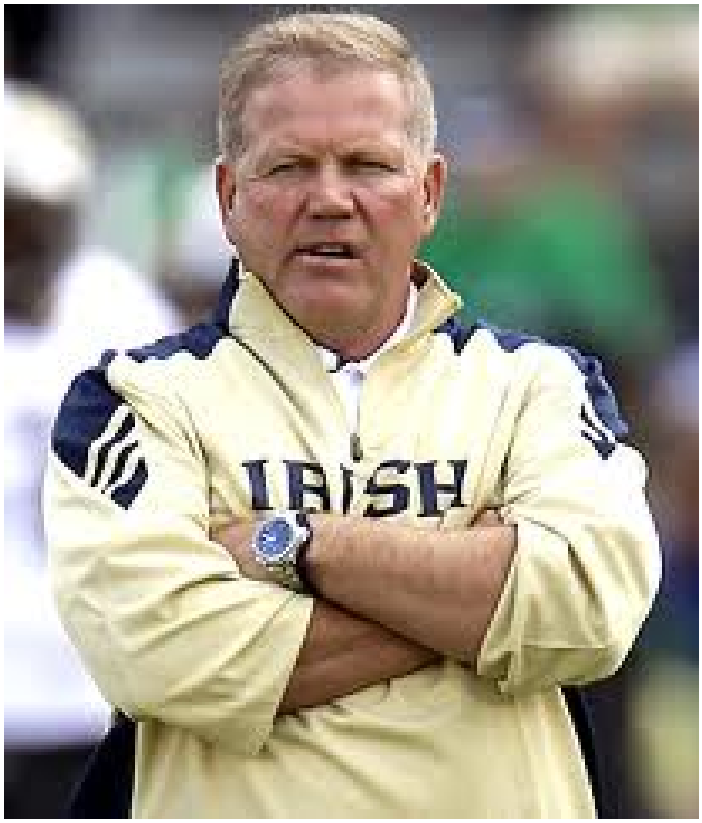

Could you feel it in the blessedly cool air this past week? Could you smell it in the tinge of cut grass and wood smoke? Could you sense it in the turn of calendar pages? Sure you could. It's almost the best season of the year. It's almost football season.

It's still nearly four weeks until the National Football League kicks off. But college football is less than three weeks away, with the season cranking up over Labor Day weekend. With kickoff fast approaching, let's take a closer look at the upcoming season, with my picks for division and conference titles as well as teams on the rise and on the decline, some of the best games on the non-conference schedule and predictions for the 2012 BCS bowls.

Man, it's good to have football back. Let's get this show on the road.

Teams on the Rise

Notre Dame: The Irish finished only 8-5 in Brian Kelly's first season, but the way they reached 8-5 should have the people in South Bend excited. After starting out 4-5 the Irish won their last four in impressive fashion, including a throttling of Utah, the first win over USC in a decade and a lopsided Sun Bowl triumph over Miami . After years of starting fast and folding late, Notre Dame finally peaked in November and December- and with a proven winner on the sidelines, depth at quarterback, Michael Floyd (who seemingly arrived in the same recruiting class as Tim Brown) and a talented young defense, the future looks as shiny as those golden helmets. The schedule is brutal, putting hopes of a 2011 BCS run in jeopardy, but make no mistake- the Irish are on their way back.

Mississippi State: It has taken Dan Mullen just two years to turn one of the SEC's most consistent losers into a winner. In 2010 his Bulldogs surged to a 9-4 record, taking eventual BCS Champion Auburn down to the wire, shocking Florida in Gainesville and ending the Rich Rodriguez era in spectacular fashion with a 52-14 Gator Bowl drubbing of Michigan . And there's plenty left in the cupboard- quarterback Chris Relf, who combined for 2,477 yards passing and running, 20-touchdown tailback Vick Ballard and a defense that returns seven starters. The SEC West is loaded, but Mullen has Mississippi State in a position to be very competitive even in this fast company.

