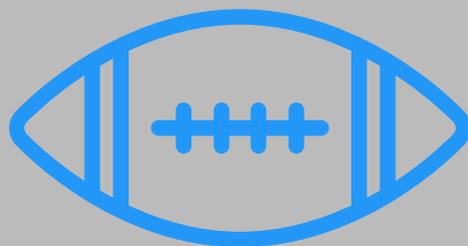


**The**  
**2016**  
**College Football**  
**Win Totals Report**



Ed Feng, [thepowerrank.com](http://thepowerrank.com)

You want to predict the 2016 college football season with accuracy. Any analytics that can help pin down a win total for each team is helpful.

However, college football seems so random. The sport relies on 18-22 year olds raging with testosterone. At best, they throw an errant pass or miss a block. At worst, they punch a female.

There's also the inherent randomness of football. A pass gets tipped at the line of scrimmage and falls into the hands of a defender who rumbles for a touchdown. Small collisions can have large consequences.

Despite these factors, it's possible to predict college football in the preseason with surprising accuracy.

Last year in 2015, my preseason rankings predicted the winner in 73.3% of games. This percentage includes only games with two FBS teams and excludes the more predictable FCS cupcake games.

Based on these preseason rankings, this win totals report gives an overview of the 2016 college football season. The sections of this report contain the following content:

1. College football win totals for all 128 bowl subdivision teams
2. Why accurate preseason predictions are possible

3. A discussion of 3 teams' win totals for 2016
4. The surprising truth about preseason polls

Let's get started.

# College football win totals

The preseason model for college football assigns each team three important numbers.

1. A rank according to the preseason rankings, listed before the name of each team.
2. A rating, or an expected margin of victory against an average FBS team. Teams get ranked by this rating.
3. An expected win total.

To see college football teams ranked 1 through 128 by the preseason model, click [here](#).

## **Southeastern**

- 1: Alabama, 21.2 rating, 9.7 wins.**
- 3: LSU, 17.3 rating, 9.0 wins.**
- 7: Tennessee, 14.8 rating, 9.0 wins.**
- 8: Mississippi, 13.2 rating, 7.2 wins.**
- 10: Texas A&M, 12.3 rating, 7.6 wins.**
- 12: Arkansas, 11.8 rating, 7.6 wins.**
- 16: Georgia, 11.0 rating, 8.3 wins.**
- 23: Mississippi State, 9.5 rating, 7.1 wins.**
- 28: Florida, 8.3 rating, 7.2 wins.**
- 32: Auburn, 7.1 rating, 6.0 wins.**
- 34: South Carolina, 5.9 rating, 6.5 wins.**
- 44: Vanderbilt, 3.7 rating, 5.8 wins.**
- 52: Missouri, 3.0 rating, 5.9 wins.**
- 83: Kentucky, -2.3 rating, 4.5 wins.**

## Big Ten

- 9: Michigan, 12.6 rating, 9.4 wins.
- 11: Ohio State, 12.1 rating, 8.4 wins.
- 22: Wisconsin, 9.8 rating, 7.8 wins.
- 25: Nebraska, 8.7 rating, 8.2 wins.
- 29: Michigan State, 7.9 rating, 7.5 wins.
- 36: Iowa, 5.8 rating, 7.3 wins.
- 43: Penn State, 3.9 rating, 6.4 wins.
- 58: Northwestern, 1.9 rating, 5.8 wins.
- 60: Minnesota, 1.8 rating, 6.8 wins.
- 67: Indiana, 0.5 rating, 5.9 wins.
- 76: Purdue, -1.2 rating, 5.4 wins.
- 78: Maryland, -1.3 rating, 5.4 wins.
- 84: Rutgers, -2.4 rating, 4.9 wins.
- 88: Illinois, -4.2 rating, 3.9 wins.

