

fcs week #12: class rings



nc central had a fantastic ride in 2022, establishing themselves as a power early and cruising to a celebration bowl victory. few remembered that in order to secure that bowl bid, the eagles still had to beat howard. the bison with far less fanfare had eked themselves into a tie. the eagles dispatched their rivals in resounding fashion, dropping 50 points on their lesser known competition to earn the meac crown. as a consolation prize for their conference record, the bison took home some co-champ rings, which a few of their players and coaches wore to meac media day over the summer. upon spotting them there, eagle coach trei oliver jokingly asked if they were class rings. the jab was all but forgotten until last weekend.

the eagles were off to an even better 2023, but just like last season, the bison had eked out enough wins to keep pace, meaning that whomever won their head-to-head would once again punch their ticket to the celebration. to the shock of all, the game would go completely howard's way. not sufficed with just a blowout victory, howard coach larry scott used his final drive to go for it on 4th down, put in a 2 minute offense, score a td, and add a 2 point attempt. why? the end result of that late rush was 50 points, the exact reverse outcome of their game last season.

the upset is not sitting well with the rest of the fcs playoff bubble. should howard win its game against morgan state, the bison—not the eagles—will be going to the celebration bowl. that would put the dominant-to-disappointed eagles back in the playoff picture and likely at the expense of some other team. at the very least, coach oliver has the consolation of knowing that some time next summer he too will receive some co-champ jewelry which may or may not be mistaken as a class ring.

sidelines

- the most interesting conference scenarios entering the final week come from the caa. 4 teams are tied for the top spot. two of those—delaware and villanova—play each other, but there is still a significant chance of a 3 way tie when the dust settles. with the caa's now highly imbalanced schedule, only nova and albany played each other, and albany won. any other combination of 1 loss teams will fall to the caa's next two tie breakers, record against common opponents and score differential (capped at 21 in any single game to discount blowouts). the former of those mostly works in 2 way ties, but again due to the dearth of overlapping opponents, score differential is likely to come into play, which will make scoreboard watching all the more interesting, as 3 of the 4 teams have nearly identical marks heading into the final week.
- dymere miller collected 330 yards in receptions last weekend, moving him into first place overall in the fcs. his success means that monmouth now has both the leader in receiving yards (miller) and rushing yards (jaden shirden) entering the final week. unfortunately, last week went a lot like the rest of the hawks' season—an incredible statistical effort wasted on another late game loss.

- the schedule broke out nicely to make for 3 winner-take-all championship games in the final weekend. the brawl of the wild will have never been so fierce with the outcome determining whether montana or montana state are crowned big sky champ. in its first season of existence, the united title will go to the winner of austin peay and central arkansas. the nec goes to the winner of duquesne and merrimack. combined with furman's socon win earlier this month, 40% of the autobids will be determined on the field by a de facto championship game.

aps picture

w 1 aps last week

next week

top dogs					
south dakota state jackrabbits	9	0	733	shutout youngstown to claim mo valley crown	missouri state
south dakota coyotes	8	1	479	beat #22 north dakota (below)	@ hapless western illinois
harvard crimson	8	1	436	convert 2 point attempt in 3 ot to surpass penn	@ yale for the game & ivy title
albany great danes	8	1	396	handle sorry stony brook	monmouth
in the hunt					
villanova wildcats	8	1	369	take care of towson	@ archrival #10 delaware (below)
furman paladins	9	0	366	decimate vmi	@ wofford
ut martin skyhawks	8	1	356	crush former ovc champ southeastern missouri	@ last year's socon champ samford
montana griz	8	1	337	obliterate portland state	brawl of the wild against #14 montana state with big sky title up for grabs
dark horses					
lafayette leopards	8	1	322	sneak past fordham thanks to another 200 yard rushing day from rb jamar curtis	@ lehigh in resumption of the oldest rivalry in college football with patriot title on the line
delaware blue hens	8	1	311	dismantle campbell	archrival #5 villanova (below)
gardner webb runnin' bulldogs	6	2	310	shutout tennessee tech	charleston southern for the 1 st ever big south ovc title

