This is where things get fun if you are a college football fan. Twelve games in eight days, with all the nation's top teams and many of the top prospects for the 2009 NFL Draft on display. A USC/Penn State Rose Bowl, the Buckeyes and the Longhorns doing battle in the Fiesta Bowl. And the National Championship Game between Florida and Oklahoma. Jesse Lamovsky, our college football guru, checks in to preview all the big bowl games we'll see over the next eight days.

The bowl season is now two weeks old. Some observations as we head into the New Year's Eve docket:

AT&T Park is actually a pretty cool venue for a football game. With its funky angles and both benches on the same sideline, it's kind of a throwback to the old days, when teams played on gridirons squeezed into the contours of baseball parks like Metropolitan Stadium in Bloomington and Municipal Stadium in Kansas City. I'd still be appalled if they ever put a bowl game in the Jake.

Wisconsin *really* blew this year.

Losing to Syracuse was the best thing that happened to Notre Dame all season. Had they hung on against the Orangemen, the 7-5 Irish would have probably gone to the Gator Bowl and played Clemson, and we'd be talking about how Davis, Spiller, and the rest of the superior Tiger athletes were going to deliver a tenth consecutive bowl loss to the Domers. Instead, they went 6-6 and drew a lousy Hawaii team, and for the first time since the height of the Lou Holtz era, the Irish had a talent advantage in a bowl game.

Pat Fitzgerald is a very bright man. And kicking to Jeremy Maclin was very stupid.

The ACC has done well, as should have been expected. The league had a very good year, and it's had a solid bowl season so far, going 3-3 with Florida State smashing Wisconsin, Wake Forest and Maryland handling business, and Miami, UNC and NC State representing well in losses to higher-rated opponents. Boston College, Georgia Tech, Clemson, and Virginia Tech remain to play, with the Hokies going for the conference's first BCS win since 2000.

So has the Big East, although the competition has been a little skimpy. West Virginia's win over North Carolina was solid, but Rutgers beat a last-place, albeit hot, NC State team, and South Florida's win was in a virtual home game against a middle-of-the-road foe from Conference-USA. Not a single game against an SEC, Big 12, or Big Ten opponent. This league needs to improve its bowl arrangements.

It's still early, but the Pac-10 looks well on the way to redeeming what had been an up-and-down season. Arizona, California and Oregon got the conference off to a 3-0 start, beating teams from the Mountain West- which tormented the Pac-10 this year- Big 12, and ACC.

The Western Athletic Conference didn't have it so well. Fresno State lost to Colorado State, Hawaii was stomped by Notre Dame, Nevada fell to Maryland, and standard-bearer Boise State had its undefeated season ended by TCU. Only Louisiana Tech, conquerors of mighty Northern Illinois in the Independence Bowl, got a win for the WAC.

So far, not so good for the Big Ten. Wisconsin got blasted by FSU, Northwestern fell to Missouri in overtime, and more unfavorable match-ups remain.

Congratulations to the Rice Owls for their first bowl win since 1954. Condolences to the Northwestern Wildcats for falling just short of their first bowl win since 1949. Good luck to the Vanderbilt Commodores, looking for their first

bowl win since 1955.

Never, ever pick against a Howard Schnellenberger team in a bowl.

Now, on to the games of January 1 and beyond:

Thursday, January 1

Outback Bowl: Iowa (8-4) vs. South Carolina (7-5), 11:00 AM, ESPN

Set the TIVO, so you can sleep it off and still catch what might be the most favorable match-up of the bowl season for the Big Ten. The Hawkeyes are hot-with Big Ten MVP Shonn Greene playing like he jumped on the mushroom in Super Mario they've won five of six, and their four losses this season have been by a combined twelve points. South Carolina lost its last two to Florida and Clemson by a combined score of 87-20, and once again the Head Ball-Coach rummaged through his depth chart to find a serviceable quarterback, to no avail. Gamecock passers threw a combined 24 interceptions, the second-most in the country, while Iowa's defense snared twenty picks, the sixth-most. Something's got to give, and most likely it will be Carolina quarterbacks doing the giving.

Prediction: Iowa 23, South Carolina 10

Capital One Bowl: Georgia (10-2) vs. Michigan State (9-3), 1:00 PM, ABC

The Bulldogs were a hip preseason pick for the national title, but a rash of interior-line injuries and two catastrophic losses knocked them all the way out of the BCS picture and into a match-up with a Michigan State team playing in its first

New Year's Day bowl since 2000. The Spartans are probably just happy to be there, a feeling that should last all the way into the opening kickoff. MSU was overmatched by the two best teams on its schedule, Ohio State and Penn State, and a run-in with a talented, pissed-off Georgia team will likely not thaw Mark Dantonio's stony countenance.

