

College Football

# Race for Pac-12 title still not entirely clear cut

By ANNE M. PETERSON  
Associated Press

So, seventh-ranked Stanford looks like a lock for the Pac-12 North title, right? Not so fast.

Oregon visits the Cardinal this weekend, and while the Ducks are underdogs, there's still a chance — albeit an improbable one — that they could defend their Pac-12 championship. But there are a couple of moving parts.

Here's the scenario: Oregon must beat Stanford then win its final two games against USC and Oregon State. The Ducks will also need the Cardinal to lose in the Big Game to Cal.

Stanford, which finishes out the regular season with an out-of-conference game against Notre Dame, clinches the North outright with a victory over Oregon on Saturday, and indeed, the Cardinal (8-1, 7-0 Pac-12) are favored.

But don't underestimate the Ducks. Quarterback Vernon Adams Jr. is back after an early season finger injury and Oregon (6-3, 4-2) is riding a three-game winning streak while playing as well as it has all season.

Oregon would no doubt like to turn the table on Stanford — which upset the Ducks in both 2012 and 2013 and kept them out of the conference championship game and the chance for that coveted shot at the Rose Bowl.

"The last four years the winner of this game has won the Pac-12 championship so it's everything. For us our ultimate goal every year is to win the Pac-12 and we have a chance this Saturday so it's huge," Stanford linebacker Kevin Anderson said.

Adams said it's hard not to think about the possibility of a conference championship berth. Oregon went to the national championship game last season.

"We don't want to be just completely thinking about the Pac-12 North, but it's in our minds, definitely," Adams said. "Hopefully, we just get this win and things happen. We've got to win one game at a time and go from there."

Washington State (6-3, 4-2) is out of contention for the North title because of how the tie-breaker rules play out, but the good news for the Cougars is that they



AP Photo/David Zalubowski  
Stanford running back Christian McCaffrey carries an American flag on the field as the team takes the gridiron to face Colorado in the first half of an NCAA college football game Saturday, Nov. 7, 2015, in Boulder, Colo.

are already bowl eligible. It looks as if coach Mike Leach is finally turning the program around in Pullman.

Also out of the picture are Oregon State, Washington and Cal, which will have to

upset Stanford for the Ducks to get in.

The Pac-12 South is a bit murkier.

Utah (8-1, 5-1) is a game up on the Southern California schools and basically

controls its own destiny. If the Utes win out they win the South.

The Utes play Arizona (5-5, 2-5) in Tucson this weekend before returning home to face UCLA in a game that will go a long way in determining how the division will shake out. Utah wraps up the season with South bottom-dweller Colorado (4-6, 1-5).

"We still stick to a game-by-game approach, but we see the big picture," Utes coach Kyle Whittingham said. "We understand what we want to accomplish and that's to try to get to the Pac-12 championship game, which requires winning the south. That's not something that we ignore, but our focus on a week-to-week basis is completely on the next opponent."

A combination of losses by the Bruins (7-2, 4-2) and USC (6-3, 4-2) could also get the Utes into the Pac-12 championship game at Levi's Stadium in Santa Clara on Dec. 5.

Utah was just one win away from clinching the South division in 2011, the team's first in the league.

If the Bruins can defeat

upstart Washington State at home on Saturday, it will set up a pivotal game against Utah at Rice-Eccles Stadium, before the finale at USC.

The Trojans, who visit Colorado on Friday, are also still alive, but they'll have to take care of their own business, including a winning trip to Oregon, while rooting for a Utes loss. USC holds the tiebreaker against Utah because of a 42-24 victory over the Utes on Oct. 24.

If UCLA and USC both win over the next two weeks — that means the Bruins beat Utah — the rivalry game between the two teams to cap the regular season will decide the South.

In addition to the Buffaloes, the Arizona schools are already out of the league championship race.

As for the bowl picture, the Pac-12 has contracts with seven bowl games, but if a conference team earns a spot in the College Football Playoff, then an eighth team from the league could draw a postseason berth. At this point, Stanford appears to have the best chance of cracking the top four in the nation.

## TIGERS: Both teams' leading rushers over 1,100 yards this season

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and they're ready to go toe-to-toe.

