

MONTANA GRIZZLIES 2026 SEASON PREVIEW • THURSDAY, AUG. 20, 2026

GRIZZLY

GAME DAY

Missoulian

THE BOOK OF BK

**Bobby Kennedy
has been shaped
by football icons**

BEN ALLAN SMITH, MISSOULIAN

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THE FAMILY YOU CHOOSE

Kennedy ready to put his stamp on Grizzlies program

FRANK GOGOLA
406 MT Sports

Bobby Kennedy turned to David Shaw for some inspiration heading into his first fall football camp as Montana's head coach in August.

He didn't literally turn to Shaw, who may be most well known as the Stanford Cardinal head coach for 12 seasons from 2011-22 in an ongoing coaching career that has included several stops with NFL teams.

Kennedy did physically turn the pages in one of his notebooks to one of Shaw's speeches he had written down while working under him at Stanford when he was looking for a message to share with his Grizzly players.

"It was something that David Shaw talked about all the time in terms of when you come out to practice do things with intent," he said following the first day of fall camp. "It's not just doing the drills to do the drills, but it's you're practicing with intent on getting better at everything you do."

Kennedy was planning to use a couple points from his notebooks each day during the three-week training camp. He's up to 14 books of notes that he has accumulated in a coaching career of 30-plus years alongside football icons.

The first of those came in 1994 when he was heading into his second of two seasons as the Wyoming Cowboys wide receivers coach. That year, he was chosen for a minority internship with the NFL's San Francisco 49ers, he said.

He worked primarily with wide receivers coach Larry Kirksey while with the 49ers. One day, he asked offensive coordinator Mike Shanahan if he could watch film with him during lunchtime, he said.

After inquiring a few times, Shanahan asked him to do a favor, he recalled. Whenever head coach George Siefert spoke to the team, Kennedy was tasked with writing down what he talked about and giving the notes to Shanahan.

"It gave me an idea when I went back to Wyoming," he said. "Every job I had I



SHANNA MADISON, MISSOULIAN

Montana head coach Bobby Kennedy walks past players stretching during a fall camp football practice Aug. 3 at Dornblaser Field in Missoula. He is heading into his first season leading the Grizzlies.

would write notes down about practices, about what coach talked about, some of the things I liked that we did in practice, some things I didn't like, practice plan, organization, messages to the team, motivational messages, or things that were critical or negative."

Kennedy, 59, kept that practice of taking handwritten notes for over 30 years as an FBS assistant who has coached wide receivers and running backs.

He kept those notes while he made coaching stops at Wyoming, Wake Forest, Arizona, Washington, Texas, Colorado, Iowa, Stanford and Rice before UM.

He played at Northern Colorado and coached at Illinois and Penn State before the notebook idea. So, he added notes from those stops when he was struck by a memory of what some of those coaches had said or done that he liked.

He brought those notebooks with him when he was hired as the Montana wide receivers coach ahead of 2025 fall camp. They continue to be an asset as he landed his first head coaching job in February.

"It's a way for me to remember the things that I was inspired by, that I really liked, maybe some of the things I didn't like that maybe I don't want to incorporate as a head coach," he said. "It wasn't just with me being a head coach. I used stuff when I was an assistant. It's just been a great resource. It's just been a great personal kind of journey for me."

Messages from mentors

Kennedy turned to another coach when he wrapped up the final practice of the first week of fall camp. He shared with his players another message that has resonated over the years. It's a two-word phrase from

Jim Caldwell: "Earn it."

Before Kennedy visits his team in the weight room, before he leads them through practice, before he watches film or before he flips through those notebooks for inspiration, he starts his day with a simple routine.

"Every day I get up, first thing I do, walk in the bathroom, brush my teeth and I look in the mirror, I say, 'Earn it today,'" he said. "It's like Saving Private Ryan, 'Earn this.' I say to the players the same thing all the time. I've got to earn it, you've got to earn it, we've got to earn it together. There's expectation, so every day it can be a grind, but I've loved every minute of it."

Kennedy has been trying to earn it since 1990, when he got his first college coaching job as a graduate assistant at Illinois

GRIZZLIES WEEK-BY-WEEK PREVIEW

FRANK GOGOLA | 406 MT Sports

Anticipation has filled the air around the Montana football team heading into its first season under first-time head coach Bobby Kennedy.

