Welcome to the final season of college football as we've known it. Starting in 2011 Nebraska will join the Big Ten and Colorado will head for the Pac-10, while in the lower reaches Boise State makes its long-awaited upward move to the Mountain West. The multiple shifts end more than a decade of relative stasis among the sport's high-profile leagues; there was, of course, the raid on the Big East by the ACC in 2005, but this is the first time since the mid-90's that the musical chairs have affected the Big Four of the Big Ten, SEC, Big 12 and Pac-10.

Of course, the winds of change aren't waiting until 2011 to blow throughout college football. Several high-profile programs, most notably Notre Dame, USC and Florida State, have made coaching changes that will affect the landscape of the game. Some programs that dominated the last decade- such as the aforementioned USC- might find the going tougher in the next one, while others that struggled in the 'aughts- like the aforementioned Notre Dame- might find their way back to prominence. Alabama has already been resurrected under Nick Saban, winning the whole ball of wax in 2009; other venerable-yet-fallen powers like Nebraska might be next to reclaim their former glory.

It's about time for the greatest season of all- football season- to get underway. With that, let's take a look at some championship predictions, games to watch and trends to follow for 2010.

Conference Championship Predictions

Big East- Pittsburgh: Star tailback Dion Lewis (1,799 yards as a freshman) is back as is stud defensive end Greg Romeus. Dave Wannstadt has increased the talent level across the board over the last several years and the conference schedule is favorable, with Rutgers, Connecticut and West Virginia all coming to Heinz Field. If the Panthers can adequate replace departed quarterback Bill Stull they'll win the Big East and play in their first major bowl game since 2005.

ACC Atlantic- Florida State: The retirement of Bobby Bowden and the ascension of Jimbo Fisher to the head-coaching position might be the tonic the torpid Seminole program needs. Of equal importance is the healthy return of quarterback Christian Ponder, who was having a superb 2009 campaign (2,717 yards, 14 touchdowns, 68.8 completion pct) before suffering a season-ending shoulder injury in November. Armed with Ponder, a veteran offensive line and a defense that can't possibly be worse than it was in '09, Florida State should be the cream of the Atlantic- and in the ACC Championship Game for the first time since 2005.

ACC Coastal- North Carolina: After three years of rebuilding under Butch Davis it's finally time for the Tarheels to take the next step. They'll do so behind an absolutely loaded defense that has nine starters returning from a unit that was one of the best in college football last season. UNC also has a four-year starter at quarterback in senior T.J. Yates- but he has been spotty, throwing for 39 touchdowns and 37 interceptions in his career. If Yates can take care of the football and make some plays here and there, the Butcher's boys will be playing their guts out at Raymond James Stadium in December.

SEC East- Georgia: It's not so much what the Bulldogs have as what the two-time defending SEC Champion Florida Gators no longer have. Nine Gators were selected in the NFL Draft, three in the first round- including, of course, God's Quarterback Himself, Tim Tebow. That isn't to say Florida won't be a formidable team in 2010. They will be. But Georgia has a softer schedule- no Alabama, no LSU- and enough talent to end Florida's mini-dynasty in the East. A win over the Gators in the Cocktail Party on Halloween weekend is a must.

SEC West- Alabama: Heisman winning tailback Mark Ingram is back, as is his understudy Trent Richardson. So are quarterback Greg McElroy and receiver Julio Jones. Even with seven members of the defense departing in the NFL Draft the Tide should at least have enough offense to roll to their third consecutive SEC West title. They have to go to Baton Rouge to play LSU and to Fayetteville to play Arkansas- a definite dark-horse contender with the brilliant Ryan Mallett behind center- but Alabama hasn't lost a football game prior to the SEC Championship since 2007. They're the pick to click until proven otherwise.

Big 12 North- Nebraska: Bo Pelini re-introduced defense to the scoring-happy Big Twelve, and defense will take the Cornhuskers to the top of the North for the second consecutive season. All-world Ndamukong Suh is off to the NFL but fellow defensive tackle Jared Crick is a dominant player in his own right, and the rest of the front line is plenty good enough to give fits to every offense it faces. Add in ten returning starters on offense and Nebraska will make its final season in the Big 12 a memorable one.

