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Most Pleasant Surprise so far: Minnesota- Last year, the Gophers were arguably the worst BCS team in the land, going 1-11, with losses to Florida Atlantic, Bowling Green, and North Dakota State. This year, they're 6-1 and bowl eligible after a road upset of Illinois. The Gophers will probably need one more win to seal a postseason berth, but either way, it's been a remarkable turnaround for Tim Brewster's troops, who should carry a nice head of steam into the inaugural season at TCF Bank Stadium in '09.

Biggest Disappointment so far: Rutgers- Two years ago, the Scarlet Knights went 11-2 and came within a dropped touchdown pass of winning the Big East title and going to the Orange Bowl. Now they're 1-5 without a win over an FBS opponent, bereft of the hard-nosed offensive identity forged by Ray Rice and Brian Leonard, and if that isn't enough, embattled quarterback Mike Teel got caught pimp-slapping teammate Glen Lee after his interception sealed a loss to Navy. It's been ugly in New Jersey this fall... not that it usually isn't.

Best Team of the first half: Penn State- The Nittany Lions lead the nation in wins (seven), haven't won by fewer than 14 points, are the only team in the national top ten in both scoring offense and scoring defense, and have looked next to unbeatable against competition both soft (Coastal Carolina, Syracuse,

Temple) and solid (Oregon State, Illinois, Wisconsin).

Worst Team of the first half: Washington State- Mike Price's 2002 Rose Bowl team is only six years gone, but it must feel like a hundred to the people in Pullman. The Cougars have given up 60-plus points three times already, including twice at home, to Cal (66-3) and Oregon (63-14). They've lost all five of their games against FBS opponents by at least 25 points and have been outscored 223-33 in conference play. There's talk that they are the worst team in the history of Pac-10 football, which might be a stretch... or might not be.

Best Game of the first half: Texas vs. Oklahoma- Two top-five teams, an ancient rivalry, a neutral location nearly equidistant to each of the schools, plenty of offense, scads of big plays, two great quarterbacks at the top of their respective games, and to top it all off, a classic fourth-quarter comeback that leads to an upset. That was Texas-Oklahoma, a game that often doesn't live up to the hype but certainly did this time around.

Biggest whipping of the first half: Brigham Young 59, UCLA 0- At the end of three quarters, the Cougars were leading 59-0, had out-gained the Bruins 457-143, and had run off 52 points in the previous two periods. Had Bronco Mendenhall not removed his foot from the gas in a scoreless fourth quarter, BYU would have probably hung 70 on the Bruins. There have been bigger margins of victory and more lopsided disparities in total yards and other assorted peripherals, but you won't find a more authoritative beat-down than the one the Cougars laid on UCLA on September 13.

SEC: Offensively challenged- Remember that sound-byte in *Madden Football*, where Madden says, "I don't know if that's good, good defense- or bad, bad offense?" It's a question that applies to the SEC, which has struggled mightily on the offensive side of the ball. Five SEC teams rank 96th

or lower in total offense; only Georgia (22nd) is in the top thirty. The lowest-scoring game of the season- Auburn 3, Mississippi State 2- was also brought to you by the folks from the World's Greatest Conference. Maybe it's the supreme athleticism of SEC defenses, maybe it's the inexperience at quarterback and key injuries that have derailed offenses across the conference- or maybe it's a little bit of both. Either way, it's a trend that should continue into the second half of the season.

What about Tulsa? BYU and Utah are getting the lion's share of the attention, Boise is hanging around in case either of them gets tripped up, and East Carolina got a lot of what turned out to be premature love, but nobody seems to be talking about another non-BCS school that is flying under the radar- and carpet-bombing every defense it encounters. The Tulsa Golden Hurricane are 6-0, the only team in major college football averaging over fifty points per game, tops in the nation in total offense, and a legitimate threat to run the table. Tricky road games loom at Houston and Marshall, as well as a short trip to Arkansas in November, but if there's a year to play a roadie in Fayetteville, it's this one. And, if Tulsa does go undefeated, it gets the Conference-USA title game right at home in Skelly Stadium. It won't result in a BCS berth, but Tulsa's bid for perfection bears watching.

Will any of the BCS unbeaten teams remain unbeaten? Right now, five BCS teams- Texas, Oklahoma State, Texas Tech, Penn State, and Alabama- remain undefeated. The team with the best chance of the five is Penn State, which has only two road games remaining, at Ohio State and at Iowa. Ultimately, I would be surprised if any BCS team finished undefeated. So I'll say, "None of them."