Expectations remain high for the Grizzlies despite an offseason of change as they were voted No. 2 in the Stats Perform FCS Top 25 preseason poll as well as the Big Sky Conference preseason coaches and media polls.

It's not only the Kennedy Era that is new this season. The Big Sky Conference has moved from eight to nine league games following changes in membership. They've also permanently moved from 11 to 12 regular season games.

Here is a week-by-week look at the Grizzlies' schedule as they prepare to kick off their 2026 season on Aug. 29 at Washington-Grizzly Stadium in Missoula.



Vs. Southern Utah, Aug. 29 in Missoula:

The Thunderbirds were on the wrong side of the playoff bubble the past two years, going 7-5 overall and 6-2 in the United Athletic Conference each year. They made the "others receiving votes" of the FCS Top 25 preseason poll, coming in No. 32. They were sixth in the Big Sky coaches poll and seventh in the media poll despite not having any preseason all-league players selected.

They had seven All-UAC players last year but return only one: second-team offensive lineman Sirri Kandiyeli. They boasted the FCS regular season rushing leader the past two years: Targhee Lambson ran out of eligibility after 2024 and Joshua Dye transferred to Ole Miss after 2025.

Head coach DeLane Fitzgerald is 25-21 in four seasons. He guides the T-Birds back to the Big Sky after he took over in 2022, the first year after they left. They spent 2022 in the Western Athletic Conference and 2023-25 in the UAC.

This will be the first time Montana opens the season with a conference game since 1986, a 51-17 loss at No. 1 Nevada in Don Read's Griz debut. Its last season-opening conference game at home was 1983 against Boise State.



Vs. Drake, Sept. 5 in Missoula:

The Bulldogs, like the Griz, are under the direction of a first-year head coach. They're two of seven teams who made the playoffs last season and have a new head coach this year. Matt Walker took over after 15 years at Wisconsin-River Falls, which he led to the 2025 NCAA Division III national title.



BEN ALLAN SMITH, MISSOULIAN

Montana quarterback Keali'i Ah Yat rushes as UC Davis defensive lineman Evan Bearden pursues him on Nov. 9, 2024, at Washington-Grizzly Stadium in Missoula. The Grizzlies will play at the Aggies in the 2026 season.

Drake won the non-scholarship Pioneer Football League the past three seasons but lost in the first round of the playoffs by 14 or more points each time. The Bulldogs were picked second in the PFL preseason poll and got one preseason pick in defensive back Garrison Codde, who was second team in 2025. They were in the "others receiving votes" of the FCS Top 25, checking in at 42nd.



Vs. Utah Tech, Sept. 12 in Missoula:

The Trailblazers joined the Big Sky this season after playing in the United Athletic Conference. This game will count as a nonconference game because it was scheduled before the change in league affiliation. UM and Utah Tech did cancel their 2027 matchup, which was going to be the fourth in their contract.

The Trailblazers were picked 13th out of 13 teams in the Big Sky coaches and media polls. They had two players on the All-UAC team last year and returned one, punter Ryan Marks, who was their lone Big Sky preseason honoree.



At Oregon State, Sept. 19 in Corvallis, Oregon:

Like Montana, the Beavers are led by a first-year head coach who is also in that role for the first time in his career. JaMarcus Shephard previously made stops at FBS teams Alabama, Washington, Purdue and Washington State.

The Beavers were picked eighth out of eight teams in the Pac-12 preseason media poll. They're coming off a 2-10 season after going 5-7 in 2024. They open this season playing at Houston and hosting Texas Tech, so they could possibly be 0-2 before the Grizzlies make their first road trip of the year.

Montana is 2-12-2 all-time against Or-

regon State. The Griz won the two most recent matchups, 22-15 in 1990 and 35-14 in 1996. In the latter, UM was led by quarterback Brian Ah Yat, the father of current Griz QB Keali'i Ah Yat.

This will be the Grizzlies' first FBS game since 2021. That year, they beat FBS No. 20 Washington, 13-7, in Seattle in their season opener. They became just the sixth — and still most recent — FCS team to beat a ranked FBS opponent.



At UC Davis, Sept. 26 in Davis, California:

The Aggies made the quarterfinals each of their first two seasons under head coach Tim Plough. Last year, they were eliminated by eventual national runner-up Illinois State. They finished 9-4 in 2025 after going 11-3 in 2024.