Big 12 South- Oklahoma: The Sooners can't possibly have worse luck than they had last season, when a siege of injuries reduced them to an 8-5 Sun Bowl team. They'll welcome back quarterback Landry Jones, who threw for 3,198 yards and 26 touchdowns last season in Sam Bradford's absence. Also returning is tailback DeMarco Murray, who has yet to live up to his advance billing but will have one more chance to do so as a senior. Receiver Ryan Broyles, who had a monster 2009 with 89 receptions for 1,120 yards and 15 touchdowns, will also be back in crimson-and-cream. With these offensive stars, a defense that returns most of its major contributors and a favorable conference schedule that doesn't include Nebraska the Sooners will be back on top of the South in 2010.

Pac-10- Oregon State: The Beavers have come close the last two seasons to breaking through and garnering their first Rose Bowl bid since 1964, only to fall short at the finish line. This year they'll finally get over the hump. Leading the way are the electrifying Rodgers brothers, who accounted for 96 percent of Oregon State's rushing yardage, 53 percent of its receptions and 44 percent of its receiving yardage in 2010. There is inexperience at quarterback but with the Rodgers brothers, a veteran defense and a schedule that has USC and Oregon coming to Corvallis the Beavers might just have enough going for them to finally get to Pasadena.

Big Ten- Ohio State: With seventeen starters back from the team that won the Big Ten outright and garnered the conference's first Rose Bowl victory since 2000, the Buckeyes are the easy choice to repeat. But the Big Ten title is the least of Ohio State's goals in 2010. Like 1998 and 2006 this is a National Championship-or-Bust kind of season in Columbus. With Miami of Florida and Penn State coming to the Shoe and with Wisconsin and Iowa the only truly formidable road opponents the schedule works out nicely for just such a run.

Mountain West- Utah: The Utes have gone 23-3 the past two seasons with bowl wins over Alabama and California, and they'll ride a veteran offense and a favorable schedule back to the top of the BCS Conference-That-Isn't. Both Texas Christian and Brigham Young have to go to Salt Lake City this season and for that reason alone, Utah rates the edge. Non-conference tilts

at home against Pittsburgh and at Notre Dame will go a long way toward determining if the Utes spend their holiday season at the Las Vegas Bowl, or at other, more desirable destinations.

Western Athletic- Boise State: And in another out-on-a-limb prediction, the sun will rise in the East. The Broncos have won six outright WAC titles in eight seasons and they'll be at the top again in this, their final season in the circuit.

Conference USA East- Southern Mississippi: Unlike Conference USA West, Conference USA East actually places a premium on defense. And no East team plays better defense than the Southern Miss Eagles, who will break East Carolina's two-year stranglehold on the division in 2010.

Conference USA West- Houston: In a word (two words, actually): Case Keenum. The gunslinger from Abilene has thrown for more than 5,000 yards the previous two seasons, including an amazing 5,671 in 2009. In a conference- and a division- predicated on firepower, the Cougars have the highest-caliber weapon, and they'll use it to claim the West for the second consecutive season.

Sun Belt- Middle Tennessee State: The Blue Raiders had a breakthrough season in 2009, going 10-3, finishing second in the conference behind Troy and upsetting Southern Miss in the New Orleans Bowl. Returning to lead another title run is quarterback Dwight Dasher, who threw for 2,789 yards, ran for 1,154, and accounted for 36 touchdowns with his arm and legs. With Sun Belt titan Troy in rebuilding mode after losing Levi Brown to the NFL, look for Dasher and Co. to bring the crown back to Murfreesboro at long last.

Mid-American East- Temple: The Owls had their best season since 1979, going 9-4 and leading for most of the way before falling to UCLA in the EagleBank Bowl- but they didn't win the MAC East. That honor went to Ohio, which defeated the Owls in Athens to claim the division. This season its Temple's turn. The Owls return sensational back Bernard Pierce, MAC Defensive Player of the Year Adrian Robinson, and the Bobcats have to come to Philadelphia. Add it all up to Temple taking a trip to Detroit for the conference title game in early December.

