

# Utah rises one spot in The Athletic's college football preseason Top 25

By STEWART MANDEL  
The Athletic

The last of the high-profile spring transfer portal entrants have found new homes. Coaches are turning their attention to recruiting visits. And the video game is almost here.

Time for my 2024 preseason Top 25, version 3.0.

**1. Georgia (Previous rank: 1)**  
News flash: Georgia is still loaded. Carson Beck, who threw 45 passes in the Bulldogs' spring game, should be one of the best quarterbacks in the country, playing behind a dominant offensive line. Former Miami receiver Colbie Young looks like a nice addition alongside Dominic Lovett, Dillon Bell and Rara Thomas. The defense will be fast, hungry and brimming with experienced veterans like safety Malaki Starks and linebacker Smael Mondon. Rising sophomore linebacker CJ Allen stood out in the spring game.

**2. Ohio State (Previous: 2)**  
Ohio State has assembled a de facto all-star team, retaining high-end draft prospects like receiver Emeka Egbuka, running back Trevyn Henderson and defensive end JT Tuimolaau and Jack Sawyer while adding the likes of former Ole Miss running back Quinshon Jenkins and former Alabama safety Caleb Downs through the transfer portal. Freshman wideout Jeremiah Smith, the nation's No. 1 recruit, already looked the part in his first spring. But I can't rank the Buckeyes No. 1 due to an unsettled quarterback competition between Kansas State transfer Will Howard and returnee Devin Brown, plus a couple of questions on the offensive line.

**3. Texas (Previous: 3)**  
Quinn Ewers has a new set of targets from the transfer portal in Isaiah Bond (Alabama), Silas Bolden (Oregon State) and Matthew Golden (Houston). Rising sophomore DeAndre Moore Jr. opened the spring game with a 75-yard catch. All-America tackle Kelvin Banks leads a strong offensive line, and Steve Sarkisian moved this spring about the team's pass rushers, led by UTSA transfer Trey Moore (4 sacks last season). The biggest question remains the secondary, which struggled in last year's College Football Playoff semifinal and in the spring game.

**4. Alabama (Previous: 5)**  
I overcorrected after Nick Saban's retirement. If anything, the Tide should be better than last season. Quarterback Jalen Milroe is more established and will be playing in new coach Kal DeBoer's creative offense. Running backs Jam Miller and Justice Haynes should be a solid 1-2 tandem, former Washington receiver Carmie Bernard and center Parker Brailford were big additions, and tackle Kaden Proctor is back after all. The front seven looks strong, and DeBoer went hard at defensive backs in the portal, notably former Michigan safety Keon Sabb and former USC cornerback Domani Jackson.

**5. Oregon (Previous: 4)**  
The Ducks look like the Big Ten's best team not named Ohio State. Oklahoma transfer Dillon Gabriel was unsurprisingly sharp in the spring game, with Ter Johnson and Texas A&M transfer Evan Stewart his top targets. Running back Jay Harris (Northwest Missouri State) could be a nice complement to Jordan James. Houston transfer defensive tackle Jamaree Caldwell looked the part in the spring, as did several young defensive linemen. Washington transfer cornerback Jabbar Muhammad was a big addition in the secondary.

**6. Ole Miss (Previous: 5)**  
You know what to expect on offense with quarterback Jaxson Dart, running back Ulysses Bentley IV and receivers Tre Harris and Jordan Watkins. Washington transfers Nate Kalepo and Julius Buehler upgraded the offensive line. Lane Kiffin pledged to improve his defense via the portal, and he just keeps adding. He recently landed former Jacksonville State defensive end Chris Hardie, who led Conference USA with 8.5 sacks last season. Hardie joins returnees Jared Ivey and JJ Pagues. Texas A&M transfer Walter Nolen and Florida transfer Princely Unammielen, among others.

**7. Notre Dame (Previous: 8)**  
Proven quarterback Riley



Quarterback Cam Rising participates in Utah football practice on March 12. Rising's return from a knee injury has raised optimism about the Utes' upcoming season, their first in the Big 12 Conference.

Leonard (Duke) could thrive with new offensive coordinator Mike Denbrock's run game. Rising sophomore Jeremiah Love is ready to be the lead back, and the Irish should be better at receiver with the addition of Kris Mitchell (Ft. Butte) but it won't be easy replacing offensive tackles Joe Alt and Blake Fisher. Defensive tackles Howard Cross II and Rylie Mills, linebacker Jack Kiser, safety Xavier Watts and cornerback Benjamin Morrison return from last year's defense that ranked fifth nationally in yards per play. Early enrollee linebacker Kyngston Vilami-Asa worked in the spring game.