The Aggies were tabbed sixth in the FCS Top 25 poll even after losing Big Sky freshman of the year quarterback Kaden Pinnick, who transferred to Washington State. They were third in the Big Sky coaches and media polls despite receiving more first-place votes than No. 2 Montana in both polls.

They got seven All-Big Sky preseason selections: wide receiver Samuel Gbatu, tight end Winston Williams, O-lineman Zaire Collier, D-lineman Rayne Mayo, linebacker Porter Connors, and defensive backs Rex Connors and Drew Cofield. They also return honorable mention running back Jordan Fisher.

This will be the only time all season the Griz play back-to-back road games. It'll be their first trip to UC Davis since 2023. The teams didn't play last year.



Vs. Northern Colorado, Oct. 3 in Missoula:

The Bears are looking to take another step forward under fourth-year head coach Ed Lamb. They went from 0-11 in 2023 to 1-11 in 2024 to 4-8 in 2025. They were picked 10th in the Big Sky coaches poll and 11th in the media poll.

They had three preseason all-league picks: O-lineman Jack Ziebell, D-lineman Ezra Ekuban and long snapper Maddox Broughton. They also return honorable mention linebacker Hudson Voggeser. Both their first-team picks transferred: wide receiver Carver Cheeks (UTEP) and defensive back Cam Chapa (Arizona).

The Griz have shut out UNC in each of their past three meetings. They won 24-0 in 2024 on the road, 40-0 in 2023 in Missoula and 35-0 in 2021 on the road.

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BIG SKY VS. FBS PREVIEW

FRANK GOGOLA
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All 13 Big Sky Conference football teams will get a shot to knock off an FBS opponent this season.

It's the first time since 2021 that every Big Sky squad will be playing at least one FBS opponent in the same season.

Conference teams have notched 10 victories in 74 games against FBS foes dating back to the 2021 season. They won four games in 2021, two in 2022, two in 2023 and two in 2024. However, they failed to win one last season across 15 opportunities.

Here is an early look at each of the FBS matchups for Big Sky teams:

Should be favored

Montana State at Nevada (Sept. 12): The Bobcats and head coach Brent Vigen are the defending FCS national champions as they head to Reno, Nevada, to face former MSU head coach Jeff Choate and his Wolf Pack. The Bobcats begin the season ranked No. 1 in the FCS with six previous All-Americans: quarterback Justin Lamson, running back Adam Jones, all-purpose player Taco Dowler, offensive linemen Titan Fleischmann and Braden Zimmer, and safety Caden Dowler. They went 14-2 last season and got their most recent FBS win in 2024, 35-31 at New Mexico.

Nevada went 3-9 last year and had to squeak out a 20-17 win over then-Big Sky team Sacramento State. The Wolf Pack lost 33-6 against Idaho in 2023. The Mountain West scrapped its annual preseason poll, but Nevada was voted eighth out of 10 teams in SB Nation's Mountain West Connection media poll.

"You have FBS games and it's more visibility," Taco Dowler said. "If you can show out in an FBS game and show that you belong at that level and can dominate at that level, I think that that's good for what we're both striving for with the NFL. And it shows your team that you belong really anywhere."

"Last year is a different story; we played Oregon, and it's like playing the Monsters in Space Jam, so they were really good. But Nevada's going to bring it. They got a lot of athletes on their team. They got a good coaching staff, so it'll be fun, it'll be exciting."

Don't be surprised if

Montana at Oregon State (Sept. 19): The Grizzlies are playing their first FBS opponent since 2021, when they scored a 13-7



BEN ALLAN SMITH, MISSOULIAN

Montana's Corbin Walker (8) tackles Washington's Giles Jackson (0) during the college football game on Sept. 4, 2021, at Husky Stadium in Seattle, Washington. The Grizzlies won, 13-7.

win at No. 20 Washington, becoming the sixth FCS team ever to beat a ranked FBS foe. They'll enter their first season under head coach Bobby Kennedy ranked No. 2 in the subdivision. They return three All-Americans who likely could've been on FBS teams if they decided to transfer — quarterback Keali'i Ah Yat, running back Eli Gillman and linebacker Peyton Wing — in addition to Freshman All-American wide receiver Brooks Davis.