## **Big 12**

**5: Oklahoma, 16.2 rating, 9.5 wins.**

**15: Baylor, 11.3 rating, 8.7 wins.**

**17: Oklahoma State, 10.8 rating, 8.3 wins.**

**21: TCU, 9.9 rating, 7.9 wins.**

**35: West Virginia, 5.8 rating, 6.5 wins.**

**39: Texas, 5.4 rating, 6.2 wins.**

**42: Texas Tech, 5.0 rating, 6.5 wins.**

**50: Kansas State, 3.3 rating, 5.6 wins.**

**63: Iowa State, 1.0 rating, 4.8 wins.**

**111: Kansas, -11.4 rating, 2.4 wins.**

## **Independents**

**13: Notre Dame, 11.8 rating, 8.7 wins.**

**27: Brigham Young, 8.6 rating, 7.7 wins.**

**91: Army, -5.9 rating, 6.2 wins.**

**124: Massachusetts, -16.6 rating, 3.1 wins.**

## Atlantic Coast

- 2: Florida State, 19.3 rating, 10.0 wins.
- 4: Clemson, 16.3 rating, 9.6 wins.
- 14: Louisville, 11.3 rating, 8.6 wins.
- 20: North Carolina, 10.1 rating, 8.2 wins.
- 31: Virginia Tech, 7.2 rating, 7.2 wins.
- 33: Pittsburgh, 6.7 rating, 7.1 wins.
- 40: Miami (FL), 5.2 rating, 6.6 wins.
- 47: Georgia Tech, 3.4 rating, 5.9 wins.
- 55: Boston College, 2.5 rating, 6.4 wins.
- 59: North Carolina State, 1.9 rating, 5.4 wins.
- 64: Syracuse, 0.9 rating, 4.6 wins.
- 72: Virginia, -0.5 rating, 4.6 wins.
- 73: Wake Forest, -0.6 rating, 5.6 wins.
- 75: Duke, -0.6 rating, 4.9 wins.

## **Pac-12**

**6: Stanford, 15.7 rating, 9.2 wins.**

**18: Oregon, 10.7 rating, 7.9 wins.**

**19: USC, 10.4 rating, 6.9 wins.**

**24: Utah, 8.9 rating, 7.8 wins.**

**26: Washington, 8.6 rating, 7.6 wins.**

**30: Washington State, 7.3 rating, 7.6 wins.**

**37: UCLA, 5.6 rating, 6.1 wins.**

**38: Arizona, 5.5 rating, 6.8 wins.**

**53: Arizona State, 2.6 rating, 5.8 wins.**

**56: California, 2.1 rating, 4.9 wins.**

**77: Colorado, -1.2 rating, 4.4 wins.**

**87: Oregon State, -2.7 rating, 4.0 wins.**

## American Athletic Conference

- 41: Houston, 5.2 rating, 8.1 wins.
- 45: Memphis, 3.6 rating, 7.7 wins.
- 48: Cincinnati, 3.4 rating, 7.5 wins.
- 51: South Florida, 3.2 rating, 7.0 wins.
- 54: Temple, 2.6 rating, 8.1 wins.
- 61: Navy, 1.3 rating, 6.9 wins.
- 71: Connecticut, -0.3 rating, 6.3 wins.
- 80: East Carolina, -1.8 rating, 5.5 wins.
- 82: Tulsa, -2.2 rating, 6.2 wins.
- 89: UCF, -5.5 rating, 4.9 wins.
- 94: SMU, -6.9 rating, 4.0 wins.
- 110: Tulane, -11.0 rating, 4.0 wins.

## Mountain West

- 49: Boise State, 3.4 rating, 8.3 wins.

66: San Diego State, 0.6 rating, 8.4 wins.  
70: Air Force, -0.3 rating, 8.1 wins.  
74: Utah State, -0.6 rating, 7.0 wins.  
81: San Jose State, -1.8 rating, 6.6 wins.  
95: Nevada, -7.0 rating, 5.7 wins.  
97: Colorado State, -7.9 rating, 5.7 wins.  
104: New Mexico, -9.1 rating, 5.3 wins.  
105: Wyoming, -9.2 rating, 4.5 wins.  
107: Hawaii, -9.4 rating, 4.7 wins.  
112: UNLV, -12.0 rating, 4.7 wins.  
114: Fresno State, -12.6 rating, 3.6 wins.

## **Conference USA**

62: Western Kentucky, 1.3 rating, 8.5 wins.  
79: Marshall, -1.5 rating, 8.2 wins.  
92: Middle Tennessee St, -6.6 rating, 6.4 wins.  
93: Louisiana Tech, -6.7 rating, 6.7 wins.  
98: Florida Atlantic, -7.9 rating, 5.9 wins.

100: Southern Miss, -8.0 rating, 7.3 wins.  
108: Rice, -10.1 rating, 5.8 wins.  
116: Old Dominion, -13.9 rating, 5.1 wins.  
118: Florida Intl, -14.4 rating, 4.2 wins.  
120: North Texas, -15.2 rating, 3.8 wins.  
122: UTEP, -15.9 rating, 4.9 wins.  
125: UTSA, -17.4 rating, 4.2 wins.  
128: Charlotte, -24.0 rating, 2.3 wins.

