

BIG 12 CONFERENCE

COLLEGE FOOTBALL: 2026 Preview



5 GAMES TO WATCH



TCU VS. NORTH CAROLINA
AUG. 28: For the second year in a row, the Big 12 goes international with the first college football game of 2026 on ESPN from Dublin, Ireland, with TCU trying to steal the show from 8-time Super Bowl winner Bill Belichick.



HOUSTON AT TEXAS TECH
SEPT. 19: Conference play opens with a bang as Texas Tech puts its national championship dreams on the line against a Houston team with dreams of becoming Big 12 champion.



ARIZONA STATE AT KANSAS
SEPT. 18: It's back to Europe for the Big 12 as iconic Wembley Stadium will fill 85,000 seats as it hosts its first American college football game in the Union Jack Classic with Fox bringing its "Big Noon Kickoff" show overseas as well.



NOTRE DAME AT BYU
OCT. 17: In 1990, BYU kicked off quarterback Ty Detmer's Heisman Trophy season upsetting No. 1 Miami, 28-21, and now may get a second chance to beat a No. 1 as the Fighting Irish are projected to be 6-0 when this game takes place in Provo.



BYU AT UTAH
NOV. 7: The Holy War as it could decide the Big 12 title and be for a spot in the field for the College Football Playoffs. This year's version offers at late-season, Big 12 showdown that will have plenty of intrigue.



THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

Texas Tech players celebrate their team's win against BYU in the Big 12 Conference championship game last December in Arlington, Texas.

COMPETITIVE CONFERENCE

Big 12's balance from top to bottom touted as strength

BY BOB HERTZEL, CNHI SPORTS

During the Big 12's summer Media Day, it felt like Commissioner Brett Yormark spoke more about the state of the game than he did about what promises to be an exciting, competitive football season that was being overshadowed by what was taking place not on the field but in boardrooms.

There were rumors that the SEC was considering breaking away from the rest of the NCAA and, with the Big Ten joining, changing the very face of the game itself. There was a gambling scandal for the Big 12 to deal with; there was NIL and the transfer portal to deal with; and seemingly inevitable future expansion with more teams jumping from conference to conference.

Money remains front and center and overwhelms the football facts that in years past were more important, things stressed by Yormark, such as the thought that the Big 12 was the most competitive conference in

the country last year "with more late-game drama than any other conference, and the metrics show that."

The conference is expected to be just as tight this year, even though Texas Tech enters the season as the defending champion and the favorite to win it again this year. BYU and Utah are legitimate contenders, and no one is willing to stamp them as repeat champions as they often did back when Oklahoma was dominant in the conference.

The on-field direction was trending upward, with last year's championship game drawing "more than 85,000 fans, the most

attended in Power 4 history, with game viewership up 39%," Yormark said.

The feeling was that it was simply the first step forward and that there's more to come.

Yormark said four new coaches — Collin Klein of Kansas State, Eric Morris at Oklahoma State, Jimmy Rogers at Iowa State and Morgan Scalley at Utah — are bringing new life where needed and "the Big 12, again, will be the conference of quarterbacks, with six returning starters and one of the strongest portal classes in the country at the position. Our competitive depth will fuel another exciting run to the Big 12 Championship at AT&T Stadium in Arlington and position multiple Big 12 programs firmly in the college football conversation — playoff conversation."

No, this is not the old Big 12 brand of quarterbacks

such as Patrick Mahomes, Geno Smith, Vince Young or Robert Griffin, but the list headed by Arizona's undersized but still overwhelming Noah Fifita, BYU's now sophomore Bear Bachmeier, and North Texas transfer Drew Mestemaker, who is expected to breathe life into the offense at Oklahoma State.

And while Mestemaker is the cornerstone of a bounce-back in Stillwater, West Virginia coach Rich Rodriguez has dedicated himself to rebuilding from the ground game up on Jacksonville State transfer Cam Cook, who led the nation in rushing last season with 1,659 yards.

So, buckle up. The Big 12 is coming at you, and if it doesn't have the glitz and glitter of the SEC and Big Ten, it carries with it a certain balance that figures to lead to close games and a season-long, tight battle.

PREDICTED ORDER OF FINISH

- Texas Tech
- BYU
- Utah
- Kansas State
- Houston
- Arizona State
- TCU
- Arizona
- Oklahoma State
- West Virginia
- Cincinnati
- Colorado
- Kansas
- UCF
- Iowa State
- Baylor

STORIES TO FOLLOW

1 Can Scalley keep Utah rolling along?

Michigan lured Kyle Whittingham away from the Utes after 21 years of successful football, which produced 177 win. He turned the team over to Morgan Scalley, his assistant for 18 of those years.

2 Can Texas Tech fulfill Big 12 expectations?

Brendan Sorsby moved to the Red Raiders but was suspended and made ineligible for gambling. The job goes to Will Hammond, who started last year until an injury against Oklahoma State, and coach Joey McGuire believes in him, as do the players.

3 Back to future for Rodriguez and WVU

Rich Rodriguez's greatest success at WVU came when he had Pat White at quarterback and Steve Slaton at running back. He is trying to recapture that feel after a 4-8 return season with Oklahoma transfer Michael Hawkins in White's role and Jacksonville State transfer Cam Cook, the nation's top rusher last year, in the Slaton role.

4 Can Morris strike gold in Stillwater?

Mike Gundy coached the Cowboys for 21 years, but was fired when he started 1-2 last year following a 3-9 season. Chad Morris, a month shy of his 40th birthday when the season opens, went 12-2 last year with Drew Mestemaker at QB, and is looking for a quick turnaround for the Cowboys.

PLAYERS TO WATCH



DREW MESTEMAKER
QB, Oklahoma State

• Preseason Newcomer of the Year, the sophomore is the central figure in the plans to make Oklahoma State a Big 12 contender



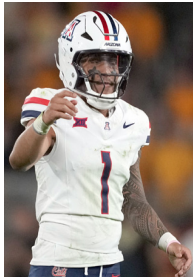
LJ MARTIN RB, BYU

• Ran for 1,305 yards, 5.5 per carry, and caught 36 passes last season at 7.3 per reception in 2025.



CAM COOK
RB, West Virginia

Former TCU back returns to the Big 12 after leading the nation with 1,659 yards rushing at Jacksonville State.



NOAH FIFITA
QB, Arizona

• Three-year starter who has 9,083 yards with 73 touchdowns in his career.



AJ HOLMES
DL, Texas Tech

• Returns for senior year as Big 12's Preseason Defensive Player of the Year.

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