Oregon State also has a new head coach in JaMarcus Shepard. The Pac-12 didn't issue a preseason poll, but the Beavers were picked last out of eight teams in The Denver Gazette's media poll. They went 2-10 last year, with one win coming against FCS team Lafayette. OSU hasn't had any scares from Big Sky teams recently, beating Idaho State 38-15 in 2024, UC Davis 55-7 in 2023 and Montana State 68-28 in 2022.

"I think it's just cool to play an upper-level school any chance you get," Gillman said. "I think it'll be a cool environment for sure. And I think it'll be a good chance for a lot of us to show how well we can compete and even show the rest of the country how actually competitive the Big Sky is. We got a lot of talent in the Big Sky that people don't realize or appreciate. So, I think it's just another opportunity to showcase it."

Idaho State at Utah State (Sept. 5): The Bengals came close to two FBS wins last year, losing fourth-quarter leads in a 38-31 loss at UNLV and a 32-22 defeat at New Mexico. They bring back big-armed quarterback Jordan Cooke, bruising running back Dason Brooks and have re-added receiver Chedon James, a 2023 FCS All-American. They were voted fourth in the Big Sky preseason media poll after posting a 6-6 record last year and were right outside the FCS Top 25 at 26th.

Utah State, which moved from the Mountain West to the new Pac-12, went 6-7 last year and tied for sixth in The Denver Gazette's media poll this year. Bronco Mendenhall is in his second year leading the Aggies and was the New Mexico coach in the 2024 loss to Montana State. Their most recent game against a Big Sky team was a 78-28 win over Idaho State in 2023, but they lost to Weber State 35-7 in 2022. The Bengals' most recent FBS win came in 2017, 30-28 at Nevada.

Keep an eye on it

Northern Colorado at Wyoming (Sept. 12): The Bears nearly knocked off Colorado State last season, having their go-ahead touchdown with eight seconds remaining in regulation overturned upon replay

review. The Bears finished the season 4-8 overall in Year 3 under head coach Ed Lamb, who has been turning around the program. They have three preseason All-Big Sky players, tied for the third most in the conference but were voted 11th out of 13 teams in the league's media poll.

Wyoming was picked seventh out of 10 teams in SB Nation's Mountain West Connection media poll under third-year head coach Jay Sawvel. The Cowboys went 4-8 last year, which included an FCS win over Northern Iowa. They lost their most recent game against a Big Sky team, 17-13 against Idaho in 2024 and had to survive for a 19-16 win over Montana State in 2021, Vigen's first season.

Southern Utah at Colorado State (Sept. 12): The Thunderbirds were a fringe play-off team the past two years with a pair of 7-5 records, including beating FBS team UTEP 27-24 in 2024. They hung close with Arizona State in a 24-21 loss in 2023. Led by fifth-year coach DeLane Fitzgerald, Southern Utah was voted seventh in the Big Sky preseason media poll and has to replace All-America running back Joshua Dye.

Colorado State took a big step back last year with a 2-10 record and was voted tied for sixth in The Denver Gazette's media poll this year after hiring head coach Jim Mora. The Rams had to survive for a 21-17 win over Northern Colorado in 2025 and suffered a 41-10 loss against then-Big Sky team Sacramento State in 2022.

Bit of a long shot

Cal Poly at San Jose State (Sept. 12): The Mustangs hired Tim Skipper, a veteran FBS assistant who was the UCLA interim head coach last year, to help improve a team that went 4-8. They were picked ninth in the Big Sky preseason media poll but pack some punch with preseason All-America linebackers Mikey D'Amato and Kenny Olson.

San Jose State was picked fifth out of 10 teams in SB Nation's Mountain West Connection media poll. The Spartans are coming off a 3-9 season in which they had to pull out a 31-28 win over Idaho. This will be the sixth consecutive season they play a Big Sky team. They're 5-0 but beat Portland State only 21-17 in 2022. They're led by third-year head coach Ken Niumatalo.

Kennedy

From 2

after being a career backup player in college. He now enters his 35th season coaching, being away from the game for only two seasons in that 37-year stretch.

His notebooks contain words of wisdom from football coaching icons. After playing for Northern Colorado coach Joe Glenn, who later brought his infectious personality to Montana, and working for Lou Tepper at Illinois, he was a graduate assistant at Penn State under head coach Joe Paterno.