## **Mid-American Conference**

46: Toledo, 3.5 rating, 8.7 wins.  
65: Northern Illinois, 0.7 rating, 7.8 wins.  
68: Western Michigan, 0.3 rating, 7.9 wins.  
69: Bowling Green, 0.0 rating, 7.7 wins.  
86: Central Michigan, -2.4 rating, 7.1 wins.  
96: Ohio, -7.5 rating, 6.4 wins.  
101: Kent State, -8.1 rating, 5.3 wins.  
102: Ball State, -8.6 rating, 5.3 wins.

- 109: Buffalo, -10.3 rating, 5.0 wins.
- 113: Akron, -12.5 rating, 3.8 wins.
- 117: Miami (OH), -14.3 rating, 3.4 wins.
- 121: Eastern Michigan, -15.2 rating, 3.8 wins.

## Sun Belt

- 57: Georgia Southern, 2.0 rating, 8.4 wins.
- 85: Appalachian State, -2.4 rating, 7.8 wins.
- 90: Arkansas State, -5.7 rating, 6.7 wins.
- 99: Troy, -8.0 rating, 6.8 wins.
- 103: Georgia State, -8.9 rating, 5.6 wins.
- 106: Louisiana Lafayette, -9.3 rating, 5.8 wins.
- 115: South Alabama, -12.7 rating, 4.6 wins.
- 119: Louisiana Monroe, -14.8 rating, 4.2 wins.
- 123: Idaho, -16.0 rating, 3.9 wins.
- 126: New Mexico State, -18.8 rating, 2.8 wins.
- 127: Texas State, -20.9 rating, 2.9 wins.

# Why accurate preseason predictions are possible

In college football, teams tend to persist from year to year due to financial resources and tradition.

Alabama puts a hundred thousand fans into Bryant Denny stadium each game and gets a large check from the SEC conference each year. Coach Nick Saban has a track record of winning, which allows him to recruit a top ranked class almost every year.

In comparison, Louisiana Monroe has the smallest athletic department budget of any bowl subdivision school. According to a USA Today report, former coach Todd Berry had a recruiting budget of \$36,761 for 2014-2015. Top FBS schools spent over a \$1 million.

Louisiana Monroe will never trade places with Alabama. They have had their good years, like in 2012 when they beat Arkansas and took Auburn to overtime. Then the Warhawks returned to their usual position at the bottom of FBS with other Sun Belt schools.

This persistence of teams from year to year allows for accurate preseason predictions for college football. My preseason rankings come from a regression model that considers three factors:

1. **Four years of team performance.** This is based on The Power Rank's team rankings, which takes margin of victory in games and adjusts for strength of schedule.
2. **Turnover margin.** Turnovers can have enormous impact on football games. However, randomness plays a large role in turnover margin, as a large, positive quantity one season fails to predict the quantity for the following season. The inclusion of turnover margin in the model accounts for a team's luck in any given season.
3. **Returning starters.** Teams with many returning starters tend to perform better the following season. When only 6 starters return due to early exits to the NFL draft (Ohio State in 2016), we expect a dip in team performance.

The model has its flaws. It doesn't distinguish between offense, defense and special teams. It also treats a returning quarterback the same as a linebacker.

Despite these deficiencies, the preseason rankings are remarkably accurate in predicting games. Let's see how this works.

The preseason rankings assign each team a rating, and the difference in the rating of two teams gives a predicted margin of victory on a neutral field. The home team gets an extra 3 points.

For example, Michigan has a rating a half point better than Ohio State in this year's preseason rankings. This gives Michigan a slight edge at a neutral site.

However, Michigan travels to Ohio State this year. The addition of 3 points for home field implies that Ohio State should win by 2.5 points.

I have made some minor updates to these preseason rankings over the past few months. Over the past three seasons, this latest model has predicted the game winner in 71.7% of games (1519-599, with no predictions in 144 games).