Mid-American West- Northern Illinois: The Huskies will benefit from a power vacuum in the MAC West and a schedule that has Temple and Central Michigan coming to DeKalb. The CMU Chippewas have owned the West of late, winning the division and conference championship three times in the last four seasons, but Dan LeFevour has taken his FBS-record 149 passing and rushing touchdowns and gone pro. The Huskies are the pick to play in Detroit for the first time since 2005.

Entirely Premature BCS Predictions

@ Pasadena, CA): Wisconsin vs. Oregon State

@ Glendale, AZ): Nebraska vs. Pittsburgh

@ Miami, FL): North Carolina vs. Utah

@ New Orleans, LA): Georgia vs. Oklahoma

@ Glendale, AZ): Ohio State vs. Alabama

Top Five Non-Conference Games to Watch

Louisiana State vs. North Carolina (Atlanta): The ACC has been humbled twice in the Chick-fil-A Kickoff, both times by Alabama. Fortunately the Tide won't be in Atlanta on September 4th. Picking up the torch for God's Conference are the LSU Tigers, who have disappointed with a

17-9 combined record the last two seasons. People in Baton Rouge are beginning to look askance at Les Miles, who won big with Nick Saban's recruits but hasn't been as successful with his own. Meanwhile, people in Chapel Hill are bullish about Butch Davis's rebuilding job, which looks as if it's finally about to bear ripe fruit. This can be a transformative game: Alabama's rout of Clemson in 2008 was the Tide's springboard to an undefeated regular season, while the Tigers nosedived into a chaotic campaign that included Tommy Bowden's midseason firing.

Boise State vs. Virginia Tech (Washington DC): The Broncos haven't lost a regular-season game since the end of the 2007 season- a span of 25 games. But they've never won a game east of the Mississippi against a BCS opponent. They'll try to break through against the Hokies on the opening Monday night of the season at FedEx field in Landover, Maryland- an ostensibly neutral site that is only about a five-hour drive from Virginia Tech's campus in Blacksburg. Boise absolutely needs to win to keep hope alive for the program's first-ever appearance in the BCS title game.

Florida State @ Oklahoma: The Seminoles and Sooners haven't met since the 2001 Orange Bowl, which Oklahoma won to claim Bob Stoops's first and only BCS Championship. The final score of that game was 13-2. Expect a more robust scoring output on September 11th in Norman, with Oklahoma's Landry Jones and Florida State's Christian Ponder ready to lead stacked offenses into the new decade. This will be Jimbo Fisher's second game as the new FSU coach. His first is against Samford, so this will be the real, if early, barometer as to how life in Tallahassee will look without Coach Dad-Gum.

Penn State @ Alabama: It's been a long time since big-time Big Ten and SEC teams met in the regular season. The last in-season game between the conferences took place in 2006 and that involved Vanderbilt. So this September 11th tilt in Tuscaloosa should generate plenty of interest. Alabama is loaded for bear again after its National Championship campaign of 2009, while Penn State should once again be in the upper echelon of the Big Ten ranks. It would be a surprise if the Nittany Lions won, but even if they keep it interesting it'll be a boost for the conference.

Nebraska @ Washington: A couple of programs that won National Championships in the '90s but fell off the radar in the 2000's enter this September 18th confrontation in Seattle feeling good about their prospects going into the 10's. Guided by second-year head coach Steve Sarkisian, the Huskies went a respectable 5-7 in 2009 and are hopeful for their first winning season and bowl berth since 2002. Nebraska is 19-7 with

back-to-back bowl victories under Bo Pelini and will be looking to jump back into serious BCS contention for the first time in a decade.