Texas A&M: Mike Sherman's rebuilding program finally paid off in 2010. After wallowing in mediocrity for years the Aggies rolled to a 9-4 record and earned its first Cotton Bowl bid in more than a decade. Eighteen starters return in 2011 and the schedule is friendly, with Oklahoma State, Missouri and Texas all coming to College Station. Sherman has inspired a lot of skepticism since arriving at A&M, but there's too much talent on hand for him to screw this up. With most of the tough opponents at home and Texas coming off a 5-7 season, the Aggies should at least mount a serious challenge for the Big 12's automatic BCS berth.

Michigan: You know, if you married Rich Rodriguez's offensive talent and a coach who actually gave a crap about stopping opposing offenses, you might have something. Michigan finally tied the knot when it hired Brady Hoke, the defensive-minded former Wolverine assistant who turned around programs at Ball State and San Diego State. Hoke should at least stiffen a formerly woeful defense, and the offense won't be a problem: Michigan finished eighth in the nation in total offense in 2010 and returns the extravagantly talented Denard "Shoelace" Robinson to spearhead the attack. If the Wolverines put even a semblance of a defense on the field- and under Hoke, they will- they're going to be a formidable team in 2011 and beyond.

Syracuse: After nearly a decade of misery Doug Marrone got the Orangemen on the winning track in 2010, finishing 8-5 and beating Kansas State in the Pinstripe Bowl for the program's first postseason win since 2001. There's no doubt Syracuse benefited from a soft schedule- Akron and two FCS programs were among its victims- and the Orangemen had all sorts of trouble at home, going 0-4 in the Carrier Dome against FBS opposition, but after going 14-45 in the previous five seasons the fans in upstate New York will take whatever they can get. And with the rest of the Big East in upheaval- new coaches at Pitt, West Virginia and Connecticut, fading programs at Rutgers and Cincinnati- Syracuse has an opportunity to make hay before big, bad TCU arrives on the scene in 2012.

Teams on the Decline

Rutgers: Five years ago the Scarlet Knights went 11-2, came within a dropped touchdown pass of going to the Orange Bowl and for a brief moment captured the imagination of New York City, a place that rarely goes gaga over college football. But Greg Schiano's program has slipped from that dizzying height. Last season Rutgers went 4-8 in a turbulent campaign marred by Eric LeGrand's spinal injury and erstwhile savior Tom Savage's transfer to Arizona . The Big East being what it is, a turnaround is possible- but Schiano has to recapture the mojo of 2006, and fast.

North Carolina: That deafening thud you heard was Carolina football crashing to earth. Butch Davis is gone, swallowed up along with much of the talent he brought to Chapel Hill by the academic scandals that have engulfed the program. The Butcher didn't leave the cupboards bare- there are still some good football players wearing Carolina blue, especially on defense- but the hammer is going to come down on this program before too long, and it'll take a while for a new regime to get the mess entirely cleaned out.

Boise State: It's not as if the Broncos are getting worse: with Chris Peterson in charge, underrated talent flowing in and the best home-field advantage in the nation, Boise is poised to keep winning well into the future. Unfortunately, the long-anticipated move to the Mountain West is looking rather lateral, with TCU, Utah and BYU all off to greener pastures. The program is under NCAA investigation along with several other BSU athletic programs. As if that isn't enough, San Diego State head coach Rocky Long even took a shot at the Broncos' fabled blue-turf field, calling it "unfair" and saying they ought to tear it up. The horror!

UCLA: The Rick Neuheisal era is into its fourth season and there's been absolutely no

improvement in Westwood. UCLA is 15-22 the last three years, can't field a competent offense and has been utterly unable to capitalize on the problems at cross-town rival USC. With their location and history there's no good reason for the Bruins to be this mediocre for this long- but there doesn't seem to be any end in sight for this program's struggles.

Western Athletic Conference: Of all the conferences that gained and lost members in this musical-chairs offseason, no one came out worse than the WAC, which lost flagship member Boise State (for 2011), Fresno State, Nevada and Hawaii (for 2012) and responded by adding UT-San Antonio, UT-Arlington, Texas State-San Marcos, Denver and Seattle. Not exactly an even swap. The league's one bowl tie-in for 2012: the Famous Idaho Potato Bowl in Boise. Nice. Essentially this has become the Big Sky Conference with a thin coat of FBS paint.