## **3 teams' win totals for 2016**

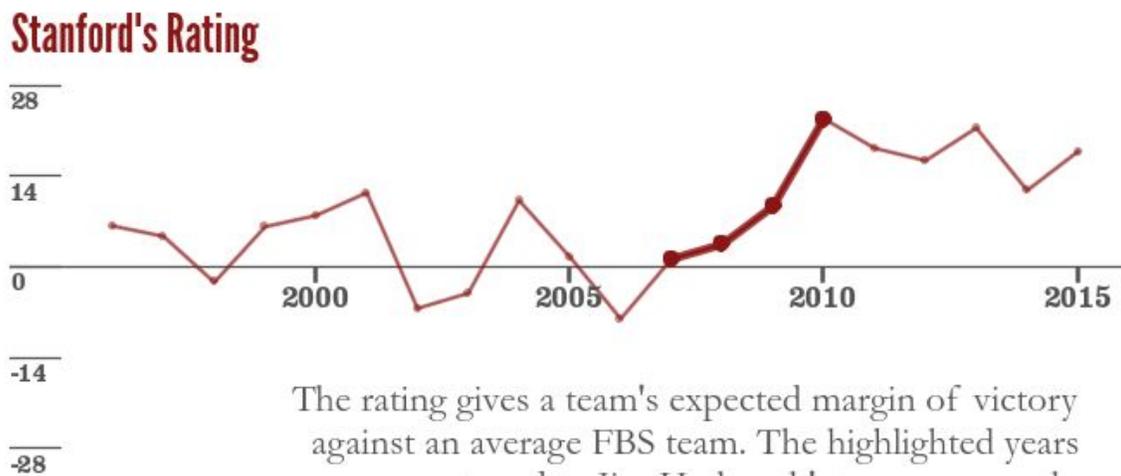
Let's look at three intriguing teams based on their expected win total.

# Michigan

The preseason rank of ninth might seem low to Michigan fans.

The defense returns almost every significant starter from last season. If this unit does not end the season in the top ten by my adjusted yards per play, it would be a disappointment.

There's also the Jim Harbaugh factor. My preseason model looks at a four year window of team ratings. While this usually gives an accurate assessment of team strength, it will underestimate a team on a rapid rise.



Michigan does have some questions to answer. The quarterback battle will get the headlines, but the offensive line might be even more critical for a team determined to impose its will at the line of scrimmage.

In addition, Michigan had exceptional special teams last season. Jabrill Peppers will still return kicks this season, but special teams coach John Baxter left for USC during the off season.

Michigan will start the season higher than ninth in the preseason AP and Coaches polls. Since these preseason human polls are surprising predictors of team strength, this suggests my win total of 9.4 games might be low.

To learn more about how human polls can help predictions, check out “The surprising truth about preseason polls” later in this report.

## **Tennessee**

While the preseason model considers four years of team performance, it gives last year the most weight. This feature helps the Volunteers.

In 2015, Tennessee lost four games. However, each of these games came against quality competition, and Tennessee never lost by more than a touchdown. Two of these losses came against Alabama and Oklahoma, two of the four teams that made the College Football Playoff.

My ranking algorithm gives teams credit for playing tight games against quality competition. Add in 17 returning starters split almost equally on both sides of the ball, and the preseason model ranks Tennessee 7th.

Tennessee still has its questions. QB Josh Dobbs can get better, and neither the offense or defense ranked in the top 25 by my adjusted yards per play last season.

Still, Tennessee is projected to win 9 games. They get Alabama at home, which implies a 40% win probability. The preseason model projects road trips to Georgia and Texas A&M as coin flip type games.

Tennessee's fate in these three critical games will determine whether they can win more than 9 games.

# Texas A&M

The Aggies show how the preseason rankings reflect team strength instead of expected record.

Texas A&M plays in the SEC West, the most difficult division in college football. With strength of schedule adjustments, the Aggies look better in my team performance ratings than their record over the past few seasons (8-5 in 2014, 2015).

The preseason model with its schedule adjustments ranks Texas A&M 10th for 2016. The Aggies are a strong program that would be the favorite on a neutral site against all but 9 teams. However, this rank doesn't translate into a high expected win total.

Texas A&M is the fourth of seven SEC West teams in the rankings. They travel to play the three teams below them (Arkansas in Arlington, Mississippi State and Auburn) and also play Tennessee out of division. This difficult schedule implies a predicted win total of 7.6 games.

The Aggies struggled throwing the ball last season. However, the arrival of graduate transfer QB Trevor Knight, the Sugar Bowl

MVP during his time at Oklahoma, should help the passing game immediately.

