

2014 College Football Recruiting Rankings Report

One of the great things about college football this time of year is that right after bowl season, we immediately prepare for national letter of intent day. Unlike the regular season, we don't have to wait for months to see who will be a future star of our favorite team, it comes just a few weeks after the National Championship. It's a time when fans get an idea of what their favorite team is going to look like in the future.

For college football fans, and the media that follows them, it's an exciting time of year.

- Fans get confirmation as to which of the most talented recruits actually choose a particular college, and why they make that decision.
- We get to see how one team compares with another team.
- Coaching staffs are credited with the tags of "great recruiters", while others are questioned for their ability to reel-in high profile future stars.

But all of this hype begs the obvious question: Does a Division I football team's recruiting class really determine their actual on-the-field success?

That's the question that our research expert at Tudor Collegiate Strategies, Matt Boyles, asked at the end of this season.

To test this question, we hypothesize that how a team ranks in recruiting should basically match where they finish in the polls. Of course, we cannot look at just one year's worth of recruiting results; we need to account for at least four years of recruiting leading up to this year in order to determine how recruiting has impacted wins on the current team, and make it a statistically valid research study.

To accomplish this, we took an average of the recruiting class rankings from Scout.com and Rivals.com for the years 2011-2014, which would account for most of the players on the field this season.

Then, we weighted these recruiting classes to reflect that seniors will have more impact on a team's current performance than a freshman just joining the team. Of course, this impact varies from team to team, but it lends credence to the idea that older, more experienced players are most likely to have the greatest long-term impact for their teams over the course of a typical season.

The result is a 4 year weighted¹ moving average (WMA) that we can use to rank the teams [according to their recruiting over the past four years] and compare against this year's rankings as determined by the College Football Playoff Committee (CFP).

Methods

- Identified top 25 from final rankings of the CFP for 2014.
- Data collected from Scout and Rivals scouting organizations.
- Researched recruiting class ranks of CFP top 25 from years 2011–2014.
- Calculated an average of the recruiting rankings for each team and year respectively.
- Using the team recruiting rank average, calculated a 4 year weighted moving average (WMA) of recruiting class ranks.
- Ranked the teams according to 4 year WMA
- Performed Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test using the WMA rankings and the final CFP top 25 rankings.

Assumptions

- The performance of current teams is a result of multiple recruiting classes (2011–2014).
- Recruiting class weights based on study of Football Bowl Subdivision Power 5 Conference depth charts
- The CFP top 25 is the ranking of consequence.

What the Results Showed

After calculating the data, the usual suspects appeared at the top of both the CFP poll and recruiting rankings average. Ohio State, Alabama and Florida State, for example.

At first glance, the high powered top level teams seem to match up with how they have recruited. However, as you move down the list, you begin to notice that many of the other well-performing teams that ended in the Top 25 this year had WMA rankings outside of the Top 25 rankings. In some cases, way outside.

What we find is that teams like Baylor, TCU, Kansas State and Boise State are over-achieving when it comes to their results on the field based on how their recruiting classes were ranked. Even perennial power Oregon, who rarely has a top recruiting class, has consistently performed well on the field...especially this season.

By contrast, recruiting powerhouses such Michigan, Florida and Texas (outside Top 25, not listed/graphed) with WMA ranks of 13, 8 and 6 respectively, have had disappointing on-field results lately; the last time either Michigan, Florida or Texas was ranked in the final Top 25 poll was 2012. Of course, coaching changes at these programs recently may change the course of their WMA rankings in the years to come.

CFP Ranking	School	WMA Ranking
1	Alabama	1
2	Oregon	14
3	Florida State	3
4	Ohio State	2
5	Baylor	36
6	TCU	33
7	Mississippi St	31
8	Michigan St	34
9	Mississippi	25
10	Arizona	56
11	Kansas State	87
12	Georgia Tech	66
13	Georgia	7
14	UCLA	22
15	Arizona St	53
16	Missouri	37
17	Clemson	12
18	Wisconsin	58
19	Auburn	4
20	Boise State	68
21	Louisville	38
22	Utah	41
23	LSU	5
24	USC	9
25	Minnesota	82

What the Results Mean

When the research results were computed, the test² indicated no statistical relationship between the WMA ranking and the CFP top 25.

In other words, just because your team recruits in the Top 25, it does not necessarily mean they will be Top 25 once the games are played.

Some football coaches would contend that this points to the inaccuracy and speculation of recruiting websites such as those used in this study. Others might say that it shows that the importance of great coaches on the field, and the impact of the successful development of the raw materials that a program might inherit through recruiting. The University of Minnesota, for example, can point to a relatively mediocre WMA recruiting ranking of 82, but an impressive ranking of 25 on the field where it counts.

Digging Deeper

What we have established through this study, and others conducted at Tudor Collegiate Strategies, is that there is not necessarily a link between what a Division I football program's recruiting class is ranked and what your team will be ranked in the polls.

However, the original question is, "Does recruiting make a difference in on-field success?"

Given that there are many factors that go into the final polls (teams move in and fall out of the polls fluidly over the course of the season, the opinion element of each committee member, etc.) determining a team's success by their ranking alone may be too broad.

To dig a little deeper, we conducted a follow-up study using the WMA with individual games to determine how accurate the actual game result was compared to what we expected based on recruiting (WMA).

To do this, 185 games were randomly selected from the 2014 college football season. Using WMA, the expected results of each game were based on recruiting; whichever team had the higher WMA was listed as the expected winner. This was compared against the actual result of the game.

What we found is that in a game-by-game situation, recruiting does give an advantage to the higher ranked team: 60% of the games went according to our expected results based on the WMA recruiting rankings.

Conclusion

Though it is logical to assume that there would be a relationship between the recruiting class rankings and the end of season rankings, given the evidence for FBS college football, we cannot statistically establish there is a consistent match. This means that a WMA recruiting ranking of Top 25 will not necessarily equal a ranking of Top 25 at the end of the season in the polls.

However, we can see that having better recruiting is a good indication of winning on an individual game level; there does appear to be a strong link between which team had the better recruiting, and which team wins the game.

We must recognize that other factors such as the quality of the coaching staff and the manner in which the team is assembled and developed also play critical roles in how the team performs.

Excellent recruiting alone cannot guarantee success; however, there does seem to be evidence to justify a fan base getting excited for recruiting day because chances are there will be a real impact on the future of the team, especially on a game-by-game basis.

Recruiting can still be viewed as the foundation for building a great program. But what a Division I football coach does with that talent after arriving on campus is going to determine the long-term success of the program in the years to come.

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About Tudor Collegiate Strategies

Tudor Collegiate Strategies is the nation's leading recruiting strategy and research organization, serving hundreds of coaching staffs and athletic departments every year.

TCS designs cutting-edge, customized recruiting communication plans to strategically address the recruiting needs from large Division I programs to small, private colleges.

For more information on how we help college coaches and the programs they lead, visit dantudor.com or email Dan Tudor, at dan@dantudor.com.



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Weights for WMA: 2011=36%, 2012=32%, 2013=23%, 2014=10%
(percentages may not equal 100% due to rounding)

² Wilcoxon Signed Rank Test: P Value=.0001, 95% confidence level