Five Non-Conference Games to Watch

Sept. 3- Oregon vs. LSU: A pair of powerhouses in an intersectional neutral-site matchup in Jerry World, with the Ducks fresh off a trip to the BCS Championship and the Tigers fresh off their fifth double-digit-win season in eight years. Oregon is in hot water, with the NCAA investigating alleged payments made to a Houston-area recruiter . The allegations shouldn't obscure a fascinating matchup between Oregon's volatile offense, which finished tops in the nation last season, and LSU's stingy defense, which finished twelfth.

Sept. 3- Boise State @ Georgia: Boise may have won two BCS bowls in the last five seasons, but the Broncos have yet to go on the road against a power program from a power league and won. Their last trip to Athens six years ago was a disaster, as the Bulldogs ripped off 574 total yards in a 48-13 thrashing . Georgia probably isn't as strong as it was back in 2005, when it won the SEC and played in the Sugar Bowl, and Boise is almost certainly better. Still, this is a huge barometer for Chris Peterson's team- the biggest, maybe, since the 2007 Fiesta Bowl against Oklahoma. Beating the likes of TCU and Virginia Tech is one thing- beating a team from God's Conference in their house is quite another.

Sept. 10- Brigham Young @ Texas: It isn't exactly a marquee game- the teams combined to go 12-13 last year- but it's an interesting matchup regardless. BYU won five of its last six in 2010 as heralded freshman quarterback Jack Heaps got it cranked up; Texas had its worst season in over a decade, going 5-7 despite boasting one of the nation's best defenses. Mack Brown needs a lot of improvement from quarterback Garrett Gilbert, who was horrible last season. The Longhorns need this game badly; after going 2-5 at DKR in 2010, a loss at home

to the Mormons wouldn't sit well with the burnt-orange faithful.

Sept. 10- Notre Dame @ Michigan: These two ancient rivals played two of the most thrilling games in college football in 2008 and 2009, the winning touchdowns scored with eleven and 27 seconds remaining, respectively. Michigan won them both and hosts the Irish this year in what should be a crucial test for second-year Notre Dame coach Brian Kelly and first-year Wolverine coach Brady Hoke. Expect more fireworks and another photo finish this season from these two evenly-matched foes, who share high hopes going into 2011.

Sept. 17- Ohio State @ Miami (Fl.): The mystery game of the non-conference season: two teams with first-year head coaches and futures fraught with uncertainty meeting on a hot September night in south Florida. Miami is arguably in a better short-term position, with experience at quarterback (experience in throwing tons of interceptions, but still) and a head coach in Al Golden who was hired to turn the program around, not merely shepherd it through a lame-duck season. Ohio State will arrive in Sun Life Stadium bearing neophytes on the sideline as well as under center. (I'm operating under the safe assumption that Joe Bauserman will not be starting.) It may not be the most artistic game in the world, but the curiosity level should be off the charts.

Division & Conference Championship Predictions

Big Ten (Leaders)- Wisconsin: I'm not 100 percent sure Russell Wilson's transition into the Badger offense will be a smooth one. Wisconsin quarterbacks are traditionally game-managers, guys that are at their best turning around and handing off forty times a game, and the dynamic Wilson isn't that type of player. Nevertheless, the Badgers have enough talent to take advantage of what should be a down year at Ohio State and cop the Leaders title.

Big Ten (Legends)- Nebraska: With Taylor Martinez, a shutdown defense anchored by Jared Crick and a schedule that sees Ohio State, Michigan State and Iowa visit Lincoln, the Cornhuskers should take the division crown in their first year in the conference.

Pac-10 (North)- Oregon: Steve Sarkasian has Washington on the rise and Andrew Luck makes Stanford dangerous, but Oregon returns a bushel full of talent from the nation's most explosive offense and should take this division, the questions around the program notwithstanding.

Pac-10 (South)- Arizona State: USC is probably still the best team in the division, but the Trojans are ineligible for the championship. Arizona State always seems to fall short of expectations, but the Sun Devils return almost everyone from last year's team and someone has to win this division, if only by default.

