Bowl season totals can be one of the most profitable bets of the college football season. Generally speaking, the over/under number is set by taking the average offensive and defensive output for each team. If the two teams score 22.8 and 31.6 points per game, respectively, while allowing 17.6 and 29.5 points per game, respectively, the total will be somewhere in the ballpark of 50-51 points.

However, these numbers have to be taken in context during bowl season. A team that struggled in conference play against quality SEC defenses may now be playing a bad Big Ten defense or a marginal ACC defense. A SEC team that averages 21.8 points per game could be playing a slower, less talented Big Ten defense. That should increase their scoring output, possibly causing the total to be lower than it should be. Similarly, a team averaging 35.2 points per game might be playing the best defense they've seen all season and that will slow down their offense.

It's important to consider a lot of factors when betting bowl totals. Some teams are going to play very tight in the first half, whether they are dealing with some nerves or simply going through a "feeling out" process of their opponent. Weather, since it is December after all, may play an enormous factor. Just like the spread needs to be broken down in the context of the gaps between the conferences, totals do as well. That's where it's important to have a working knowledge of how teams operate. Will a defense that is stout against the run be able to have success against a team that likes to use a hurry-up offense?

Keep in mind that teams have almost a month, in some instances, to prepare for their opponents. That includes adding trick plays, formations that haven't been seen on film, and different players in different positions. Little nuances in the gameplan can turn a six-yard gain into a 26-yard gain because it's a wrinkle that the other team couldn't prepare for.

Another factor to keep in mind is to look at teams that are in big underdog or large favorite roles. In some of these games, a talent mismatch is clearly evident and that will dictate the pace of the game. The less-talented team may pull out all the stops, throwing in trick plays, working a no-huddle offense, or just go all out and take a lot of chances. Chances tend to mean points. On the other side, teams in favorite roles may underestimate their opponent and start slow or play without focus.

Bowls are a great way for schools to recruit players. Coaches are fully aware of this. Sometimes, a bowl game is the only national exposure a school will have gotten all season for its football program. Other times, a coach may want to showcase a trick running play or two to impress a recruit who is deciding which school to attend. These instances probably don't happen often, but the possibility is always there.

I'll let you into my mind with an example of what I'm talking about. Saturday's Famous Idaho Potato Bowl pits Utah State against Toledo. Utah State is averaging 34.66 points per game and allowing 15.16 points per game. Toledo is averaging 32.91 points per game and allowing 26.16 points per game. The total offensive average points per game is 33.785, while the total defensive average points per game is 20.66. That puts a ballpark total in the 54 range. The current total is 57.5 or 58, down from the 59 it opened at in Vegas. The five point disparity from the average offensive and defensive numbers and the opening total is due to a few factors. The first being that when people think of the MAC, they think of overs, so the books will shade the line towards the over. The second being that Utah State has averaged just below 45 points per game over their last six games. The third being that the WAC and MAC both have some downright terrible teams where both of these teams put up huge offensive numbers. I'm not an oddsmaker, so I don't know every reason for the higher total, but, those are my best guesses.

In any event, as this total creeps down, I still like going against the move and taking the over. Here's why: Utah State coach Gary Andersen was sought after this offseason for a lot of vacant head coaching jobs. He chose to stay at Utah State and that will be a big boost for his players, both on gameday and in preparation for Toledo. Utah State has a quality offense that is better than anything that Toledo saw during MAC play, except maybe Northern Illinois. Toledo gave up just 31 points to Northern Illinois, despite giving up nearly 600 yards because of red zone turnovers. Keep in mind that Toledo played some inefficient offenses like Akron and Eastern Michigan and still gave up points.

When you look at Toledo, you see a team that has played in two straight bowl games and the average score in those games is 74.5 points. They have scored 32 and 44 points against FIU and Air Force. Utah State has a better defense than both of those teams, however, Toledo and

hotshot head coach Matt Campbell will likely play aggressive and try to match Utah State score-for-score because they will have a lot of difficulty stopping Chuckie Keeton.

Utah State has one of the most efficient touchdown offenses in the red zone, scoring TDs on 32 of 49 red zone possessions. The four-point difference between getting seven and settling for three is a big deal with totals. Utah State's defense has allowed just 13 TDs in 39 red zone possessions, while Toledo has scored just 24 TDs in 49 possessions (BTW, this is a big factor in the spread). Toledo's 16 field goals are in the top ten in the country, so that's a plus in that they aren't likely to come away empty-handed in the red zone.

So, all of these things considered leads me to like the over in this game. That's how every total needs to be broken down during bowl season. In this game, unlike some of the others, the quality of competition both teams have played is very similar, so the intangibles, not the average offensive/defensive output, is what I like about the over. Other games, like Arizona State and Navy, will pit two teams with drastically different schedules against each other. Navy played one currently-ranked team, Notre Dame, while Arizona State played Oregon, Oregon State, Stanford, and then USC and Arizona when they were ranked during the season. Those are games that will require more research into the quality of opposing offenses and defenses.

Keep in mind, too, that, just like with motivation, which is a buzz word come bowl season, teams may not prepare well leading up to a bowl, but they will play better as the game goes on. A team playing against an offense that usually struggles may fall behind 14-0 or 21-7 before they start caring and will come back and win the game. At that point, the team must score 17 without letting the opponent score again. With that seeming unlikely, scoring can come at a surprising rate from two teams who weren't expected to light up the scoreboard.

As always, good luck and pick winners.