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FINALLY! 2021 WEEK 1 CFB KICKOFF ISSUE

Welcome to Dennis Stagliano's Gridiron Gold 2021 NCAA kickoff issue. We're celebrating our 40th year in the sports service business. We want to start out by thanking all of our loyal subscribers. Now let's get started.

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COLLEGE FOOTBALL BEST BETS

Alabama - 18½ Over MIAMI by 27

The Alabama Crimson Tide come in with a familiar title, the defending national champions after finishing the year 13-0 with wins over Notre Dame and Ohio State to claim the college football championship. Now the task remains to replace some of the best offensive players from the Tide in recent memory, as Mac Jones, DeVonta Smith, Jaylen Waddle, Najee Harris and Alex Leatherwood all went pro. Bryce Young is expected to take over the quarterback duties for the Crimson Tide, but it may take some time for Young to get truly comfortable within the Tide's system under a new offensive co-ordinator as Steve Sarkisian is now the head coach at Texas. Brian Robinson is expected to head the running back duties for the Tide, while Jase McClellan and Roydell Williams will also get their fair share of touches. John Metchie might be the lynch pin to carrying over the offensive success as he's really the Alabama receiver that not many people were talking about despite finishing second on the team with 55 catches for 916 yards and six touchdowns, averaging 16.7 yards per catch. There are also lots of up and coming pieces to like with Alabama, such as Slade Bolden, Javon Baker, freshman Agiye Hall and Traeshon Holden. Jahleel Billingsley and Cameron Latu are also options for Alabama at tight end. On the defensive side of the ball is a very talented unit that is STOUT!

The Hurricanes come in ranked 14th in the nation after a generally impressive season in 2020, though big losses to Clemson and North Carolina knocked them out of being in the true upper echelon of college football. The Hurricanes return almost all of an offense that scored 34 points per game last year, and 6th year senior QB D'Eriq King is viewed by many as one of the best QBs in the nation (and Vegas agrees... He's 8th overall in the Heisman odds).

King was spectacular for Miami in 2020 after graduate transferring from Houston, throwing for 2700 yards and 23 touchdowns with only 5 interceptions, and adding another 500 yards rushing. He's

one of the best rushing QBs in the nation and combines that with veteran leadership, aggressive and mostly accurate downfield passing, and tremendous moxie to make throws while being blasted by a pass rusher. Unfortunately, King tore his ACL in the bowl game at the end of 2020. By all accounts, he's fully recovered and ready to go, but half a year is a short amount of time. Will he be as electric of a runner in game 1 as he's been his whole career? That's ultimately the question that will have to be answered for the Hurricanes to have a chance in the opener.

Offensive coordinator Rhett Lashlee returns for his second season, and he's instilled an offense that takes many concepts and elements of the Gus Malzahn offense we saw for years at Auburn and removes a lot of the power rushing in favor of a more spread out wide receiver group and a focus on downfield, sideline passing. The rushing game is largely read option based, with D'Eriq King being the #1 threat. Running back Cam'Ron Harris led the team with 600 or so yards last year, and looks to be the starter yet again. Harris is a nice, balanced back who can eat up a quick 8-9 yards and knock a defensive back down if the defense bites on the read option fake, but he's not the kind of running back who can carry an offense or make plays happen in tight spaces.

Last year, slot receiver Mike Harley led the team with 800 yards, and was exceptionally dangerous on those RPO slant routes that Alabama has made so popular the last few years. On the outside, Mark Pope and Dee Wiggins mostly worked the sidelines as deep threats. Both have the speed to burn a defensive back off the line of scrimmage and decent ability to make tough catches, but lack any real threat of getting yards after catch.

With that said, sophomore Key'Shawn Smith, who only had 2 catches last year, has supplanted Pope as one starter, and Oklahoma transfer Charleston Rambo has taken over Wiggins' job. Rambo was a big play threat who had a huge season in 2019 as one of Jalen Hurts' favorite targets, but saw his production drop drastically in 2020. He's got the speed to take any catch to the house and the versatility to play most any receiver spot.

At tight end, Will Mallory caught 22 passes for nearly 350 yards as the backup TE last year, and is projected to pick up the extra production as the full starter and be one of the best in the ACC. He was a major threat running seams and sneaking behind the linebackers, and displayed the ability to elude a tackle if a defender didn't come in cleanly to attempt a tackle.