SEC (East)- Florida: The hiring of Will Muschamp is just the tonic needed for a program that looked rather stale in 2010. South Carolina won this division last season and has plenty of talent coming back, but if the Gators play up to their potential they will take the East for the eleventh time in twenty seasons.

SEC (West)- Alabama: Talk about throwing darts at a board. Every SEC West powerhouse faces major attrition from last season. But all things being equal, it's best to go with the Crimson Tide, who are nasty on defense and will be looking at this season as an emotional crusade in the wake of the tornadoes that devastated Tuscaloosa over the summer.

Big 12- Oklahoma: With Landry Jones back to lead a volatile offense, Texas struggling to recover from a disastrous season, Texas A&M not quite ready for prime time (and coming to Norman) and Nebraska off to the Big Ten, the Sooners are the best team left standing in a conference that looks to be in its twilight years.

ACC (Atlantic)- Florida State: The Seminoles aren't back at their early-90's level, when they turned the ACC into their personal playground, but they're past the torpor of the late-Bobby Bowden era and have the talent and the schedule to coast to the Atlantic crown.

ACC (Coastal)- Virginia Tech: Losing Tyrod Taylor and Darren Evans hurts, but the Hokies are still in a perfect position to take advantage of the distractions surrounding their two main inter-divisional competitors, Georgia Tech and North Carolina.

Big East- South Florida: For years the Bulls have been regarded as “next year’s champions” in the Big East, but in Skip Holtz they finally have the coach who can deliver on those expectations. The defense will be fast and athletic, as usual, and the offense anchored by B.J. Daniels will be good enough to bring the title and a BCS bid to Tampa for the first time. The weakness and tumult in the rest of the conference won’t hurt, either.

Mountain West- Boise State: The November 12th showdown with TCU is the only game that really matters, and it’s on the blue turf, where the Broncos are virtually unbeatable. That more than anything gives Boise the edge over the Horned Frogs in this conference. The presence of senior quarterback Kellen Moore doesn’t hurt either.

Conference USA (East)- Central Florida: UCF was the dominant team in C-USA last year with an 11-3 record and a Liberty Bowl upset of Georgia, and with dual-threat quarterback Jeff Godfrey just a sophomore, the Knights are in a good position to keep right on dominating, particularly with the East by far the weaker of the league’s two divisions.

Conference USA (West)- SMU: Fresh off a C-USA West title-game appearance, June Jones finally has the weapons he needs to make his system work to the fullest. Quarterback Kyle Padron is back after throwing for 3,828 yards and 31 touchdowns, as is bruising back Zach Line (1,494 rushing yards) and receivers Cole Beasley and Darius Johnson (1,905 combined yards.) With just a little bit of defense the Mustangs will set up a C-USA title-game remach with Central Florida.

WAC- Hawaii: It’s all about which team fills the void left by Boise State’s departure for the Mountain West, and with Fresno State inconsistent and Nevada losing Colin Kaepernick and Vai Taua, the opportunity is there for the Rainbows to take the title in their final year before following Boise to the MWC.

MAC (East)- Ohio: The schedule is favorable, with Kent State, Temple and O.G. Miami all coming to Athens, and there’s enough talent across the board to make Frank Solich’s Bobcats the team to beat in the East.

MAC (West)- Toledo: With eighteen starters returning and a schedule that has Western Michigan and Northern Illinois coming to the Glass Bowl in November, everything is lined up for

the Rockets to win the West for the first time since 2004.

Sun Belt- Troy: Florida International surprised almost everyone by coming out of nowhere and winning the conference last season, but the Trojans are still the Sun Belt's most consistent power and should restore order to the league hierarchy in 2011.

Absurdly Early BCS Bowl Predictions

Rose Bowl (Pasadena, CA): Wisconsin (Big Ten) vs. Oregon (Pac-10)

Sugar Bowl (New Orleans, LA): Florida (at-large) vs. Boise State (at-large)

Orange Bowl (Miami, FL): Florida State (ACC) vs. South Florida (Big East)

Fiesta Bowl (Glendale, AZ): Texas A&M (at-large) vs. Nebraska (at-large)

BCS Championship (New Orleans, LA): Alabama (SEC) vs. Oklahoma (Big 12)