In Happy Valley, Kennedy also learned from Caldwell, who was then the quarterbacks coach and went on to coach the NFL's Indianapolis Colts and Detroit Lions. Kennedy later joined Caldwell's staff at Wake Forest in 1995, his first stop after Wyoming, where he had learned under head coach Joe Tiller.

"He was huge just in terms of if there's ever a person you want to model yourself after," Kennedy said. "Jim Caldwell has been phenomenal, a guy that I've always been able to lean on."

Kennedy moved cross country to Arizona to work for head coach John Mackovic. After a year, he left for Washington, where he connected with Rick Neuheisel, Keith Gilbertson and Bobby Hauck, who soon took over the Griz.

Then it was on to Texas, where head coach Mack Brown became one of the most influential coaches for Kennedy. They spent seven seasons together from 2004-10, won a national championship and finished as a runner-up.

As a head coach, he can appreciate why Brown was so fanatical about texting at all hours of the day and night. He's found himself doing it now too because when something crosses his mind he wants to make sure it gets covered.

"I also appreciate the fact that he was really good to work for, but it could be very demanding," he said. "Not a lot of people saw that relationship with head coach to assistant, but I appreciate that now because even though sometimes I thought, 'God, I can't believe what he just said to me,' but he was trying to get a point across and he was trying to teach me. I think he was a phenomenal teacher."

From the Lone Star State, Kennedy moved to Colorado under head coach Jon Embree and Iowa under head coach Kirk Ferentz, one of several stops where he saw the importance of controlling the in-state recruiting battle.

He next worked for Shaw at Stanford and Mike Bloomgren at Rice in 2024 be-



BEN ALLAN SMITH, MISSOULIAN

Montana head coach Bobby Kennedy talks to his players during a fall camp football practice Aug. 5 at Dornblaser Field in Missoula. He was promoted from wide receivers coach to head coach in February.

fore coming to Missoula. His five-year stint with Shaw was the second-longest he worked under the same coach, behind only his time with Brown.

"I look at his patience and how he was very introspective," Kennedy said of Shaw. "The way he dealt with the team, his calmness, his demeanor, his clear passion for football was super impressive."

The Family You Choose

Kennedy had his team take a journey across the parking lot to South Campus Stadium following the 10th day of fall camp at Dornblaser Field.

The coaches and players made the walk of less than a minute to show their support for the soccer team, which was making its season debut Aug. 13 under first-year head coach Stuart Gore. They cheered on the team from the sideline during warmups and sang the fight song before the game.

Kennedy took in part of the contest, just like when he attended basketball games, tennis matches and track meets after he was hired as the head coach. It's an effort he saw Caldwell and Brown make when he worked for them.

"I enjoy going and supporting the other teams but also the other coaches," he said, "because, like I've said before, I think our athletic department is really aligned right now and very supportive of one another."

Kennedy now gets a chance to put his mark on a program as a first-time head coach. That stamp is encapsulated in the

phrase "The Family You Choose."

For all the insight he has collected over the years in his notebooks, that saying is something he came up with on his own, he said. It first entered his mind in 2011 when he was hired as the Colorado Buffaloes wide receivers coach.

It was there working under Embree that he saw what it was like for a head coach to deal with the pressure of leading his alma mater. It was also a return home for Kennedy, who was born in Denver and raised in Boulder, Colorado.

"In my (receivers) room at Colorado, I didn't know how connected we were," he said. "We'd come in as a new staff and there was some, 'Oh, he didn't recruit me, he doesn't like me.' Part of my deal was, 'They chose us to come here. You chose to come here. Whether we like it or not, this is a family that we all choose.'"

"There's going to be ups and downs. There's going to be struggles. There's going to be good times. There's going to be bad times. How do we invest so much in each other that when we do have those tough times that we stay together?"

He started a weekly family dinner night for the players in his position group, he said. That would come on Thursdays when the week of practice was completed leading up to a game.

Sometimes there were trips to Six Flags, he said. At Stanford, he started hosting a deep sea fishing trip every year, he added.

The purpose was to enjoy time with each

other while creating a bond that would benefit them on the football field, film room, weight room and beyond.

"Doing different stuff so that when you get on guys and when you demand out of them, it's not a personal thing," he said. "So many guys take it as a personal attack. No, I'm trying to help you get better."

"How do you create that family atmosphere, that connection with one another, making sure that they understand that it's not just about football but that they're valued."