<i>florida a&m rattlers</i>	7	0	307	blowout lincoln (d2)	nationally televised game against bethune cookman
<i>austin peay governors</i>	8	1	299	beat utah tech	#15 central arkansas with 1 st ever united crown up for grabs
<i>montana state bobcats</i>	8	2	293	destroy eastern washington	@ #8 montana in the brawl of the wild, with winner take all shot at big sky crown
<i>central arkansas bears</i>	6	2	267	stun eastern kentucky with hail mary at buzzer, deflected at the goal line into the arms of late breaking receiver whose desperation lunge was marked just in under review. also have a close win over last year's ovc champ southeastern missouri.	@ #13 austin peay with winner claiming 1 st ever united crown
<i>holy cross crusaders</i>	6	2	260	late charge against army (fbs) could not erase earlier blocked punt returned for game winning score	georgetown

dropping back: *idaho vandals* fall to always challenging weber in a close one and dropped out of the big sky race as a result. **nc central eagles** were crushed by vengeance seeking howard and now may have lost their shot at the celebration bowl.

also rans: north dakota state bison (7 – 3, 241), mercer bears (8 – 2, 229), idaho vandals (6 – 2, 228), nc central eagles (7 – 1, 213), western carolina catamounts (7 – 2, 205), north dakota fighting hawks (6 – 3, 193)

fcs game of week



last week: south dakota coyotes (8 – 1, 479, #2) push past north dakota fighting hawks (6 – 3, 193, #22), 14 – 10

the coyotes moved the ball around the field with ease, but the fighting hawks managed to keep them at bay on the scoreboard for most, but not all, of the game. red wilson returned the opening kickoff the length of the field to give the hawks an early lead which they would hold until the 4th. the hawks would pitch a shutout most of the game thanks to timely turnovers, first stripping wr carter bell from behind as he dove into the end zone and then making an interception with their backs against their own goal line. the coyotes would break through in the 2nd half though, blanking the hawks and holding them to limited yardage. qb aidan bouman would rack up over 300 yards passing, primarily to bell and fellow wr jj galbreath. bell would make a big punt



return, followed by a big galbreath reception, to set up the first td, then a series of 5 throw-and-catch plays between bouman and the two would result in the game winning drive.



next week: villanova wildcats (8 – 1, 369, #5)

@ delaware blue hens (8 – 1, 311, #10)

ordinarily a bitter rivalry to cap their respective seasons, this year's clash takes on an even more climactic feel with the caa



crown on the line. the winner of this game will be peeking up at the scoreboard to see if they do in fact claim an autobid. (the blue hens hold a tie break over albany but not richmond, the wildcats hold a tie break over richmond but not albany, and in the event of a 3 way tie, everyone will be watching exceedingly tight score differentials.) the blue hens have drawn a lot of the attention, but the matchup here is not terribly favorable. they rely on a disruptive d-line, anchored by de chase mcgowan, that brings pressure and causes bad things to happen. the wildcats' lesser known d has actually held up better on the year, though, seldom getting burned by big plays. the key there has really been the wildcat offense. qb connor watkins has a strong arm but is an even bigger threat when he is on the run, and rb td ayo durojaiye has lead a pack of talented rushers to great things. the wildcats take the ball and simply do not give it back, grinding teams into the ground with a variety of looks. the hens' d will have to find a way to contain, because the hens' o is unlikely to keep pace with these cats.

richmond spiders (7 – 2, 147)

last week: topple elon phoenix (5 – 4, 182), 38 – 24

the spiders took control of this game in nearly all facets. they jumped out to a 3 score lead by halftime on the back of 4 long td drives. those were interrupted by an interception by db caleb curtain, but the phoenix d was otherwise overrun.

dl marvin pearson provided a check on the spiders at points, but overall, the home team had its way on the ground, amassing 240 yards rushing and averaging 6 yards per carry. meanwhile, the defense was suffocating most of the way through. qb matthew downing had a strong showing on paper as the phoenix played catch up in the 2nd half, but a lot of those completions came too late to alter the outcome. the phoenix' longest drive, for example, resulted in a garbage time td in the final minute. prior to that, the phoenix rally was just two big plays. downing found himself under a lot of pressure. rb jalen hampton broke loose in the 3rd for a 40 yard td run, but this one play was nearly half of the phoenix rushing yards for the entire game, as lb tristan wheeler kept them more or less pinned back. wr jordan bonner broke free on a cross to pick up 50 yards early in the 4th to put the phoenix into the spider red zone, but dl zander barnett made two huge tackles behind the line and forced them to settle for a fg. even the spider special teams got into the action, with p aaron trusler rushing a fake kick for 20 yards plus a late hit penalty to set up a 1st half score.