Prediction: Georgia 30, Michigan State 7

Gator Bowl: Nebraska (8-4) vs. Clemson (7-5), 1:00 PM, CBS

Bo Pelini got Nebraska back into a bowl in his first season in Lincoln, but his Huskers have flashed serious weaknesses, getting run off the field by Missouri for their first home loss to the Tigers since 1978, and coughing up 62 points in a rout at Oklahoma. It's better than it was under Tom Callahan, but it still isn't exactly Grant Wistrom and the Blackshirts back there. Clemson had a chaotic season marked by the opening-night disaster against Alabama and the midseason swoon that sent Tommy Bowden packing, but the exhortations of interim coach Dabo Sweeney and a renewed defense led to four wins in the last five games. Jacksonville is a good destination for both teams, all things considered, but Clemson's running game will match up well with Nebraska's defense. The X-factor is Sweeney's actual coaching skill in preparing for a bowl game.

Prediction: Clemson 30, Nebraska 20

Rose Bowl: Southern California (11-1) vs. Penn State (11-1), 4:30 PM, ABC

USC has won its last five Rose Bowls against Big Ten opponents dating back to 1990, while Penn State always shows up well in bowl games under Joe Paterno. The Nittany Lions are too good up front, too experienced, and too well-prepared to get blown out like Illinois did last year. Penn State will be limited by USC's outstanding defense, so Darryl Clark will have to take advantage of whatever

scoring opportunities he does get, and avoid the kind of pitfalls that led to his team's only loss at Iowa. Will he, and will he? He might, but I'm not picking against Petey's boys in their own backyard.

Prediction: USC 24, Penn State 17

Orange Bowl: Virginia Tech (10-3) vs. Cincinnati (10-2), 8:30 PM, FOX

Virginia Tech is back in the Orange Bowl for the second year in a row after dispatching Boston College in the ACC Championship Game, while Big East Champion Cincinnati is celebrating its first outright league title of any kind since winning the Missouri Valley Conference crown in 1964. Both teams play solid defense, and both have had quarterback issues: Frank Beamer had to remove Tyrod Taylor's red-shirt, while a series of injuries and the NCAA's refusal to grant Ben Mauk a sixth season of eligibility forced Brian Kelly to go with five different quarterbacks during the season. Both teams are evenly matched; Virginia Tech will have trouble moving against Cincinnati's veteran defense, while the Bearcats have never been on this kind of stage before. I'll give the nod to the big game-tested Hokies.

Prediction: Virginia Tech 19, Cincinnati 17

Friday, January 2

Cotton Bowl: Texas Tech (11-1) vs. Ole Miss (8-4), 2:00 PM, FOX

It's the under card to the title game, as the Big 12's Texas Tech faces off with the SEC's Mississippi in a send-off to the State Fairgrounds before the game moves to the Cowboys' new stadium next year. The Raiders stayed in the thick of the

BCS title conversation deep into November, while Houston Nutt's Rebel's fulfilled all that preseason "dark horse" talk, handing Florida its only loss along the way to the program's first winning record since Eli Manning's senior season of 2003, when Ole Miss also went to the Cotton Bowl. Mike Leach has won five of his last six bowl games at Texas Tech, while Nutt struggled to a 2-6 record in bowls at Arkansas. It's a tough call, Ole Miss's strength in the trenches against TTU's offense, but I'm going with the Raiders, based on Leach's half of the coaching match-up.

Prediction: Texas Tech 27, Ole Miss 23

Liberty Bowl: East Carolina (9-4) vs. Kentucky (6-6), 5:00 PM, ESPN

Kentucky wasn't exactly in thoroughbred form down the backstretch of 2008. The Wildcats are two one-point wins from an eight-game losing streak to end the season, sit near the bottom of the FBS in both scoring offense and total offense, and will be without the services of Randall "Tex" Cobb in this one. East Carolina was the darling of early September, the bust of late September, and ended the season on a six win-in-seven game spurt punctuated by a victory at Tulsa in the C-USA title game. The Pirates also have a pretty good defense, which might be overkill against Kentucky's feeble attack.

Prediction: East Carolina 17, Kentucky 10

Sugar Bowl: Alabama (12-1) vs. Utah (12-0), 8:00 PM, FOX

Utah wanted to be in the geographically convenient Fiesta Bowl; the Sugar Bowl wanted to avoid a repeat of last year's fiasco, when mid-major Hawaii was beaten to a pulp by Georgia; I wanted Ohio State in the Sugar Bowl for the chance at redemption against the SEC, as well as for the Friday night kickoff. This being the BCS, none of us got what we wanted. The Utes played a far more credible

schedule than Hawaii and match up better physically at this level, but they just don't have the speed and power to hang with an Alabama team playing in front of a Crimson-partial Superdome crowd. Andre Smith's absence will hurt the Crimson Tide offense, but Utah won't score enough itself to make it matter. Alabama is 5-1 in the Sugar Bowl since the game moved indoors in 1975. It will also be the Tide's first appearance in the game since blistering the Hurricanes to win the National Championship in '93.

