

## fcs week #12: the final turn

the mercer bears became the first team to secure a postseason bid. they did so by taking care of business against a hapless opponent and then watching as every other team still vaguely in the hunt for the conference crown did not. the socon has opened each season as one of the most wide open, having not had a repeat champion in nearly a decade. given that, it is always a surprise that their race tends to be decided without much drama. for the 2<sup>nd</sup> consecutive season, the socon was the first to wrap up its auto-bid. the conference crown has not been up-for-grabs in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of november since 2021.

the remainder of the 12 conference races are still undetermined, and 3 of those cannot even be resolved until the final games are played: the big south ovc, the mo valley, and the nec. most of the remainder might be anointing a champ on saturday but might not too. there are still 32 teams alive for the remaining 9 autobids, so there is bound to be a lot of scoreboard watching.



there is at least one conference that is guaranteed to give out some hardware in the next few days: the big sky. the top two teams, both undefeated against the fcs, are squaring off against each other on saturday night. montana state entered this season this season as a strong bet to challenge for the conference crown and beyond. the bobcats have rolled every team in their wake so far, but their two toughest opponents are still in front of them. uc davis had a surprise run at the end of last season that left them just outside the playoff field. that carried over into 2024 where they have fared just as well as the better known bobcats, albeit by much closer scores. last week, the aggies prevailed over last year's winner montana, eliminating the griz and turning this weekend's primetime match into a title bout. last november, 4 of the 10 auto-bids were determined by win-and-in scenarios just like this, leading to lots of drama at season's end. this season, the battle for the big sky crown may well end up with the only one.

### sidelines

- northern iowa coach mark farley has decided to retire after over 40 years in various coaching roles, almost all of which were with his alma mater panthers, including being at the helm for the past 24 seasons. northern iowa has been among the most successful programs over his tenure. this season's 2 win performance will be by far and away the worst of his career. farley had developed the panthers into a defensive force which has fueled deep playoff runs including a championship appearance in 2005. though they have continued to be a force in the post-bison era, reaching the playoffs 8 of the last 12 seasons, the panthers had not made it past the quarterfinals since 2008. farley was pretty pointed in making the announcement, citing how much the game changed, then acknowledging that everyone always says "how much the game changed", but



reiterating his belief that there has been more changes in the past 5 seasons than in the previous 50.

### aps picture

<i>top dogs</i>	<i>w</i>	<i>l</i>	<i>aps</i>	<i>last week</i>	<i>next week</i>
<i>north dakota state bison</i>	9	0	598	bye	#3 missouri state (below)
<i>south dakota state jackrabbits</i>	7	1	406	roll north dakota	southern illinois
<i>missouri state bears</i>	8	1	393	blowout murray state	@ #1 north dakota state (below)
<i>uc davis aggies</i>	9	0	386	beat #25 montana	#6 montana state
<i>villanova wildcats</i>	8	1	382	destroy north carolina a&t	@ monmouth
<i>in the hunt</i>	<i>w</i>	<i>l</i>	<i>aps</i>	<i>last week</i>	<i>next week</i>
<i>montana state bobcats</i>	9	0	371	crush sacramento state	@ #4 uc davis
<i>rhode island rams</i>	8	1	371	fall to #13 delaware (below)	albany
<i>dark horses</i>	<i>w</i>	<i>l</i>	<i>aps</i>	<i>last week</i>	<i>next week</i>
<i>incarnate word cardinals</i>	8	2	353	overwhelm lamar	@ stephen f austin
<i>tarleton state texans</i>	8	1	348	handle west georgia	#22 abilene christian
<i>dartmouth big green</i>	7	1	341	beat princeton	@ cornell
<i>mercer bears</i>	9	1	323	claim the socon title with shutout of vmi	@ alabama (fbs)
<i>harvard crimson</i>	7	1	312	overpower columbia	@ penn
<i>delaware blue hens</i>	8	1	304	beat #7 rhode island (below)	campbell
<i>southeastern missouri redhawks</i>	8	1	287	stunned by lindenwood	western illinois

