

Phil Steele: USF is a title contender

Alan Dell
USFBullsEYE.com Associate Editor

When Phil Steele puts his words into print, passionate conversation is generated. He has become arguably the most respected voice in the college football magazine prognostication business.

Steele loves a healthy Matt Grothe with added weapons in the backfield. It's one reason University of South Florida fans adore Steele right now and are rooting for him to continue his success in the crystal ball business of predicting college football.

Steele lists USF as his No. 5 surprise team for 2007. He labels the Bulls a darkhorse contender for the national title and says he won't be surprised if the Bulls play in a BCS Bowl and win the Big East Conference championship.

Chris Stassen (football.stassen.com) has kept track of college football magazines since 1993. He has Steele's magazine finishing first in the prediction-accuracy component of his survey in 2006, marking the third time in the past six years that Steele's publication finished atop the list. Over the past eight years, Stassen rates Steele's pre-season magazine the most accurate.

Consider this: Last season, he had Louisville as his number one surprise team. Take away a fourth quarter meltdown against Rutgers and the Cardinals would've been playing for the national championship.

Steele leaves little to chance. The Cleveland, Ohio resident uses a set of eight power ratings to rank each team and leaves few stones unturned.

If a team is leading an opponent by a bunch of points in the fourth quarter and its backup defense allows a touchdown or two, he doesn't allow it to affect the team's defensive rating. If a team is having its way on the ground and doesn't need to pass, he doesn't reward the opponent by upgrading its pass defense rating.

The 46-year-old says he works 365 days and does all the writing for all 119 football teams that play Division I-A football.

Among the five magazines rated the most accurate over the past eight years by Stassen, Steele is the only one who picks USF to finish third in the Big East ahead of Rutgers. Last year, he went against popular opinion when he picked favorite West Virginia to finish in a tie for second in the Big East, which it did.

Steele says USF has a legitimate shot to make it to the BCS title game. At one time, before he finished his rankings, he had the Bulls winning the Big East Championship.

He loves the Bulls defense and is the only one in Stassen's top five to have linebacker Tyrone McKenzie on the Big East pre-season first team. Steele rates USF's defense the best in the Big East.

"The first thing you think about with USF is its defense. I love the linebacking even though they lost Stephen Nicholas," Steele said. "They have Tyrone McKenzie. He started 12 games at Iowa State and had 129 tackles. I almost picked USF to finish first in the Big East, but when I threw the rest of the power ratings in the mix and looked at their schedule, I had to change.

"When I first do my ratings I don't take into consideration the schedule and every time I looked at USF I said 'wow.' I thought they could play in a BCS bowl. When I threw the schedule into my rankings, I backed off."

Steele believes USF has a good shot at beating Rutgers on the road and likes its chance to defeat what he considers a rebuilding Auburn team on the road the second week of the season. He says the Bulls' two biggest games of the season, Louisville and West Virginia, are at home.

Steele has no problem being the only magazine to pick USF ahead of Rutgers in the Big East. Though with their very soft non-conference schedule, he feels the Scarlet Knights could open the season at 6-0, he is not as impressed as others.

He notes Rutgers has just 13 returning starters, which is the second fewest in the league. He also points out that last year the New Jersey state university benefitted from a plus-11 in turnover ratio and had two net close wins, one coming in a 22-20 victory over USF.

He measures quality wins differently than other publications, many of which considered the Scarlet Knights' victory over undefeated Louisville last year a bench mark victory. He also notes that WVU quarterback Pat White did not play when it took the Mountaineers three overtimes to defeat Rutgers.

"I didn't see a huge quality win for Rutgers. They won at USF and Pitt, but neither of those strike me as huge wins," Steele said. "The Louisville game was tailor made for Rutgers. Louisville had just come off its biggest win in school history and generally there is no way your team can capture the emotion of the previous week in that situation. It was a tremendous situation for Rutgers. They had their biggest home crowd in history and they got Louisville's C game."

Steele believes the USF offense will be in a lot better shape this season. He likes its veteran offensive line, the fact that quarterback Matt Grothe goes into the season 100-percent healthy with an improved cast of running backs. Despite limitations last season, the Bulls out-gained their Big East opponents by 51.6 yards per game, which was third best in the conference behind WVU and Louisville.

"Mike Ford is part of the reason that USF is so improved at running back," Steele said. "He was our 46th best running back coming out of high school. The whole thing comes down to his attitude. He could be one of the top backs in the Big East."

Steele rates USF's defense as the best in the Big East and its defensive backfield as the 13th best in the country. He is the only magazine among the top five to have cornerback Mike Jenkins on the Big East pre-season first team.

Steele On Turnovers . . .

Every football coach at any level says turnovers are critical. Steele devotes an entire page to the subject and says they often leave fans with misleading information about a team.

A few examples:

Kansas loses at Toledo last year and then defeats USF. (Not a surprise, Steele says, because Kansas had five turnovers at Toledo and was a lot better than advertised.

Hawaii had the NCAA's largest single season turn-around, going from 0-12 in 1998 to 9-4 in 1999. Not surprisingly, its turnover margin when from a minus-10 to a plus-1. USF had a minus-10 turnover ratio in 2004 when it went 4-7. It had a plus-5 the next year in a 6-5 season.

Rutgers had a plus-11 turnover margin last year, which tied for ninth best in the country.

What to know about turnovers: . . .

Good fortune rarely repeats from year to year, according to Steele. He notes: Teams with a positive double-digit turnover ratio had a weaker or the same records the next season 77-percent of the time since 1996. Teams with a negative double-digit TO ratio had stronger or the same records 79-percent of the time since 1996.