Prediction: Alabama 27, Utah 10

Saturday, January 3

International Bowl: Buffalo (8-5) vs. Connecticut (7-5), 12:00 PM, ESPN2

Turner Gill's Bulls lived a charmed life in 2008, taking their first-ever winning record, MAC East, and conference championships in one fell swoop, while Connecticut struggled after winning their first five. U-Conn's Donald Brown rushed for 1,822 yards and 17 touchdowns, but his heroics were offset somewhat by a lifeless air attack that produced the second-fewest touchdown passes in the nation (four). Buffalo did a credible job on Pitt's LeShon McCoy, holding him to 93 yards in September, but they are statistically poor against the run, yielding 4.62 yards per carry, 97th in the nation. The Bulls will have the crowd in Toronto and a four-year starter at quarterback in Drew Willy (25 touchdowns, five interceptions) but there will be a little too much U-Conn "D" as in defense and Donald, in this one.

Prediction: Connecticut 31, Buffalo 17

Monday, January 5

Fiesta Bowl: Texas (11-1) vs. Ohio State (10-2), 8:00 PM, FOX

Maybe I'm all wrong here, but having seen Texas a few times this year, they don't strike me as the typical all-offense, no-defense Big 12 team. The Longhorns have some capabilities on defense, especially in their front four, where Nagurski, Lombardi, and Ted Hendricks Award-winner Brian Orakpo is a force off the edge. At the same time, they don't look quite as explosive on offense as their fellow conference powers. Colt McCoy is sensational, but Texas doesn't have a stud running back, and while Quan Cosby and Jordan Shipley are excellent targets, they aren't really burners in the classic sense. I see a team with better balance than most of its conference brethren, although they're reliant on their quarterback in the typical way.

Ohio State has been a little one-dimensional itself. The Buckeyes are 105th in the nation in passing offense, second only to awful Michigan in Big Ten futility. Ohio State's offense has been plagued by poor offensive line play, inexperience at quarterback, over-reliance on the big play, and Beanie's fragile physical state. It's been the defense, led by Malcolm Jenkins and an outstanding second half from James Laurinaitis that has led the way. The Buckeyes are eighth in the nation in total defense, seventh against the pass, and fifth in turnover margin.

I think this is a close match-up. Texas has the big edge in experience at quarterback, with McCoy a three-year starter, while Ohio State has the overall edge in experience, particularly on defense. Texas is young in the secondary, but Ohio State doesn't have the offense to exploit it. Both teams will have

something to prove: Texas wants to show that being passed over by Oklahoma in the BCS rankings was a mistake, while the Buckeyes want to erase the memories of the big-game failures against Florida, LSU, and USC. Ultimately, Ohio State will have to get to Colt McCoy to win the game. I'm just not sure they'll be able to do it enough.

Prediction: Texas 26, Ohio State 21

Tuesday, January 6

GMAC Bowl: Ball State (12-1) vs. Tulsa (10-3), 8:00 PM, ESPN

A couple of teams with dashed dreams meet in Mobile in a battle of what might have been. The Hurricane got off to an 8-0 start with the nation's highest-scoring offense before losing to Arkansas, while the Cardinals went unbeaten in the regular season behind Nate Davis. Both teams fumbled away their respective conference championship games, the Hurricane at home to East Carolina. Todd Graham's team shredded Bowling Green 63-7 in last year's GMAC Bowl, and although Ball State is stronger than last year's Falcons, they haven't seen an offense the caliber of this one. The C-USA has had the better of the MAC of late in this game, winning the last two by a

combined score of 91-14.

Prediction: Tulsa 38, Ball State 24

Thursday, January 8

BCS National Championship Game: Florida (12-1) vs. Oklahoma (12-1), 8:00 PM, FOX

I'm not buying Oklahoma. I know I'm supposed to be deeply impressed by the run of 60-point performances, the insanely prolific offense, and the make-or-break demolition of Texas Tech. I'm not. I see a team without a significant road or neutral-site win, with the questionable exception of Oklahoma State. I see a team with major injuries to a couple of key performers, Ryan Reynolds and DeMarco Murray. I see a team with a highly questionable defense. I see a team with an immobile quarterback against a very mobile Florida defense, one that is second in the nation in both opposing quarterback rating and interceptions. Lastly, I see a team with a recent history of not protecting its quarterback stopping anyone, or winning in BCS games.

In Florida, meanwhile, I see a team with a couple of good neutral-site wins, including a victory over undefeated Alabama in the SEC title game and a payback annihilation of Georgia in the Cocktail Party. I see a Heisman winner crossed with Paul Bunyan at quarterback who has thrown for 16 touchdowns and no interceptions in his last six starts and can beat you with his arm and his tree-trunk legs. I see an outstanding defense, especially against the pass. And I see at least a nominal home-field advantage with the game in Miami.

What I don't see is this game being particularly close. I mean, when you have the reigning Heisman Trophy winner behind center and you're still the second-best team on the field in the quarterback match-up... you're in trouble.

I'm not trying to tout Florida as unbeatable. Obviously they're not. But given the match-ups and the recent history, especially in Oklahoma's case, I don't see how I can pick anything other than a decisive Gator victory. I'm as sick of the SEC hype as everyone else. But for yet another year, the partisans of God's Conference will own braggin' rights- big time.

Prediction: Florida 44, Oklahoma 21

Have a safe, festive, and altogether wonderful New Year. And thank you for reading.