titles and four of the last six. Two of those SEC championships came at the expense of Oklahoma, which despite juggernaut offenses and Heisman Trophy-winning quarterbacks lost 21-14 to LSU and 24-14 to Florida.

The SEC has not otherwise dominated the Big 12. The SEC leads the Big 12 15-13 this decade in head-to-head matchups, and that's with the SEC yet to return games on the back end of home-and-home series (Oklahoma State-Georgia, Colorado-Georgia, Kansas State-Auburn).

Here's what's interesting. Divide those games into high-scoring and low-scoring, and a clear trend develops.

In low-scoring games against the SEC, the Big 12 is 2-7. Cotton Bowl finals like Alabama 13, Texas Tech 10 and Auburn 17, Nebraska 14.

But in high-scoring games against the SEC, the Big 12 is 7-4. Independence Bowl scores like Oklahoma State 34, Alabama 31 and Missouri 38, South Carolina 31.

Big 12/SEC matchups have become like basketball, with tempo and style of play important, whereby you could project who might win given the total number of points scored.

Big 12 coaches are slow to admit the trend, though Oklahoma's Bob Stoops said, "There could be something to that. They could overall have better defensive personnel."

I don't think there's any question about that. There's also little doubt that the Big 12 has had superior

offenses. While SEC schools like Tennessee, Alabama and Arkansas have struggled to find productive quarterbacks, the Big 12 has mushroomed with big-time playmakers. Kansas State's Josh Freeman was a first-round draft pick by the Tampa Bay Buccaneers last spring, the NFL's No. 17 overall selection, yet was not considered among the upper half of the Big 12's quarterbacks.

"I know sometimes people pick on the defenses in our league because there's so many offensive numbers," said Colorado coach Dan Hawkins. "But I just think it's because of the great talent that's in our league, and then obviously spreading people out. It's very difficult to defend."

That's a position Stoops claims, too.

"Look at the quality of quarterbacks, the skill level," Stoops said. "It's easier to play better defense when you're not playing against great quarterbacks. When that guy behind the center isn't special, it's always a little easier."

Truth is, Big 12 defenses probably are underrated. Same as SEC offenses. Oklahoma's defense in the Big Bowl against Florida last January was a prime example; the Sooner D played well enough to win (though they did yield 480 total yards).

Kansas State coach Bill Snyder returns to the league after a three-year hiatus. He says the Big 12 has changed since he's been gone.

"Emphasis has certainly changed," Snyder said. "We're sitting in the capital of change in regards to offensive football."

Texas Tech coach Mike Leach's spread passing. Oklahoma State's hurry-up offense. The shotgun option, maybe not invented by Texas but certainly perfected and popularized by the Longhorns, courtesy of Vince Young. The Big 12 has been among the leaders of college football innovation this decade.

But SEC defenses, not Big 12 offenses, reign in college football. And it really comes down to two games, those Oklahoma-LSU and Oklahoma-Florida showdowns.

Had the Sooners found a little more offense, had they not stalled on that late drive in the Superdome and had they not been twice turned away at the Florida goal line, check out how the conference landscape might differ.

The Big 12 would have four national titles this decade and the SEC two, instead of vice versa. The Big 12 would lead the SEC 15-13 in head-to-head matchups. Offense would rule the sport.

But reputations and status and titles are determined by a few solitary games. LSU's defense stymied Jason White's rally. Florida turned back Sam Bradford's Sooners.

Those were hard-won and well-earned victories, which allow the SEC to rightfully claim that its defenses have made it the best conference in college football.



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Big 12 Previews: Colorado Buffaloes

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Expectations are high for any college football team.

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But then again, in the case of the Colorado Buffaloes, the expectations have to be high. The Buffaloes finished the 2008 campaign missing out on a bowl appearance for the third straight season.

Dan Hawkins is 13-24 in his three seasons at the helm in Boulder and as he enters his 4th season with the Buffs, they're hoping to win more than two conference games. □

"Everyone loves the internet... bulldog told firefly and firefly talked to Superman.. I never made any guarantees, I never promised. It's about having excellence as the bar, it's about what are you expectations," Hawkins said after he told an Internet web site it's 10 wins or bust.

Hawkins commented, "Every coach in this business feels pressure and pressure to achieve and I used to eat Maalox pills like they were M&M's when I was a high school coach. i felt as much pressure there as I have any place else."

Injuries plagued the Buffs in 2008, but that experience has given them depth for this season. Colorado has 15 returning starters (9 - offense, 4 - defense, 2 - special teams) coming back from last season.

As always, Colorado will welcome Nebraska to Boulder on Thanksgiving Weekend.