"My kids are hungry," Stanfield head coach Davy Salas said. "Since we've been together, we told ourselves we want to go play for a state championship. That's been our goal for these guys. That's what we want to do. We're going to go play the games on our schedule, and if we play a great game we'll come out on top."

In preparation for the Cobras, Stanfield isn't changing anything. But that's been the modus operandi of first-year coach Salas since he took over before this season. The first time he addressed his team, he told them he isn't interested in sexy big-play football. He

wanted to play "man-on-man, hat-on-hat" football and run between the tackles.

The Tigers have done just that this season.

Junior running back Thyler Monkus has three games of 200 or more rushing yards, and he's eclipsed 100 in every game but two. In total, Monkus has rushed for 1,353 yards on 153 carries for an 8.8 yards per carry average and 20 touchdowns.

Quarterback Dylan Grogan, also a junior, has added another element to the rushing game with his size and athleticism, giving Stanfield a legitimate short down option. He's rushed for 976 yards on 123 carries (7.9 ypc) and 21 touchdowns. He's also passed for nine touchdowns on 44-of-62

passing for 708 yards.

But the Tigers have other options, as well. Makiah Blankenship has 449 yards on 87 attempts and four touchdowns, and Justin Keeney has 400 yards on 59 carries and four scores.

"We have a five-headed monster at running back," Salas said. "And we know who's gonna get the ball. It's no secret to nobody. Everybody knows who's gonna get the ball — my running back and my quarterback. We're not hiding them anywhere. We're running power football."

Both Stanfield and Central Linn come from tough leagues, setting them both up for potentially deep playoff runs. Stanfield hails from the Columbia Basin Conference, which at one point in the season had three teams at

5-0 and a fourth at 4-1. The CBC sent four teams to the playoffs this season, with just league champ Heppner and Stanfield advancing rounds.

Meanwhile, Central Linn calls the five-team Tri-River Conference home. There, the Cobras dropped just one game — a 35-18 loss to league champ Regis — and still managed to win the league and take the top seed in the bracket.

Statistically, Stanfield's offense is better than Central Linn's but the Cobras have a better defense. The Tigers have scored 409 points so far this season, the third most in the state behind Heppner (501) and Vernonia (500), who Stanfield beat 56-26 last week. Central Linn, though, has demonstrated a stout defense by allowing just 14

points per game this season, including two shutouts.

"What we're good at, is we sustain 10-, 12-play drives and we eat clock," Salas said. "We're not worried about the big play."

Stanfield is going to need to do something like that to keep Central Linn's big-play on-the-ground offense on the sideline.

The rushing offense is similar to Stanfield's in that it has multiple options to which it can turn. Three Cobras have more than 100 carries and a fourth has 74. All four guys have more than 500 yards, all four have had a 100-yard game this season, and all four have scored.

Senior Alex Pettner leads the way for Central Linn with 1,117 yards on 164 carries

(6.8 ypc) for 13 touchdowns. Hiss 23-carry, 187-yard game in the Regis loss was the most productive rushing game by a single Cobra this season. But Braden Nightengale and his 11.4 yards per carry average will have to be accounted for, as well. The junior has carried just 74 times for 845 yards — second-most on the team — and 11 touchdowns. Chandler Jeppson (619 yards, 8 TDs) and quarterback Jesse Wibbens (504 yards, 7 TDs) are also viable options to run. Wibbens has also passed for 483 yards on just 20-of-34 passing for 10 scores and one interception.

Salas is confident in his bunch.

"I respect everybody," Salas said. "But I'm not scared of anybody."

## PIGSKIN PICKERS

Week 10

Overall: 67-23

Last Week: 9-1

Stanfield at Central Linn: Central Linn

Reedsport at Heppner: Heppner

Wilsonville at Liberty: Liberty

Summit at Redmond: Summit

Oregon at Stanford: Stanford

Utah at Arizona: Utah

Washington St. at UCLA: UCLA

Oklahoma at Baylor: Baylor

Cardinals at Seahawks: Cardinals

Cowboys at Buccaneers: Cowboys



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