**also rans:** eastern kentucky colonels (6 – 2, 267), idaho vandals (6 – 2, 265), south dakota coyotes (6 – 1, 265), stony brook seawolves (8 – 1, 262), *richmond spiders* (8 – 1, 249), illinois state redbirds (7 – 2, 217), drake bulldogs (7 – 1, 211), abilene christian wildcats (7 – 2, 204), duquesne dukes (6 – 0, 297), east tennessee state buccaneers (5 – 3, 196), montana griz (7 – 3, 196), ut martin skyhawks (6 – 2, 192), jackson state tigers (7 – 1, 191)

**dropping back:** a pair of conference winners went down. in a stunner, **florida a&m** was upended by prairie view, dashing their hopes of a swac repeat. less surprising, **montana** was solidly beaten at

home by big sky frontrunner #4 uc davis, making a big sky repeat impossible. two others had big wins but not against opponents who moved the needle. **stony brook** dismembered last year's caa champ albany, but that team had been struggling mightily anyway. **south dakota** eviscerated hapless indiana state yet are left frustrated that a d2 exhibition and a last minute cancellation left the coyotes with 2 fewer fcs games than everyone else and is hurting their placement.

### fcs game of week



last week: delaware blue hens (8 – 1, 304, #13) slip past rhode island rams (8 – 1, 371, #7), 24 – 21

the blue hens outduel the rams in a tight battle for caa supremacy. lb gavin moul made the key pick in the closing minute to give the hens the win and dash the ram hopes in a back and forth game. rb marcus yarns had the best game of his career with 170 yards rushing, and 5 clutch catches from wr phil lutz helped the hens get out ahead. the rams benefitted from forcing a pair of fumbles and some big catches from wr marquis buchanan early that they were able to cash in for tds. the hen d then took over, with lb dillon trainer leading the way. the rams go back into the game late, thanks in large part to a massive sack from lb gabe solomons that flipped the field and eventually narrowed the score. that threat was as close as the rams got though, as the hens held on in the end.



next week: missouri state bears (8 – 1, 393, #3) @ north dakota state bison (9 – 0, 598, #1)

the bears arrived a year early. this midling team was being gradually groomed for its transition to the fbs next season with little expectations for its last lame duck run through the mo valley.



surprisingly, the nothing-to-gain bears are enjoying their best fcs season in their last one. they have an opportunity to sieze the mo valley crown—though whether they will be officially recognized as a champion is still up for debate—from the frontrunner bison. the bison are not letting anyone forget that they have 9 national championships in the past 13 seasons with runaway domination of the likely most challenging schedule in the fcs. their always impressive d has taken things to the next level with dt eli mostaert and lb logan kopp highlighting a front 7 that can both smother a running game and bring a strong pass rush. that last part will be needed because the bears have qb jacob clark under center. he has been one of the most efficient and dangerous passers with great vision to spread out the ball. the bison will counter with tried and true qb cam miller, a two way threat who may not light up the stat sheet but is both clutch and unflappable, which is why he could go down as the winningest fcs qb of all time. with clark, the bears have the biggest playmaker, but the bison have more ways to win this final clash and the pedigree to do so.

## richmond spiders (8 – 1, 249, #19)



last week: rally past campbell camels (3 – 6, -85), 27 – 24  
the spiders hit the game winning fg on the final snap to secure a come-from-behind victory. the spiders had been down by 10 at halftime but managed to tie the game in the 3<sup>rd</sup>, setting up a back and forth final quarter. db jabril hayes would make an end zone interception to kill a camel scoring threat, but after a quick 3 & out, camel qb mike chandler would make a 50 yard scramble setting up the go-ahead points. the spiders immediately responded with a long td drive of their own, fueled by several key catches from wr landon ellis to keep the game tied. the camels would get two more opportunities in the final minutes with good field position to retake the lead sandwiched around an interception, but instead the spider d would stand tall, forcing a 3 & out followed by a 4 & out. the spider offense would then use the last 2 minutes of the game to drive 50 yards setting up the game winning kick. the big 2<sup>nd</sup> half erased the memories of a 1<sup>st</sup> half where the spiders' only scoring drive was immediately met with a 90 yard td return from wr randall king. the tale of two halves can be seen through a prism of what did not happen. the spiders took a lot of deep downfield shots into single coverage, any of which could have turned the game but almost all of which were oh-so-close misses. on the other side, while chandler's quickness gave the spider d problems throughout, the camel o-line got away with an inordinate number of holds early, only to eventually be whistled for 80 yards of penalties late.