While with Bloomgren at Rice in 2024, Kennedy had again seen the importance of investing in players and assistants. He then brought "The Family You Choose" to Montana when he was hired as an assistant coach in 2025.

He had his signature phrase printed on wristbands for his wide receivers group in his first year at UM. While the phrase has long been confined to his position group, its reach has grown since he took over the Griz program.

Everyone who plays for him becomes like family to him.

"Me and my wife decided not to have kids," he said. "These guys are what I have. So, I wanted to show them that I'm going to invest in them and it is about the family you choose."

He took that saying to the recruiting front as he has prioritized in-state recruiting since being hired as head coach. It has been used in the team's various social media postings over the past several months.

It was written on bags used to send out QB Club vests in August. It was printed on a white t-shirt that Kennedy gave to new UM President Jeremiah Shinn during the latter's visit to a practice during the first week of fall camp.

It's also stamped in maroon lettering inside an outline of the state of Montana on the official shirt of the Grizzlies' white-out game Aug. 29. It'll be Kennedy's head coaching debut many years — and notebooks — in the making.

"It's been really satisfying for me and and really very humbling," he said, adding: "It's been really neat to see the athletic department, the fans but also our team embrace it."

"The thing that I always say about football and our team is if you truly come together and support one another and work for one another and put the individual stuff aside — people are going to get individual glory — but it's about the team first and it's about the family we choose."

"What do you do that's beneficial to the family? If you really care about your family, if you really care about this program, then it's family first and individual second."

Schedule

From 3



At Northern Arizona, Oct. 10 in Flagstaff, Arizona:

The Lumberjacks were ranked No. 25 in the FCS Top poll. They were fourth in the Big Sky coaches poll and fifth in the media poll. They're coming off a 7-5 overall, 4-4 conference season in 2025. They missed the playoffs after they qualified in head coach Brian Wright's debut in 2024 when they went 8-5, 6-2.

They had two preseason all-conference players in tight end Jeter Purdy and defensive back Shoes Brinkley, a McNeese transfer. Purdy was a Freshman All-American last year. Quarterback Ty Pennington also returns after he was a 2025 All-Big Sky honorable mention and the 2024 newcomer of the year.

This is Montana's first trip to NAU since 2023. That year, the Griz lost 28-14. They rebounded from that defeat with 10 consecutive victories on their way to the Big Sky championship and an FCS national championship runner-up finish.



Vs. Idaho, Oct. 17 in Missoula:

The Vandals head into their second season under head coach Thomas Ford Jr. after they finished 4-8 overall and 2-6 in the Big Sky last year. They were voted sixth in the Big Sky media poll and were seventh in the coaches poll.

They had only one All-Big Sky preseason pick: special teams contributor Brayden Rice. They also bring back starting quarterback Joshua Wood. He has a new offensive coordinator in Ian Shoemaker, who was in that same role at Eastern Washington when Eric Barriere won the 2021 Walter Payton Award.

This will be the second consecutive season that Montana is hosting Idaho. The Griz won 41-30 last year in Missoula in a night game broadcast on ESPN2. They're 5-1 against Idaho since the latter returned to the Big Sky in 2018.

Bye week, Oct. 24: The Grizzlies' bye week will come after eight games. They'll then have a run of four games to close the regular season. There's the potential they could get another week off if they earn a first-round bye in the playoffs.

Last year, their bye week came in Week 1. Because they didn't play a Week 0 game, that meant they played 12 consecutive weeks during the regular season. They did earn a first-round bye in the playoffs to get a week off.



BEN ALLAN SMITH, MISSOULIAN

Montana linebacker Peyton Wing tackles Montana State running back Adam Jones during the FCS semifinal football game on Dec. 20, 2025, at Bobcat Stadium in Bozeman. The Grizzlies will play at the Bobcats in the 2026 season.

Montana wide receiver Brooks Davis runs into the end zone during a college football game against Idaho State on Oct. 4, 2025, at the ICCU Dome in Pocatello, Idaho. The Grizzlies will host the Bengals in the 2026 season.

SHANNA MADISON, MISSOULIAN



Montana running back Eli Gillman carries the ball during the college football game against Eastern Washington on Nov. 8, 2025, at Washington-Grizzly Stadium in Missoula. The Grizzlies will play at the Eagles in the 2026 season.

