



NFL

BEST BET

*INDIANAPOLIS (-1) over CHICAGO

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 22 – “Right now, we’ve got a young quarterback, and no matter what team you’re on, there’s going to be times when the offense needs to stand up and the defense needs to stand up throughout the season. But I do think when you have a young quarterback, more times than not the defense has to stand up and they’ve got to buy some time for him to get experience and be able to execute at a high level.”

That wasn’t the Bears’ locker room talking about their rookie QB, first overall draft pick with the 4.0 YPA, yet to throw a TD pass. That was the Colts, and defensive coordinator Gus Bradley. Bradley was the first defensive coordinator to hook the Ravens with Lamar Jackson quarterbacking in a playoff game (for the San Diego Chargers). He made Jackson look the fool, when he’d been on a roll in the second half of the regular season. Bradley no doubt has gone to his library, preparing to put out some looks to lay Caleb Williams bare like they did to Lamar.

Before Bradley does this, he may want to have a talk with his head coach who also calls the plays, who is 19 years younger than Bradley. Shane Steichen asked his own young QB, Anthony Richardson, about five games into his NFL career, to drop back 36 times at Green Bay when they only had the football for 20 minutes. Duh. The running back the Colts re-signed to a 3-year, \$42 million contract a year ago, Jonathan Taylor, didn’t see the field in the fourth quarter despite rushing for 12-109 in only 7 possessions before that. Call a smarter game, coach!

For whatever he may eventually be worth to the Bears, WR Keenan Allen again didn’t practice Wednesday or Thursday. INDIANAPOLIS, 26-12.

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RECOMMENDED TOTAL

UNDER 35.5

LA CHARGERS at PITTSBURGH

SUNDAY, SEPTEMBER 22 – We’re 2-for-2 on Steelers Unders. Their scores have been:

18-10 at Atlanta
13-3 at Denver

The Chargers have played two Unders as well. Their scores have been:

22-10 vs. Las Vegas
26-3 vs. Carolina

So, 28, 16, 32 and 29 points are lesser totals than 35.5. Tell us why we shouldn’t go right back with an Under on a Steelers game when they’ve run the ball 41 times against Atlanta and 36 times at Denver, Justin Fields still figures to be their quarterback, Arthur Smith is still calling the plays (probably with a mandate from coach Tomlin to stay grounded with Fields or else he’ll hit him in the head), and Jim Harbaugh coaches the other side? The Steelers messed with their identity when they put Big Ben in shotgun, kept throwing the ball, then drafted Kenny Pickett and tried to make a destined NFL failure their “franchise QB.” It helped ruin their defense. They’re back to basics for now. So are the Chargers, because Harbaugh understands that a highly touted quarterback is only as good as the defense and running game, because football is a team sport that commands complementary philosophy which must include ball-control and slower tempo when your QB lacks game-breaking wideouts. Great minds think alike. LA CHARGERS, 17-10.

COLLEGE FOOTBALL

BEST BET

ARKANSAS (+3.5) over *AUBURN

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 21 – Seems like freshman Hank Brown will remain at quarterback for Auburn, not that Payton Thorne is a guy to be feared if Hugh Freeze wants to go back to him. Thorne didn’t do much in Auburn’s 48-10 win at Arkansas last season, passing 12-for-20 in a game where Auburn ran it 55 times for 354 yards.

Arkansas didn’t do much in that game, either!

It was a strange no-show for the Razorbacks, all the better for a revenge spot. The blowout loss may have had something to do with having no gas left in the tank. They were coming into that game off an overtime win at Florida that had snapped a six-game losing streak. Five of the losses in that span were by 7 points or fewer. QB K.J. Jefferson was playing hurt, trying to be there for the team as it en-

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COLLEGE FOOTBALL

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tered the game with a 3-6 record, still in contention to make a bowl game. But he was a dual-threatener who couldn't run and was a sitting duck as soon as Auburn started running all over the tired-out and banged-up Arkansas defense.

What a difference a year makes, we hope. Arkansas' running attack couldn't break through paper last season. It totaled only 9 rushing TDs in 12 games. Yow. For a team coached by Sudden Sam Pittman, legendary offensive line-focused and "run the ball!" person, that was very out of character. Pittman fired offensive coordinator Dan Enos following the sixth straight loss and they up and beat Florida in the first game with the interim dude. But the bump-up was followed by the setback vs. Auburn.

Bobby Petrino is the new offensive coordinator. After three games, Arkansas has 15 rushing TDs, which leads the nation. They have six more rushing TDs after three games, than they had in 12 games last year. Quite the improvement, eh? Says Freeze, about the Razorbacks: "The O-line is probably the most improved unit that I've seen this year with the guys they've brought in from the portal. They're really, really improved in the offensive line." They also got a new, experienced running back from Utah, Ja'Quinden Jackson, who was the Utes' leading rusher last season running against stacked boxes in the absence of QB Cam Rising. Dual-threat QB Taylen Greene from Boise State is also chewing up yardage and has 6 rushing TDs.