spider of week—kyle wickersham

the mobile spider qb was deadly accurate, completing 75% of his passes, albeit primarily on short routes and screens. he was far more dangerous running the ball. he picked up 130 yards on the ground, averaging 10 yards per carry. on the spiders' last drive, he effectively ended any chance of a phoenix comeback by bursting through the middle for 50 yards to set up a final td.

next week: @ william & mary tribe (6 – 3, 99)



2023 did not work out as intended for the tribe. expected to contend for the national title, the tribe struggled midseason after losing heart & soul bronson yoder to injury with a run of slip-ups from which they never fully recovered. unlike the spiders, the tribe inherited an unusually weak schedule that did not afford them any ability to climb back into the race. nevertheless, the tribe is

still a very competitive team that has already ensured itself a winning record. the oldest rivalry in the south is enough most years to offer both teams some extra incentive, but the story behind the story continues to take on new life as coach huesman duels with his one time boss, coach mike london, who won a national title with the spiders 15 years ago. offensively, the tribe continue to ride their running game, which even without yoder, thrives. rb malachi imoh was dangerous before and the extra playing time has not diminished his prowess. qb darius wilson is also a threat to run basically every time he hikes the ball. on the other side of the ball, dl nate lynn and lb john pius highlight one of the fcs' most physical defenses which has a penchant for forcing balls loose. to keep their playoff hopes alive, the spiders will need a strong game from qb wickersham and probably a few big play catches by wr nick degennaro. even more so, the spiders will need their d-line to control the trenches, so the tribe are not able to muscle them downfield 5 yards at a time. the spiders can still claim the caa with a win, though the chances are a bit slim (albany has to lose and delaware prevail over villanova), but even failing that, ending the regular season with a 6 game win streak would certainly give them a legitimate shot at an at-large. anything short of that will not be enough to extend the season.

northern arizona lumberjacks (4 – 5, 4)



last week: thump northern colorado bears (0 – 9, -432), 28 – 7

the lumberjacks made quick work of the hapless bears. their offense engineered 4 long td drives in just over one half to put the score out of hand, and the defense shut the door quickly thereafter, keeping the bears

from mounting any serious scoring threat at all in the 2nd half. it was the first game all season with a lumberjack turnover.



next week: @ eastern washington eagles (4 – 5, -148)



the eagles are not the team they once were. they had 15 consecutive winning seasons, a national championship, a couple big sky crowns, 2 trips to frisco, several deep playoff runs and a rice & payton winner who went onto be a superbowl mvp, all of which came to a crashing halt last season. despite their fall from grace, the eagles have still managed to manufacture consistently high tempo offenses by somehow unearthing an emerging star qb every couple of seasons. the latest one is kekoa visperas, who has found a lot of magic with efton chism. the lumberjacks likely do not have the skill to keep pace in the type of track meet games these eagles like to play, so they are going to have to find ways to keep that high powered offense in check while on d and put together some long, plodding drives while on o. both teams had hopes for better things this season, but the lumberjacks weathered a much stronger schedule to get here and may be able to pull on that experience for this finale. that said, even in a down eagle year, few ever find success at the inferno.

playoff picture

projected autobids in ().

ticket punched: furman (socon), south dakota state (mo valley), nicholls (southland)

near lock: south dakota, albany (caa), villanova, ut martin, montana (big sky), lafayette (patriot), delaware, gardner webb (big south ovc), austin peay (united), montana state

looking good: central arkansas, holy cross, north dakota state, mercer, idaho

bubbling in: north carolina central*, western carolina, north dakota, youngstown

other conference leaders: duquesne (nec), drake (pioneer)

bubbling out: sacramento state, southern illinois, rhode island, northern iowa, *richmond*, eastern illinois

*if eliminated from celebration bowl consideration