BEN ALLAN SMITH, MISSOULIAN



At Eastern Washington, Oct. 31 in Cheney, Washington:

The Eagles are coming off a season in which they went 5-7 overall and 4-4 in the Big Sky. It marked their most wins in each category since 2021, when they went 10-3, 6-2 and lost to UM in the second round of the playoffs.

They now head into coach Aaron Best's 10th season having been voted eighth in the Big Sky coaches and media polls.

They had two all-league preseason picks in defensive lineman Isaiah Perez and defensive back Jaylon Jenkins. They also return All-Big Sky honorable mention all-purpose player Nate Bell.

Montana and Eastern Washington's past two games have been tight contests. In 2025, the Griz survived 29-24 when the Eagles fumbled a spike in the closing seconds. In 2024, they won 52-49 for their first win on EWU's red turf.



Vs. Portland State, Nov. 7 in Missoula:

The Vikings are led by first-year head coach Chris Fisk, who spent the past seven seasons leading NCAA Division II Central Washington, where he went 48-22 overall. They were picked 12th in the Big Sky coaches and media polls.

They didn't have any players voted to the preseason all-league team. They do return Freshman All-American all-purpose player Cru Newman. He earned an All-Big Sky honorable mention nod as a kick returner last year.



Vs. Idaho State, Nov. 14 in Missoula:

The Bengals went 6-6 overall and 5-3 in the Big Sky last year, their top marks through coach Cody Hawkins' first three seasons. They were the first team in the "others receiving votes" category in the FCS Top 25 poll, putting them 26th. They were voted fourth in the Big Sky media poll and fifth in the coaches poll.

They have three preseason all-league players in wide receiver Chedon James, O-lineman Stryker Rashid and D-lineman Bronson Childs. They also return All-Big Sky honorable mention quarterback Jordan Cooke, second-team running back Dason Brooks and honorable mention linebacker Nathan Reynolds.

The teams will play under the lights on national TV as ESPN is broadcasting the game. The Griz are 3-3 in Big Sky games on ESPN linear TV since the 2021 media rights agreement. They're 1-1 at home and 2-2 on the road.



At Montana State, Nov. 21 in Bozeman:

The reigning national champion Bobcats enter the year as the first unanimous No. 1 team in the FCS Top 25 preseason poll since South Dakota State in 2023. They were also voted first in the Big Sky coaches and media polls.

They had 12 players who earned a total of 14 spots on the preseason All-Big Sky team. They bring back six previous All-Americans: quarterback Justin Lamson, running back Adam Jones, offensive linemen Titan Fleischmann and Braden Zimmer, safety Caden Dowler and all-purpose player Taco Dowler.

This will be the first time the Griz play the defending FCS national champion in a regular season game since 2015. That year, they rallied for a 38-35 win over top-ranked North Dakota State at home in Bob Stitt's head coaching debut.

Montana will be seeking its first win in Bozeman since 2015. The Griz have lost five road games against the Cats and are 2-8 overall in their past 10 matchups. Last year was the first time they met up in the playoffs.

Big Sky

From 4

Weber State at Colorado (Sept. 12): The Wildcats have been in a multi-year slump after being an annual Big Sky contender in the late 2010s. Head coach Eric Kjar will try to lead a turnaround for a team that was voted 10th in the Big Sky media poll. They also brought in FBS dropdown Devin Brown, who had been a backup quarterback at Ohio State and Cal and finally gets a shot at extended playing time as a senior.

The Big 12 didn't conduct a preseason poll, but Colorado was picked 15th out of 16 teams in the Tulsa World's media poll. The Buffaloes are coming off their worst season under head coach Deion Sanders, who enters Year 4. They went 3-9 last year, including a win over first-year FBS team Delaware.

Don't bet on it

Northern Arizona at Arizona (Sept. 5): The Lumberjacks enter Year 3 under coach Brian Wright having gone 8-5 and 7-5 the past two seasons. They bring back third-year starting quarterback Ty Pennington and were tabbed fifth in the Big Sky preseason media poll. In their first year together at NAU, they lost 22-10 at Arizona, but the Lumberjacks had upset Arizona 21-19 in 2021.

This year's Arizona team looks better on paper and was voted tied for third out of 16 teams in the Big 12 in the Tulsa World's media poll. The Wildcats were just outside the AP Top 25 at No. 29. They're led by third-year coach Brent Brennan, had a five-win improvement to 9-4 last season and return All-Big 12 first-team quarterback Noah Fifita.