**8. Utah (Previous: 9)**  
After missing all of last season, seventh-year quarterback Cam Rising looked even better than before in Utah's spring game. He has weapons to throw to in Dorian Singer (Arizona), Mike Parks and three-time All-Pac-12 tight end Brant Kuithe, also back from injury. Linebackers Lander Burton and Karene Reid and cornerback Zemaiah Vaughn are proven veterans. The Utes will need new faces to emerge in the secondary, including transfer cornerbacks Kenan Johnson (Georgia Tech) and Cameron Calhoun (Michigan).

**9. Michigan (Previous: 8)**  
The defending champion Wolverines should be stout again on defense, led by three projected first-rounders in defensive tackles Mason Graham and Kenneth Grant and cornerback Will Johnson. Former Maryland linebacker Jaishawn Barham figures to be a starter. Michigan's quarterback picture remains murky, with senior and former walk-on Davis Warren pushing sophomore Alex Orji. The offense line is a question as well. But new coach Sherrill Moore knows what he has in star running back Donovan Edwards and tight end Colton Loveland. Sophomore receiver Fredrick Moore shined in the spring game.

**10. Florida State (Previous: 14)**  
Mike Norvell again will rely heavily on the portal, starting with quarterback DJ Ugalde (Clemson, Oregon State). A pair of Alabama transfers, wide receiver Malik Benson and running back Roydell Williams, shined in the spring, and Georgia transfer Marvin Jones Jr. looks like FSU's next great pass rusher. The secondary should be a strength with cornerbacks Trentell Cypress II and Azareye'h Thomas, but the defense as a whole will be inexperienced.

**11. Oklahoma State (Previous: 10)**  
Coming off a surprise 10-win season, the Cowboys rank No. 4 nationally in returning production, per ESPN's Bill Connelly, highlighted by quarterback Alan Bowman, Doak Walker winner Ollie Gordon II and the entire offensive line. Linebackers Nick Martin and Collin Oliver headline a defense that's high on career starts but finished 123rd in yards per play last season (6.5). Mike Gundy must be confident in the group, as he brought in a few transfers.

**12. Missouri (Previous: 12)**  
Quarterback Brady Cook and receivers Luther Burden III and Theo Wease are all back from an 11-win team. Transfer running backs Marcus Carroll (Georgia

State) and Nate Noel (Appalachian State) look to fill the void left by All-American Corey Schrader. Eli Drinkwitz boosted the offensive line with the addition of All-AAC tackle Marcus Bryant from SMU. The defense lost several top players but added former Florida defensive back Chris McCellan, former Michigan State end Zion Young and former Clemson cornerback Toriano Pride.

**13. Arizona (Previous: 13)**  
New coach Brent Brennan managed to retain most of the Wildcats' key cogs, including quarterback Noah Filia, wideout Tetairoa McMillan and four offensive line starters. Bunting back remains a question. Standout cornerback Taccari Davis, who withdrew from the portal after spring ball, joins Gunner Maldonado and Dalton Johnson in a strong secondary. Arizona will count on linebackers Jacob Mann and Justin Flowe, but its defensive line may be light on experience.

**14. Miami (Previous: 25)**  
Miami dramatically remade its lineup via the portal. Washington State transfer quarterback Cam Ward is the centerpiece, but All-Pac-12 running back Damien Martinez (Oregon State), former Houston receiver Sam Brown and former Tennessee pass rusher Tyler Baron all pledged in the spring. Brown joins Xavier Restrepo and Jacoby George at receiver. Baron will bookend star Rueben Bain on the defensive front. Former Washington safety Michael Powell will be a big hit, but the secondary may still have holes.

**15. Kansas State (Previous: Unranked)**  
I have no idea why I had K-State so low. Sophomore Avery Johnson

could be one of the best dual-threat quarterbacks in the country. Running back DJ Giddens returns, and Chris Kleiman added Colorado's leading rusher Dylan Edwards in the spring. Penn State transfer wideout Dante Cephas is intriguing. The offensive line is a concern, although North Dakota tackle Easton Kilty was a touted add. An experienced defensive line should be a strength, with the defense's questions coming on the back end.

**16. Tennessee (Previous: 17)**  
Excitement is building for the Nico Iamaleava era. In addition to returning receivers Bru McCoy and Squirrel White, five-star freshman Mike Matthews and former Tulane star Chris Brizzell II flashed in the spring. Running back depth is a concern. All-SEC defensive end James Pearce Jr. leads an experienced front, and cornerback Jermond McCoy (Oregon State) and safety Jakobe Thomas (Middle Tennessee) helped plug holes in the secondary.

**17. Penn State (Previous: 16)**  
Creative offensive coordinator Andy Kotelnicki, formerly at Kansas, looks to get more out of quarterback Drew Allar. Leading receiver KeAndre Lambert-Smith left in the spring for Auburn, so Harrison Wallace III and former Ohio State receiver Julian Fleming need to take over. Wisconsin transfer tackle Nolan Rucci steps on the offensive line. Star Abdul Carter has moved from linebacker to end in defensive coordinator Tom Allen's 4-2-5 scheme. Georgia transfer cornerback A.J. Harris should make an impact.