On the other hand, Texas A&M has had an atrocious rush defense the past three season. They don't match up well against strong rushing teams like Alabama and LSU.

## **The surprising truth about preseason polls**

With The Power Rank's college football win totals, you're all set to go for the season. There's no need to consider those preseason polls from the AP and Coaches, right?

Seriously, how much do sports writers and coaches know about teams before the season begins? Most people scoff at the notion that these polls can accurately evaluate teams.

Matt Hinton even did a quantitative study of the preseason polls. He found that the preseason AP poll has no ability to predict the final AP poll.

So screw the preseason polls. Let's give these coaches and sports writers a few weeks to watch games. Then maybe these polls have something useful to say.

However, this conventional wisdom has it backwards. The preseason polls are remarkable predictors of team strength. Later polls lose this predictive power.

Let me show you.

## **How well do preseason polls predict bowl games?**

To test the predictive power of a ranking, we can ask how often the higher ranked team wins a bowl game. With no home field advantage for either team at these neutral sites, the higher ranked team should win.

For the preseason polls, I rank teams outside the top 25 based on the number of points received. For example, in the 2015 preseason AP poll, Texas gets ranked 38th with 3 points.

Ranked teams are predicted to beat unranked teams, while no prediction is made for two unranked teams. From 2005 to 2015,

college football gave us a reasonable sample size of 380 games to evaluate these polls.

The preseason AP poll predicted 60.2% of bowl game winners (174-115 with no prediction in 91 games). The preseason Coaches poll did even better at 60.9% (187-120 with no prediction in 73 games).

To put this in perspective, consider the team favored by the closing line in the markets. This prediction can use an entire season's worth of data and observations. Todd Beck's data at [ThePredictionTracker.com](http://ThePredictionTracker.com) gives an accuracy of 62.8% (238-141 with no prediction in one game).

Despite not having the same information as the markets, the preseason polls do not perform that much worse in predicting bowl games (these prediction percentages have an error of about 2.5%). Not bad for a bunch of sports writers and coaches that haven't seen a single play of football.

## **The accuracy of polls later in the season**

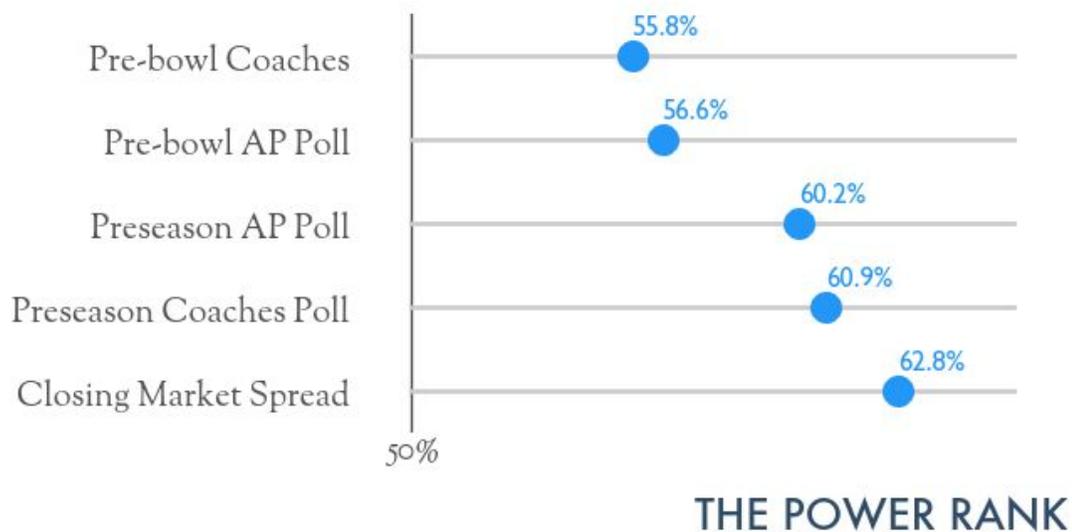
We can also ask about the predictive power of these polls later in the season. For each season, I took the final poll before bowl

season. The pollsters had regular season and conference championship games to refine their opinions.

The final pre-bowl AP poll predicted 56.6% of bowl game winners (146-112 with no prediction in 122 games). The pre-bowl Coaches poll did worse with an accuracy of 55.8% (145-115 with no prediction in 120 games).

The predictive power of the pre-bowl polls was much less than the preseason polls. This visual shows the results.