Four Trends to Follow for 2010

SEC Dominance: God's Conference ruled the latter half of the departed decade, winning four consecutive BCS title games by an average score of 35-18. Overall the SEC is a perfect 6-0 in the battle for the crystal football dating back to 1999- a showing that is even more impressive given the fact that no other conference has won more than two BCS Championships nor gone undefeated in the game. Yes, the SEC has caught some breaks in that time- Tennessee missing Ohio State in 1999, LSU twice playing quasi-home games in the Superdome, missing USC in 2004, getting a bid with two losses and getting one of Jim Tressel's weaker Buckeye teams in 2007- but it's tough to hate on God's Conference's iron-fisted rule of the sport, as tempting as it is to do just that.

And that rule looks poised to continue unabated into the new decade. Alabama is again stacked and will continue to be so until Nick Saban looks for greener pastures, while Florida will inevitably reload behind Urban Meyer's usual monster recruiting class and Arkansas looks poised for a leap behind offensive mastermind Bobby Petrino. The conference doesn't look quite as formidable on the back end as it did three or four years ago- Tennessee's future is shrouded in mystery with unproven Derek Dooley taking the helm, Leslie the Hat is showing some seams at LSU, Mark Richt seems to be running in place at Georgia and the jury is still out on Gene Chizek at Auburn- but the top of God's Conference is, as always, heavenly.

USC & Notre Dame: For most of the last decade the rivalry between the Trojans and Fighting Irish has been decidedly one-sided, with USC winning the last eight in a row by an average score of 40-15. Notre Dame hasn't won a game in the series since 2001, Pete Carril's first season in Los Angeles. Only twice in the last eight years have they even come close to beating the Trojans- the Bush Push classic of 2005 and last season, when USC mounted a late goal-line stand to hang on, 34-27.

Now that Petey has fled Los Angeles one step ahead of the NCAA posse, however, we might

see a new phase in this ancient intersectional feud. In Brian Kelly Notre Dame has hired its first proven winner as head coach since Lou Holtz- who, not incidentally, dominated USC, going 9-1-1 against the Trojans from 1986-96. Kelly has won at Division II (Grand Valley State), and at Division I-A (Central Michigan and Cincinnati.) USC's new coach, Lane Kiffin, has a grand total of two-and-a-half seasons of head-coaching experience and thus far is proven at nothing but the value of slick talk and a well-known last name.

For the first time in a long time Notre Dame has the ostensible edge over USC on the sideline. It shouldn't be too long before the Irish have the edge on the football field as well. In another ten years we could be wondering, as we did in the '90s, when, if ever, the Trojans were going to beat Notre Dame again.

Rise of the Mid-Major

In 2005 Utah became the first non-BCS school to play in a BCS bowl game, when they received a Fiesta Bowl invite as a reward for their undefeated season. In 2007 Boise State became the first non-BCS school to defeat a truly elite opponent in a BCS game, when the Broncos stunned Oklahoma in that gadget-filled overtime thriller. Last season, Boise and TCU became the first pair of non-BCS schools to play in the BCS at the same time.

Only one hurdle remains: the BCS National Championship. Almost inevitably a non-BCS school will play in that game in this decade. The only question is when. If Boise State runs the table they'll have a very good shot to make it this season. The Broncos will have wins over two quality BCS opponents in the Hokies and Oregon State, and they've got two BCS bowl victories on their recent ledger. It would be tough to keep them out, even though the Western Athletic Conference *is* a bottomless pit of suck.

Revitalized Big Ten: Everyone's favorite BCS whipping boy rose up and did a little whipping of their own last season. For the first time since the 2005 season the Big Ten went 2-0 in BCS bowl games, with Ohio State defeating Oregon in the Rose Bowl and Iowa topping Georgia Tech in the Orange Bowl. Overall the conference went 4-3 against a grueling bowl schedule, with a couple of honorable losses (Northwestern and Michigan State) mixed in with the victories.

In 2011 the Big Ten will be even stronger, with improved Nebraska and a conference

championship game added to the mix. And things look promising for this season as well, with Ohio State a favorite to play for the National Championship and Iowa, Wisconsin, Michigan State and Penn State all expected to be solid. To truly get over the hump of national perception a Big Ten team will have to defeat an SEC opponent for all the marbles. The conference could very well get that opportunity here in 2010.