**18. Louisville (Previous: 11)**  
After initially leading up in the portal, Jeff Brohm saw considerable attrition in the spring.

including winter transfer pickups Tyler Baron and running back Penny Boone (Toledo). Much of the Cards' lineup will be newcomers, led by quarterback Tyler Shough (Texas Tech), running back Donald Chaney Jr. (Miami) and wide receiver Ja'Corey Brooks (Alabama). First-team All-ACC defensive end Ashton Gillette and ex-Harvard defensive tackle Thor Griffith lead a strong defensive line. The secondary could be a concern.

**19. Oklahoma (Previous: 15)**  
Expectations are high for sophomore quarterback Jackson Arnold. Purdue transfer wideout Deion Burks dazzled in OU's spring game (five catches, 174 yards, two TDs), adding to an already deep receiving corps. But the offensive line, which lost four starters (three to the NFL Draft), remained a big concern coming out of spring. Star linebacker Danny Stutsman, defensive end Echon Downs and safety Billy Bowman lead an experienced defense that must improve from 54th nationally in yards per play.

**20. Kansas (Previous: 18)**  
Coming off nine wins, KU should earn its first preseason ranking in 15 years. Star quarterback Jalyn Daniels is healthy, and the Jayhawks' top two running backs (Devyn Neal and Daniel Hishaw Jr.) are defensive receivers (Lawrence Arnold, Quinton Skinner and Luke Grimm) All return. Cornerbacks Cobee Bryant and Mello Danton are proven players on a defense that has behind the offense. North Dakota State transfer defensive tackle Javier Derritt could make an impact.

**21. NC State (Previous: 23)**  
Dave Doeren has the makings of a special offense, led by standout Coastal Carolina transfer quarterback Grayson McCall. All-ACC receiver KC Concepcion and transfer player like running back Jordan Waters (Duke), receiver Wesley Grimes (Wake Forest) and receiver Noah Rogers (Ohio State). Former Notre Dame center Zeke Correll fills the only vacant starting job up front. The defense could take a step back without standouts Payton Wilson and Shyheim Battle.

**22. Clemson (Previous: 19)**  
Dabo Swinney's program was the only non-service academy to take zero transfers. Running back Phil Mafah emerged as a star last season, but new offensive line coach Matt Lake needs to shore up the protection for quarterback Cade Klubnik. Getting back the receiver Antonio Williams from injury is a boost. Linebacker Barrett Carter is a proven stand-out, and T.J. Parker and Peter Woods lead a respectable defensive line.

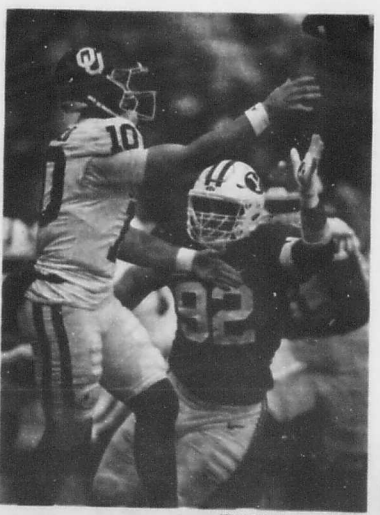
**23. Texas A&M (Previous: 21)**  
Mike Elko and offensive coordinator Collin Klein should get more out of the Aggies' offense. That starts with quarterback Connor Wiseman, running back Vonn Moss and the receivers. Former Purdue defensive end Nic Scourton, last year's Big Ten sack leader, was dominant in the spring game. He joins tackle Shemar Turner on a strong defensive line. Linebackers Taurien York and Scooby Williams (Florida transfer) look the part. The offensive line and secondaries may be works in progress.

**24. Iowa (Previous: 22)**  
The Hawkeyes rank in Connelly's top 10 in returning production (although there wasn't much offensive production to start with). New offensive coordinator Tim Lester has installed a brand new scheme. Kirk Ferentz brought in former Northwestern quarterback Brennan Sullivan, but Cade McNamara remains the starter. Iowa should feel set on another stout defense, led by All-America linebacker Jay Higgins, defensive end Deonte Craig, defensive tackle Yaba Black and defensive back Sebastian Castro.

**25. Virginia Tech (Previous: NR)**

Sleeper alert: The Hokies improved from three wins to seven in Brent Pry's second season and bring back 19 starters. Dual-threat quarterback Kyren Dymally and running back Bryce Young lead an explosive rushing attack and DaQuan Felton is a big play receiver. The offensive line needs to show progress. The defense quickly finished 28th nationally in 2023. Defensive end Antwan Fordell Jr. and cornerback Davion Strickland earned All-ACC honors.

**Just missed:** LSU, Iowa State, Wisconsin, Kentucky, West Virginia.



Oklahoma quarterback Jackson Arnold, left, passes under pressure from BYU defensive end Tyler Betty during a game on Nov. 18, 2023.