### Accuracy in predicting bowl games



The pre-bowl polls also make a prediction in fewer games than the preseason polls. For example, the preseason AP poll made a

prediction on 76.1% of bowl games. This drops to 67.9% by bowl season.

This implies that pollsters are dropping good teams from the rankings that make and win bowl games. We'll see an example from 2014 later.

## **Wisdom of crowds**

The predictive power of the preseason polls almost certainly comes from the wisdom of crowds. No one pollster can make a perfect preseason poll, but the collection of many ballots cancels out the effect of small errors made by each one.

However, this wisdom of crowds goes to shit once the season starts. A team usually drops in the polls after a loss no matter the opponent or margin of victory.

It's tough to blame the pollsters for these choices.

Fox Sports writer Stewart Mandel passed off his ballot in the AP poll to a colleague out of frustration. He said, "I found it to be largely thankless and futile. For one thing, at that time more and more big games were moving to primetime, so I'd often find

myself getting out of a stadium at 2 am and having to then do my ballot."

Let's look at two bowl games that show the power of the preseason polls.

## **Alabama vs Notre Dame in 2012**

In 2012, Alabama had a typical Nick Saban year. They lost one game to Texas A&M and Johnny Manziel but still won the SEC and made the national title game.

Notre Dame had a magical season in 2012, as they went 12-0 during the regular season. However, they did struggle at times. The Fighting Irish needed some generous officiating to beat Stanford in overtime and went 5-0 in games decided by less than a touchdown.

While some thought Notre Dame had a chance against Alabama, the preseason polls thought different. Alabama began the season 2nd in both the AP and Coaches polls. Notre Dame started 24th and 26th in the Coaches and AP polls, respectively.

Alabama showed their talent gap over Notre Dame with a 42-14 win.

## **South Carolina vs Miami in 2014**

For another example, consider the 2014 Independence Bowl between South Carolina and Miami. South Carolina's defense struggled all season. In contrast, Miami had strong efficiency numbers on both offense and defense that made them a 3 point favorite.

However, South Carolina started the season 9th in both the Coaches and AP polls. They went 6-6 and dropped from both by the beginning of bowl season.

Miami got votes in both preseason polls but couldn't crack the top 25. They also didn't make either pre-bowl poll with their 6-6 record.

Both teams regressed towards their preseason expectation, as South Carolina beat Miami 24-21.

# How to use preseason polls for predictions

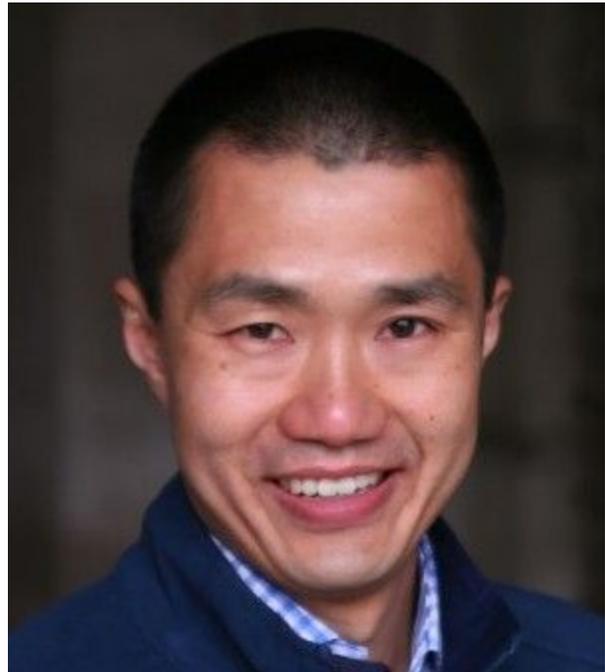
With the surprising predictive power of preseason polls, I now combine this data with the preseason model when I make my best college football predictions.

From the 2013 through 2015 seasons, these combined preseason numbers have predicted 72.2% of game winners, a small improvement over only the preseason model (71.7%). Moreover, this additional predictive strength applies to the top teams in the nation.

# About the author

Hey, my name is Ed Feng, and I'm the founder of The Power Rank.

Thanks for reading this win totals report. I hope you got some insight into teams as well as methods for predicting the college football season.



You have probably already signed up for The Power Rank's email newsletter. In addition to getting this report, you also get a sample of my best college and pro football predictions each week during the season.

If you haven't signed up for the free newsletter, click [here](#).

Thanks again.