Along the offensive line, Miami returns most of what was **a below-average run-blocking unit** and an above-average pass-blocking unit from 2020. When it comes down to it, this offense will go as King makes huge plays. He'll get a few on the Tide by hitting a quick slant or seam as he's getting blitzed, but I fear he won't quite be confident in himself enough to be the rushing and scrambling threat that he was last year. As such, Alabama will totally shut down the Miami running game, and any deep shots or sandlot plays will be limited. Without that extra level of threat, the Tide will be able to sit back and contain him, and ultimately hold the Hurricanes to 17-20 points.

King and Miami's offense last year facing Clemson is the closest thing they've seen to what Bama will put up against them. Good coaches and blue chip players. In that effort, King threw for 121 yards and 2 INTs, and about a 50% completion rate. In this his first game, very little practice time this spring/summer, coming off an injury, I believe it would be overly optimistic to expect him to do better than this against a stout Alabama defense. I just don't see Miami as a deep and balanced group. I believe King will feel the need to carry the team with his arm and that's where desperation and eventually fatigue will lead to mistakes. Alabama will keep rotating in nasty pass rushers and Miami's offense will fall apart. Like I said previously, he struggled when the opposing defenses with blue chip athletes. And that's pre-ACL King. The Bama front 7 controls things easily and leaves the safeties to smother verticals and jump some underneath stuff. I think King quickly goes chuck-and-duck. Note that Alabama is 5-0 ATS in their last 5 week 1 matchups, and we think they keep the trend going.

Projected Score: Alabama 44, Miami 17

Louisiana + 9 Over TEXAS by 3

Louisiana is coming off a 10-1 season and is winning 71.8 percent of its games under coach Billy Napier. The Louisiana Ragin' Cajuns averaged 33.6 points and 421.5 yards per game last season. Louisiana allowed an average of 22 points and 355.4 yards per game last season. Levi Lewis returns at quarterback after throwing for 2,200 yards and 19 touchdowns. Chris Smith should get more carries after averaging 5.6 yards per carry on 62 touches. Kyren Lacy and Jalen Williams is a returning receiving duo that combined for 700 yards and eight touchdowns. Defensively, Lorenzo McCaskill returns after leading Louisiana with 83 tackles, Ferrod Gardner had 4.5 sacks and Bralen Trahan has four interceptions. The Ragin' Cajuns are loaded on both sides of the ball and they should be able to build on what they did last season. Louisiana beat a ranked Iowa State in last years season opener, so you should expect a confident bunch in this game as well.

Texas finished 7-3 last season and enters the first year under coach Steve Sarkisian. The Texas Longhorns averaged 42.7 points and 475.4 yards per game last season. Texas allowed an average of 28.5 points and 406.6 yards per game last season. Casey Thompson or Hudson Card will replace Sam Ehlinger at quarterback. Bijan Robinson returns at running back after leading Texas with 700 yards and four touchdowns. Joshua Moore and Jordan Whittington is a receiving duo that combined for 600 yards and nine touchdowns. Defensively, DeMarvion Overshown returns after 60 tackles, Moro Ojomo had two sacks and Chris Adimora had one interception. Texas should be fine defensively from the gate and has another great recruiting class coming in to fill any holes. The main question for Texas is at the quarterback position, as replacing Ehlinger won't be easy. Ehlinger was a second-team All-Big 12 selection last season and produced 127 total touchdowns for his career.

The Ragin' Cajuns are 4-1 ATS in their last 5 games as an underdog. The Longhorns are 4-0 ATS in their last 4 non-conference games and 0-3-1 ATS in their last 4 home games. The Texas Longhorns obviously should be favored and "should win". However, Texas has holes to fill, especially at quarterback, and we've seen the Longhorns struggle in the favorite role in the past. Louisiana returns a lot of players on both sides of the ball and has a proven quarterback in Lewis. The Ragin' Cajuns also beat Iowa State last year, so this is a confident team that won't be scared of the bright lights. This game could be very close and we would not be surprised to see an upset. Take the points with Louisiana in what can be a shocker upset.

