

Cotton Bowl Preview: What To Know About Texas



OPPONENT: Texas (13-2, 7-2 SEC)

Before the season a postseason matchup between Ohio State and Texas, two of the most talented teams in college football, seemed inevitable. Right around the time of the kickoff of the Rose Bowl a potential matchup between the two teams seemed almost impossible.

After taking a 24-8 lead on Arizona State in the Peach Bowl, the Longhorns conceded 16 straight points and subsequently missed two field goals in the last two minutes of regulation to head to overtime. The Longhorns gave up a touchdown in the first overtime before getting backed up behind the chains on 4th and 13 in their offensive possession. Needing a conversion to keep their season alive, former Ohio State quarterback Quinn Ewers gave his current Texas team a pulse with a crucial 28-yard touchdown pass to Matthew Golden.

From there, Texas scored a touchdown and a two-point conversion in double overtime, and former Clemson transfer safety Andrew Mukuba came up with a game-winning interception to punch his team's ticket to the Cotton Bowl. Across the country in Pasadena, Ohio State was boat racing the previously undefeated Oregon to set up what could be the biggest game of the College Football Playoffs so far.

The 5-seeded Longhorns and 8-seeded Buckeyes will have the eyes of the entire college football world upon them on Friday at 7:30 p.m. Eastern Standard Time (4:30 Pacific) on ESPN.

Ohio State has seemingly been on a redemption tour for the entirety of the playoffs after its loss to Michigan, but the redemption theme should only be heightened for the Buckeyes at AT&T Stadium, the site of a frustrating 14-3 loss to Missouri in the Cotton Bowl last year.

For former Kansas State quarterback Will Howard, who was 0-3 against the Longhorns during his time with the Wildcats from 2020-23, the opponent has him particularly fired up for the semifinals of the College Football Playoff.

"For me, personally, that was the only team I didn't beat when I was in the Big 12," Howard said on Sunday. "So, yeah, there's definitely, personally for me, a little extra motivation there because I never got the chance to beat these guys. Played them four years. They were always a good team, but none of

those games were unwinnable. Last year, we lost in overtime. Definitely excited to get another chance at these guys.”

Most of the Buckeyes won't be as familiar with the Longhorns as Howard, but some were teammates with their quarterback. Ewers was only with the Buckeyes for one season in 2021 before transferring to Texas where he has been ever since, but according to Ohio State head coach Ryan Day, he still has relationships inside the program.

“C.J. (Stroud) really had a great season that season and (Ewers) decided he really wanted to play,” Day said on Friday. “It was disappointing for us, but we certainly understood. From afar I've watched him and he's got a lot of talent, he's a really good player, he comes from a great family and he's had a great career at Texas. A lot of people here still have good relationships with him and think the world of him.”

Before any of the connections to the opposing team, both sides will have plenty to play for in the win-or-go-home semifinals of the College Football Playoff.

Despite some bumps in the road, it's been another positive season for fourth-year head coach Steve Sarkisian. The Longhorns won their first six games of the season, two of which came against then-nationally ranked opponents, Michigan and Oklahoma, before losing to Georgia 30-15.

Texas basically clinched a playoff spot in the second half of the regular season with strong defensive performances in wins over SEC foes like Vanderbilt (27-24), Florida (49-17), Arkansas (20-10) and Texas A&M (17-7).

The Longhorns had a heartbreaking 22-19 overtime loss in the SEC Championship to Georgia but bounced back with a solid 38-24 triumph over Clemson in the first round of the playoffs.

Texas is one of the most talented teams Ohio State has faced all season. The Longhorns boast an All-SEC quarterback in Ewers, an All-SEC running back in Quintrevion Wisner, an experienced offensive line led by Unanimous All-American offensive tackle Kelvin Banks Jr., a plethora of talented receivers, and an All-SEC tight end in Gunnar Helm.

Even with all of that offensive skill, the defense has been the more reliable unit. Led by Jahdae Barron, winner of the Thorpe Award, given to the nation's best defensive back, and one of the deepest defensive lines in the country, Texas ranks fourth in scoring defense and third in total defense.

On paper, Texas has the talent to match up reasonably well with Ohio State. However, unlike Ohio State, Texas hasn't put together a great performance for 60 minutes in a big game. The Longhorns struggled to run the ball in their close call against Arizona State, they settled for six field goals in the SEC Championship and committed four turnovers in their first loss to Georgia during the regular season.

The Longhorns' good but not great play in the playoffs, combined with the Buckeyes' impressive feats during their two playoff games is why the spread currently sits at around 5.5 points in favor of Ohio State.

Regardless, the amount of NFL-caliber players on both sides of the field, in addition to the high stakes of the College Football Playoff could make for an instant classic game at AT&T Stadium.

Players To Watch

QB Quinn Ewers— Ewers has had quite the polarizing season leading Texas' offense. In Texas' 31-12 win over Michigan, Ewers seemed to establish himself as a Heisman Trophy candidate, throwing for 246 yards and three touchdowns while completing 24-of-36 passes. In other games, Ewers made a costly mistake or two, leading some to question his chances of leading his team to a national championship. Statistically speaking, it's been a productive season for Ewers, who has thrown 3,189 yards, 29 touchdowns and 11 interceptions in 13 games played.

WR Matthew Golden— One thing that makes the Texas offense so dangerous is the amount of weapons at Ewers' disposal. The Longhorns have eight players with at least 240 receiving yards and a touchdown, the Buckeyes for example have three such players. Despite the depth at the receiver position, it is Golden, who transferred to Texas ahead of the 2024 season from Houston, who has emerged as a true No. 1 wide receiver in the second half of the season. In the SEC Championship game, Golden had eight catches for 162 yards, and against Arizona State, he totaled 149 yards on 7 catches. For the season, Golden leads Texas with 936 receiving yards and nine touchdowns.

DE Colin Simmons—Perhaps the first thing that pops into mind for the biggest Buckeye fans about Simmons is that freshman receiver Jeremiah Smith lost the Shaun Alexander Freshman of the Year Award, to him. While one could certainly argue Smith was the more deserving player of the award, what is undeniable is how productive Simmons has been in his first year of college football. In 15 games played for Texas, Simmons has recorded a team-high nine sacks, forced three fumbles and even had an interception.

DB Andrew Mukuba—There are very few safety duos, who can legitimately compare themselves to Ohio State's duo of Caleb Downs and Lathan Ransom, but Texas' Andrew Mukuba and Michael Taaffe are one of them. Mukuba's five interceptions are currently tied for the fourth most in the country this season. Intercepting passes isn't the only thing Mukuba can do, the senior also ranks third on the team with 63 total tackles. Taaffe isn't bad either. The former walk-on is second on the team with 73 total tackles, he also has two interceptions and two sacks.

DB Jahdae Barron— Barron was one of Texas' best players on the defensive side of the ball in 2023, but very few could have foreseen this type of spectacular season. Barron is tied for the team lead with Mukuba with five interceptions, but he also is a very willing participant in defending the run. Barron is fourth on the team with 61 total tackles. Whenever Barron lines up against either Smith or senior Ohio State receiver Emeka Egbuka it will be must-see television.