Arkansas' defensive coordinator, Travis Williams, played linebacker at Auburn and spent six years on the Auburn staff, the last two (2019, 2020) as co-defensive coordinator. He'll be danged if his unit – going on fumes when they met Auburn last season – is gashed on the ground by Auburn like it was late last season. Auburn observers, in addition to wondering aloud about "what's wrong with our defense?!", are aware that, "It's gonna move faster for Hank Brown" than it did in his one start vs. New Mexico last week. "Freeze is gonna try to give Hank some easy throws early... Travis knows that, so they're probably gonna play a lot of jump and trap coverage early to take away the short and intermediate game..." ARKANSAS, 33-23.

RECOMMENDED

RUTGERS (+3.5) over *VIRGINIA TECH

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 21 – Va. Tech is on a 0-7 SU run playing outside the ACC against a Power-4 or 5 conference opponent. The Hokies' last win against one of these types was in Week 1 of the 2017 season, 31-24 against West Virginia. Since then, they've lost outright vs. Notre Dame, to Kentucky in a bowl game, at West Virginia, vs. Notre Dame again, to Maryland in a bowl game, vs. West Virginia, vs. Purdue and at Rutgers. With that negative history, they're charged with winning this game outright by more than a field goal. Seems counterintuitive.

Va. Tech head coach Brent Pry thinks his team is much more prepared to play against Rutgers than it was prior to last season's 35-19 defeat. But – ah, there's always a but, eh? – "Are we better equipped and better prepared? Yes, but Rutgers has a bunch of returners. They're strong and physical, with linebackers at 6'5", 250 pounds. This is a traditional Big 10 group, both offensively and defensively."

Rutgers' offensive coordinator Kirk Ciarocca got there last season after spending a season with Rutgers' current starting QB as OC/QB coach at Minnesota. In the off-season, he pilfered Athan Kaliakmanis to come play for him at Rutgers. Last week, we boo-boomed picking an ACC team (Virginia) over a Big Ten team (Maryland). We want redemption. RUTGERS, 23-17.

BEST BET TOTAL

UNDER 57.5

TENNESSEE at OKLAHOMA

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 21 – Game within a game here. Tennessee head coach/play-caller Josh Heupel played quarterback at Oklahoma when current head coach Brent Venables was the Sooners' defensive coordinator. Tennessee's offense has been running up points, but two of the games were against the defenses of Chattanooga and Kent State, so we're gonna throw 'em right out. Yes, they scored 51 points vs. NC State. But many of the Vols' second-half points in that game were on easy set-ups after turnovers and failed fourth down tries by the NC State offense. In the first half, NC State had forced Tennessee to be patient. The Vols scored one offensive TD in the first half, at the end of a 4:10 drive. Their other TD was on a Pick Six. In the second half, Tennessee took the kickoff and scored at the end of a 4:33 drive. Four of their next five scores were on drives that began in NC State territory.

With home field, a loud home crowd, experience on defense at all three levels, and a defensive-minded head coach looking at an opposing redshirt freshman QB in his first true road game vs. a power-conference opponent, we gotta believe that Venables' D will do a decent containment job and if Tennessee is meant to score, it won't be overly quickly. Jeff Lebby was Venables' OC at Oklahoma before leaving to be head coach at Mississippi State this season and he tends to run the same kind of offense as Heupel. They pretty much know what's coming and how. Meanwhile, Tennessee's D is no slouch and has good depth. NC State gained 149 total yards against it.

Now, how do you compete with Tennessee's offense when your own unit has gained only 378, 249 and 349 yards against Temple, Houston and Tulane? Snap it every 35 seconds and grind out some first downs! TENNESSEE, 23-20.

RECOMMENDED TOTAL

OVER 58.5

TCU at SMU

SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 21 – SMU is getting props for its defense. But their two FBS-level games have come against plodding offenses. Nevada snaps the ball once every 30.7 seconds; BYU once every 29.2 seconds. TCU is comfy-cozy getting to the line and snapping it in its customary hurry, 23.4 seconds in between snaps. The Horned Frogs have already scored 34 points twice against their two FCS-level opponents, Stanford and UCF.

TCU struggled to stop UCF's running attack, which ripped off 54-289 on the ground with running QB K.J. Jefferson getting 9-46. Against Stanford, Cardinal QB Ashton Daniels was 17-87 with his legs. SMU head coach Rhett Lashlee has assessed his QB situation and it appears he'll be going with the runnin' QB for now, Kevin Jennings. The offensive line's pass-blocking has not been holding up for the better passer, Preston Stone. Nothin' worse for a hurry-up offense than to go three-and-out, three-and-out, interception early, as the SMU offense has been doing with Stone. Better to let the offense get into a flow using the style that TCU has shown some susceptibility against. TCU, 37-31.

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