Projected Score: Louisiana 30, Texas 27

USC - 15 Over San Jose St by 3

The USC Trojans will look to defend their almost undefeated [5-1] 2020 season which finished with a trip to the Pac-12 championship game vs. Oregon. Quarterback Kedon Slovis returns for his third season as Troy's leading gunslinger working alongside offensive weapons WR Drake London and RB Vavae Malepeai. Defensively, DL Nick Figueroa is back up front after leading USC in sacks and tackles for loss, while LB Drake Jackson will serve as an anchor for the Trojans defense this season.

The Mountain West underdog appears to be outclassed by one of the Pac-12 favorites, but erase the memories of hapless San Jose State teams of the past. In his fifth year, coach Brent Brennan has transformed the Spartans' image. San Jose finished 7-1 last year and opened this season with a 45-14 victory over Southern Utah. Nick Starkel passed for 394 yards and four touchdowns, and Tyler Nevens rushed for 91 yards and a touchdown as the Spartans covered as 28-point favorites. San Jose posted double-digit wins over Boise State, Nevada and San Diego State last year, proof that Brennan's team is legit. The 15-point line at USC is a sign of respect.

The Trojans are again loaded with talent and led by veteran quarterback Kedon Slovis, who has totaled 47 touchdown passes in two seasons. Drake London could be the conference's top wide receiver, and Texas transfer Keaontay Ingram is primed to take over as the go-to running back. The

Trojans will feature plenty of weapons in offensive coordinator Graham Harrell's wide-open attack. USC was lucky to finish 5-1 last season and needed Slovis to lead improbable comebacks to beat Arizona State, Arizona and UCLA. USC's team speed advantage might be too much for San Jose to overcome, but the Spartans have a game under their belts and the Trojans have underachieved while going 13-18 ATS the last three seasons for coach Clay Helton.

San Jose State is 4-1 ATS in their last 5 games played in September and 5-0-1 ATS in their last 6 games played on a Saturday while the under is 6-1 in their last 7 games overall. USC is 4-12 ATS in their last 16 games played in September and 5-2 ATS in their last 7 games played on Saturday while the under is 5-1 in their last 6 games as a favorite.

QB Nick Starkel's rediscovered himself at SJSU and the Spartans picked up where they left off in week 0. However, the Trojans took a big step forward in 2020 and are as good as they've been in some time. I think two touchdowns + 1 is showing respect to the Spartans, so I'll take the points as the Spartans battle the Trojans to the end.

Projected Score: USC 31, San Jose St 28

Texas San Antonio + 6½ Over Illinois by 3

Illinois managed to play eight games in 2020, finishing a dismal 2-6 with victories over Rutgers and Nebraska. The Illini finished in the basement of the West Division in the Big Ten Conference. Head coach Love Smith was relieved of his duties after seven games. The Bret Bielema era in Champaign got off to a hot start with a 30-22 win over Nebraska. So how good is Nebraska? Starting quarterback Brandon Peters went down with an injury, but Artur Sitkowski filled in quite nicely. He completed 12 of his 15 passes for 124 yards and 2 touchdowns, and helped lead a well-balanced offensive attack. Illinois returned 18 starters from last season, and a lot of those guys were on the team that went to the Redbox Bowl in 2019. This is an experienced and battle-tested roster, and unlike UTSA, they already have a game under their belt in 2021. That could be huge, as Illinois was able to find what they need to improve on after their win over Nebraska. The Illini offensive line had some struggles, but they still managed to run the ball for 167 yards and had nearly 10 more minutes of possession than the Huskers.

UTSA managed a 7-5 mark last season, going 5-2 in Conference USA play. That result left the Roadrunners in second place in the West Division, one spot behind UAB. UTSA was chosen for the First Responder Bowl, where they fell in a tough one 31-24 to a **very good Louisiana team**. The Roadrunners have a serious weapon in RB Sincere McCormick, but going up against the Illini run defense could be tough. Aside from an Adrian Martinez 75-yard run, Illinois held Nebraska to 85 rushing yards on 38 carries, or 2.2 yards per carry. That one run really skewed the final stats of what was a great day up front for the Illini defense.

In the Saturday matchup versus Nebraska, Illinois had a 16-9 lead at halftime and hung on for an eventual 30-22 victory. Quarterback Artur Sitkowski went 12-of-15 for 124 yards and two scores, while Mike Epstein notched 75 yards and a TD on 16 carries to lead the rush.