*spider of week—db matthew traynor*

the freshman db already has a reputation for bone-crunching hits. this week, he accumulated enough of them to be the difference maker on defense. he led the spiders in tackles with 12, added a pair of tfl, and made a diving early game interception. he seemed to be ever present on each snap and dogged in his pursuit of camel ball carriers.

next week: @ hampton pirates (4 – 5, -70)



the pirates' surprise upset last season served as a prelude to the spiders' 7 game win streak. they enter this week riding an 8 game one, the longest since 2009. to avenge last year and keep the streak alive, they will have to overcome a pirate team that chews up large chunks of clock on offense and plays hard nose, physical defense smothering opponents at the line of scrimmage. the results of that effort has not manifested a lot of wins though, largely because the pirates are prone to mistakes and big plays on both sides of the ball too. qb camden coleman will need another strong game for the spiders in managing the offense but may benefit since wrs nick degennaro and ellis should be able to keep the pirate secondary on its toes. the pirates are certainly a threat if able to control the tempo. they do not have the depth of talent to keep pace with the spider offense, so getting ahead early will make things difficult for the pirates very quickly.

## northern arizona lumberjacks (5 – 3, 64)



last week: stomp cal poly mustangs (1 – 6, -165), 31 – 14  
the lumberjacks took a 3 score lead early in the game and never looked back. cb zach lewis would make a pick in the mustang red zone to set up the first score. they then rode a huge game from rb seth cromwell, who racked up 130 yards and scored 3 tds, much of that in the opening quarter. the mustangs attempted to make a game of it, as qb jackson akins connected with wr giancarlo woods multiple times on td drives in the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup>, but cromwell and the l-jacks cash in one more time and essentially play keep-away, rushing the ball into the ground for 13 of the game's final 16 minutes. the lumberjacks have surprisingly never lost in 8 trips to san luis obispo.



next game: @ northern colorado bears (1 – 8, -354)



the bears have won a total of 9 games over the last 6 seasons. their current run of ineptitude ranks among the worst in fcs history. some programs are atrocious. the bears hope to one day achieve that level. the lumberjacks should win this game, but of course, they were also victims to one of the infamous 9 bear wins in that stretch, an ot failure that still stings 3 years later. the lumberjacks should be able to overwhelm the bear d. qb ty pennington will have lots of options to target in wrs kolbe kastis, bryzai white, and bj fleming. he could also take off himself at any point. the running game should pick up some yards too, either behind rb darvon hubbard (if back) or cromwell (if not). defensively, the lumberjacks are also the better team, though maybe not quite as dominant. lb tommy ellis and company should contain the bear rushing attack pretty handily, which will put a lot of pressure to make big downfield throws, not their specialty. the l-jacks only real worry should be themselves. sleeping on this team in the final stretch is a mistake you do not want to make twice.

## playoff outlook

*if the season ended today. conference frontrunners notes with ().*

**ticket punched:** mercer (socon)

**near locks:** north dakota state (mo valley), south dakota state, uc davis (big sky), villanova

**looking good:** montana state, rhode island, incarnate word (southland), tarleton state, southeast missouri (big south ovc)

**bubbling in:** eastern kentucky, idaho, south dakota, stony brook, richmond, illinois state, drake (pioneer), abiline christian (united), duquesne (nec), east tennessee state, montana, ut martin, chattanooga

*other conference leader:* bucknell (patriot)

*bubbling out:* southeastern louisiana, towson, new hampshire, robert morris