

Football midterm filled with craziness

Wendell Barnhouse
Knight Ridder Newspapers
(KRT)

Eight weeks into the 2002 college football season and it's time for some halftime adjustments and analysis. Here's what we know at the halfway point:

— Defending national champion Miami remains undefeated (though barely).

— Oklahoma's Bob Stoops is perhaps the best in-game coach currently walking the sidelines.

— Texas is all hat and no cattle (still).

— Tyrone Willingham should have been Notre Dame's first choice as its coach, not its second.

— Iowa State quarterback Seneca Wallace is the leading Heisman Trophy candidate. And it's not because all the other possibilities are academically ineligible.

— There are eight undefeated teams and four with one loss that still have national-championship hopes.

— The spread (offense) is dead. Five of the 10 undefeated teams rank in the top 25 in rushing yards per game. But only Miami, 22nd nationally in passing, is in the top 25 in passing offenses. Running the football still wins.

— The Bowl Championship Series rankings, due to make their debut Monday, will again provide plenty of controversy and debate.

— Traditional powers Florida, Florida State, Nebraska and Tennessee all have two or more losses and are out of the national-title picture.

— "One thing that's been particularly interesting or surprising about this season has been the number of big-name schools that have strug-

gled," ESPN college football analyst Trev Alberts said. "And even though with one loss, Texas is not out of the national championship picture, I'd have to include the Longhorns on that list, because once again they didn't beat Oklahoma."

— Nine of the teams ranked in The Associated Press preseason top 25 are not ranked this week. There are 10 undefeated teams remaining in Division I-A. What was expected has become the unexpected. Nebraska's streak of being ranked in 348 consecutive polls ended two weeks before Florida's streak of being ranked in 209 consecutive polls ended.

— "Notre Dame and Air Force have been a little bit of a surprise," Alberts said, in a super-sized understatement.

— Notre Dame has turned defense and timely turnovers into an art

form. Air Force, which runs a tricky option-oriented offense, is a challenge for every foe. The seventh-ranked Irish (6-0) and the 18th-ranked Falcons (6-0) meet Saturday night in Colorado Springs. That wasn't a game pegged as a must-see back in August.

A Notre Dame-Air Force showdown of undefeated teams isn't the only shocking development. Thus far, there have been more twists and turns than a pretzel factory.

Consider:
— A missed field goal by Florida State kept Miami undefeated.

— A controversial call by the officials accounted for Iowa State's only loss.

— Michigan kicked a game-winning field goal to beat Washington after the Huskies were penalized for having 12 men on the field.

— Monsoons, courtesy of tropical storms, helped Florida upset Tennessee and Louisville upset Florida State.

— Disparaging comments by a rival's former coach fired up Georgia, helping the Bulldogs win at Alabama.

— The one constant has been Mi-

ami. The defending national champion has been atop The Associated Press rankings for a record 19 consecutive weeks. The Hurricanes have won 28 consecutive games. Before Saturday's 28-27 victory over Florida State, Miami was winning by an average of 32 points per game.

— Florida State, though, may have provided a blueprint for beating the champs. Florida State ran the ball on 52 of 72 plays, gaining 296 yards.

— "We just didn't tackle very well," Miami senior defensive tackle Matt Walters said. "We were there to make plays. They weren't blowing us off the line. We were missing tackles."

— A Hurricanes-Sooners game would match the past two national champions, a coach who grew up in Oklahoma (Larry Coker) and brothers against brother — Oklahoma's Bob and Mike Stoops (defensive coordinator) against Mark Stoops, Miami's defensive backs coach.

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Phil Velasquez Chicago Tribune (KRT)

Tyrone Willingham, the former head coach of the Stanford Cardinal, has led the Notre Dame to a 6-0 record this year, but the Irish face undefeated Air Force on Saturday.

Undefeated Falcons hope to disarm Irish

Tim Mimick
The Gazette (Colorado Spring, Colo.)
(KRT)

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. — College football coaches promise recruits games against top-10 teams. Playing against highly-ranked Notre Dame makes it only better.

Air Force will get its chance to knock off the Irish on Saturday night at Falcon Stadium in an ESPN telecast.

Notre Dame (6-0), winner of 11 consensus national championships, holds the No. 7 ranking in both polls. Air Force (6-0) moved up to No. 18 in the Associated Press poll and No. 15 in the ESPN/USA Today coaches poll Sunday.

"With Notre Dame coming in, it's going to be bigger than life," Falcon back Joel Buelow said.

Air Force set up this matchup of unbeaten by dispatching defending Mountain West Conference champion Brigham Young 52-9 Saturday night at Falcon Stadium. Air Force trailed 3-0, then scored the next 45 points to avenge a 63-33 blitzing at BYU a year ago.

Air Force has been determined to get back to its winning ways after a 6-6 season in 2001. In the second

game this season Air Force knocked off New Mexico, which had won a school-record three in a row against the Falcons. In the fourth game, the Falcons rallied to edge Utah, which beat Air Force to the Mountain West's postseason berths last season, although Air Force could gloat over a season-ending 38-37 win over Utah.

In the past three seasons, Air Force has gone to one bowl and hasn't claimed a Mountain West title.

By beating BYU, Air Force put itself at 3-0 in the conference with three teams picked ahead of it in the pre-season standings already defeated.

As for a postseason game, Air Force can make its unprecedented Bowl Championship Series statement by defeating Notre Dame. The first BCS poll of the year will be released Oct. 21. Even if it wins the Mountain West, Air Force won't be assured a BCS berth to one of the elite Fiesta, Rose, Sugar or Orange bowls. Air Force needs a top-six finish in the BCS standings to accomplish such a feat.

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