The Roadrunners have really turned their offense around in the last few years, posting 415 yards and 28 points per game last season. The rushing game (featuring a heavy dose of Sincere McCormick) is the high point of the attack, **and the offensive line gets everyone back this season**.

As for Illinois, they gave up 232 yards on the ground and 5.5 yards per play last year. As mentioned earlier, how good is Nebraska? We believe the Roadrunners will really test that Illini run defense this week. We also believe this is going to be a very competitive game, and an upset is very possible.

Projected Score: Texas San Antonio 27, Illinois 24

BYU - 13 Over ARIZONA by 3

The BYU Cougars and Arizona Wildcats meet Saturday at Allegiant Stadium in Viva Las Vegas. This will be a great game to watch in the new stadium, and I'm sure it will be packed with Cougar and Wildcat fans probably in the 50,000 range. Both teams will be fired up in a new stadium in front of a raucous very large fan base.

The BYU Cougars finished 11-1 last year and hope to win double-digit games two years in a row for the first time since 2008-09. The Arizona Wildcats finished 0-5 last season and will begin the Jedd Fisch coaching era. The BYU Cougars averaged 43.5 points and 522.2 yards per game last season. BYU allowed an average of 15.3 points and 318 yards per game last season. Baylor Romney likely replaces Zach Wilson at quarterback after 35 pass attempts last season. Tyler Allgeier is back after leading BYU with 1,100 rushing yards and 13 touchdowns while Gunner Romney and Neil Pau'u combined for 1,300 receiving yards and six touchdowns. Defensively, Keenan Pili returns after 72 tackles, Tyler Batty had four sacks and Malik Moore had one interception. BYU was a title contender last season but has a lot of question marks this year with a new quarterback and new head coach. BYU has playmakers on offense and plenty of returning production on defense, but the loss of Wilson does hurt and makes you wonder if the Cougars can build on last years efforts.

Arizona was winless straight up in 2020 and finished the COVID-shortened campaign at 1-4 against the spread (ATS). In fact, the Wildcats have not produced a winning season for spread bettors since 2018-19, when the team wound up with a 7-5 ATS record. However, Arizona has been a solid performer as a double-digit underdog (like it is on Saturday against BYU). Since the start of the 2004 college football season, the Wildcats are 22-31-1 (41.5%) ATS when underdogs of fewer than 10 points. But once the spread the climbs to double-digits, Arizona has been profitable for bettors, posting a 23-20 (53.5%) ATS record. Arizona is of course under new management this year — the Kevin Sumlin era is over, and Jedd Fisch takes over with former Michigan defensive coordinator Don Brown manning that spot. Fisch has jumped around a ton in the last decade, with stops as primarily a quarterbacks coach and offensive assistant with Michigan, the L.A. Rams, New England Patriots, UCLA and more.

The Arizona Wildcats averaged 17.4 points and 369.4 yards per game last season. Arizona allowed an average of 39.8 points and 473 yards per game last season. Will Plummer returns at quarterback after 80 pass attempts behind Grant Gunnell. Michael Wiley had 200 rushing yards and three touchdowns while Stanley Berryhill III and Ma'jon Wright is a receiving duo that combined for 400 yards and four touchdowns. Defensively, Rhedi Short returns after leading Arizona with 30 tackles, Paris Shand had one sack and Anthony Pandy had two interceptions. Arizona should be better than it was last season with the bulk of its defense back and playmakers at wide receiver. However, Arizona has to find a reliable option at quarterback to really make a jump and Fisch has just two games under his belt as a head coach.

The Cougars are 1-3-1 ATS in their last 5 games on grass. The Wildcats are 0-5 ATS in their last 5 neutral site games and 0-4 ATS in their last 4 games overall. The under is 9-2 in Cougars last 11 vs. Pac-12. The under is 6-2 in Wildcats last 8 games overall. The Cougars are 4-1 ATS in their last 5 meetings.

BYU is still the better team in this matchup, but don't expect the Cougars to be a fine oiled machine without Zach Wilson and the defense will take a step back. The Arizona Wildcats are breaking in a new head coach, and while they have quarterback concerns as well, they're loaded with offensive playmakers and should take a big step forward on defense. Despite the concerns, I can argue Arizona is one of the more underrated teams in the Pac-12. A battle of the cats and I'll grab the points with the wildcats.

Projected Score: BYU 27, Arizona 24

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