Idaho at Utah (Sept. 3): The Vandals have recently put scares into FBS teams. They lost 13-10 at Washington State and 31-28 at San Jose State under first-year head coach Thomas Ford Jr. last year. They hung tight in a 24-14 loss at Oregon and won 17-13 at Wyoming in 2024, beat Nevada 33-6 and lost 31-17 at Cal in 2023, and lost 24-17 at Washington State and 35-22 at Indiana in 2022 under ex-coach Jason Eck. Idaho returns quarterback Joshua Wood from a team that went 4-8 last year and was sixth in this year's Big Sky preseason media poll.

Utah was picked fifth out of 16 teams in the Big 12 in the Tulsa World's media poll. The Utes were No. 21 in the AP Top 25 poll. They're led by first-year coach Morgan Scalley, who took over as Kyle Whittingham left after 21 seasons for Michigan. Last year, they waxed Cal Poly, 63-9. They return All-Big 12 third-team quarterback Devon Dampier.



NORTHERN COLORADO ATHLETICS

Northern Colorado quarterback Jacob Sirmon, the son of Grizzly national champion linebacker David Sirmon, scores a touchdown during the college football game against Wyoming on Sept. 10, 2022, in Laramie, Wyoming. The Bears lost, 33-10.

UC Davis at SMU (Sept. 12): The Aggies bring back a slew of defensive standouts, highlighted by Connors brothers Rex and Porter, to go with an offense that has regularly excelled under coach Tim Plough. They do need to replace quarterback Caden Pinnick, who transferred to Washington State, but brought in Minnesota transfer Jackson Kollock to compete and were voted third in the Big Sky preseason media poll. However, even last year's team that made the FCS quarterfinals lost 70-10 at Washington.

SMU, another Power Four team, was picked second in the 17-team ACC preseason poll behind Miami, the 2025 College Football Playoff runner-up. The Mustangs were No. 19 in the AP Top 25 poll. They played in the CFP two years ago, just missed the ACC title game last year for a shot to return and bring back third-year starting quarterback Kevin Jennings, an All-ACC honorable mention.

Eastern Washington at Washington (Sept. 19): The Eagles' FBS games this decade have been one-score contests or massive blowout losses. They took down UNLV 35-33 in double overtime in 2021 and lost 34-31 at Fresno State in double overtime in 2023. They also lost 51-14 at Boise State last year and 49-16 at Nevada in 2024. Aaron Best, now the longest-tenured coach in the Big Sky, leads a team that was voted eighth in the Big Sky preseason polls as it tries to keep climbing out of a slump.

The Big Ten didn't conduct a preseason poll, but Washington was picked seventh out of 18 teams in Cleveland.com's media poll. The Huskies were No. 17 in the AP Top 25 poll. They're led by third-year head coach Jedd Fisch and return All-Big Ten honorable mention quarterback Demond Williams Jr.

Tough sledding

Portland State at San Diego State (Sept. 5), at Oregon (Sept. 18): Vikings first-year head coach Chris Fisk is already facing an uphill battle taking over one of the Big Sky's annual cellar dwellers. His team will face some monumental battles early in the season during nonconference play. Over the past three years, Portland State has lost

69-0 at BYU, 70-30 at Washington State, 56-14 at Boise State and 81-7 at Oregon.

San Diego State was voted second in the Pac-12 in The Denver Gazette's media poll. Oregon was picked second in the Big Ten in Cleveland.com's media poll and No. 2 in the AP Top 25 poll. The Ducks, led by fifth-year head coach Dan Lanning, made the College Football Playoff each of the past two seasons and return All-Big Ten third-team quarterback Dante Moore.

Utah Tech at BYU (Sept. 5): The Trailblazers have posted a 3-21 record across the past two seasons under head coach Lance Anderson. They played one FBS team in that stretch and lost 72-14 at UNLV. This year, they were voted last in the Big Sky preseason media and coaches polls in their debut season in the league.

Meanwhile, BYU was picked second out of 16 teams in the Big 12 in the Tulsa World's media poll and No. 14 in the AP Top 25 poll. Head coach Kalani Sitake returns for his 11th season after he turned down Penn State. BYU brings back running back LJ Martin, the 2025 Big 12 offensive player of the year, and quarterback Bear Bachmeier, an honorable mention quarterback and the Big 12 offensive freshman of the year.

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