Best potential game overall? Brigham Young @ Utah- If everything works out accordingly-a tall order, since BYU still has tough road tilts at TCU, at Colorado State and at Air Force, and Utah still has to go to New Mexico and host TCU- the Cougars and Utes will meet in the Holy War on November 22 with pristine 11-0 records and a BCS bowl bid on the line. The stakes will only be an extra dollop of whipped cream on one of the country's most delicious in-state rivalries, with the last three games between the schools decided in either the final minute or in overtime. For perhaps the first and last time, you'll thank your lucky stars you have Versus and can tune in to this showdown.

Crazy Prediction: Duke will go bowling- The Blue Devils have already won more times (three) in David Cutcliffe's first five games at the helm than they had in the previous three seasons combined (two.) At 3-2, Duke has a home game against Miami and back-to-back road games against ranked, yet vulnerable, Wake Forest and Vanderbilt. If they still one of these three, the Blue Devils will be 4-4 with remaining home games against N.C. State and arch-rival North Carolina and road tilts at Virginia Tech and mercurial Clemson, which might just be playing out the string after the firing of Tommy Bowden. A 6-6 record and a .500 mark in the ACC are possible, and if attained, just watch- the Blue Devils will be playing December football.

BCS Bowl Predictions

Rose: Penn State vs. California- I have a feeling that Penn State's undefeated season won't survive their October 26 trip to Columbus, regardless of how poorly the Buckeyes have played on offense. I also

have a feeling that one loss is all it will take to spoil Joe Pa's BCS title bid and send the Nittany Lions to the Rose Bowl for the first time since 1995. Cal, the only ranked team in the Pac-10 aside from USC, has a favorable schedule (Oregon and Stanford at home), and if the Bears can get through with just one more loss, the Rose Bowl, in its eagerness to preserve the Big Ten-Pac 10 arrangement, will send them to Pasadena for the first time since 1959.

Orange: Virginia Tech vs. Pitt- Virginia Tech hasn't exactly looked overwhelming in getting out to a 5-1 start, and last I checked, Dave Wannstedt was still coaching at Pitt. But in both cases, the pick makes sense. The Hokies have already beaten Georgia Tech and North Carolina, their two main competitors in the ACC Coastal, and they look like the clear class of the conference, especially given the way Wake Forest's offense has struggled. Pitt has already beaten South Florida, has West Virginia at home, and is playing the best football in the Big East right now- not to damn the Panthers with faint praise. I'm not necessarily comfortable with this prediction; not only are the Big East and ACC the two weakest BCS conferences, they're also the toughest to prognosticate- especially the Big East, since its conference slate starts later than everyone else's. But, what the hell.

Fiesta: Missouri vs. Utah- I've been on the bandwagon for both of these teams since the beginning of the season, and there's no sense in jumping off now. I still like Missouri to win the Big 12 North with relative ease and upset Texas in the conference title game in Kansas City; and I like the Utes to run the table and beat BYU on November 22.

Sugar: Alabama vs. Texas- A collision of classic powers and

conference runners-up in New Orleans. I've liked Alabama since the beginning of the season, but I have to think they'll get tripped up at some point, most likely in the SEC title game by Florida. There's too much inexperience and too little depth to survive unscathed. Texas's ridiculous schedule almost precludes an undefeated record, and I think the Longhorns will lose the Big 12 title game anyway.

BCS Title: USC vs. Florida- Sitting pretty at #4 in the coaches poll, all the Trojans need to do is win out and watch the dominos fall, and that's exactly what they *should* do. Florida has two true road games remaining (Vanderbilt and Florida State), as well as the neutral-site Cocktail Party versus Georgia. The Gators don't play a team of equal talent the rest of the regular season, and if they get through with only the one loss to Ole Miss, as well as win the SEC title game, they'll be in Miami to take on the Trojans.

Heisman: Colt McCoy- The trophy is going to a Big 12 quarterback, and since Texas looks set up to have the best regular season of that conference's powers, the award should go to McCoy, an upperclassman with the added advantage of having a really cool name.

National Champion: USC- More balance than Florida, more consistency on offense, and for whatever it's worth (probably not much) the Trojans have historically dominated the SEC.

And for Ohio State? Capital One Bowl, January 1, vs. Georgia. One o'clock kickoff. Set your Tivo.