



National Football Rankings - Frequently Asked Questions

These rankings are designed to be objective and consistent. Every team in the country is measured the same way, using what happens on the field, and once the season is underway no vote, committee, or reputation decides where a team lands - only games, schedules, and results.

Before the season begins, every team is given a preseason position. That starting point comes from editorial input, informed by the prior season's performance and returning student-athletes. It matters less with each game a team plays, and once a team has played four games the preseason ranking is no longer a factor at all; the rating is then driven entirely by the team's own results for that season and the strength of its schedule. A preseason ranking never locks a team in or out. It simply gives the season somewhere to begin, and the field takes over from there.

This guide explains, in plain language, how all of that works and why the rankings can be trusted to treat every team fairly.

How are the rankings produced?

Every high school football game in the country is part of a single connected network. When two teams play, that game tells us something about their relative strength. When their opponents play other teams, those games tell us something about the wider competitive landscape. The rankings analyze the full season's worth of games and produce a national rating for every team.

The system is primarily data-driven from game results. Editorial input is used in just one place: to set each team's preseason starting position before any games are played, drawing on the prior season and returning student-athletes. That starting point helps steady the earliest-season ratings, but its influence shrinks with every game and drops off entirely well before postseason seedings. There are no in-season votes or committees that adjust rankings once the season is underway.

A team's strength is earned on the field. It comes from who a team played and how it did, not from the size or classification of the school. Every team, from the smallest school to the largest, is measured on the same national scale. Classification is never used to raise or lower a rating; it enters only to keep comparisons fair (for example, schedule-strength expectations) and to organize the published lists into national, state, and by-classification views.

How often are the rankings updated?

Twice a week throughout the season. Each weekly update is published at the start of the week, after the previous week's games have been recorded, and it reflects every game played to that point in the season. Before the season begins, a preseason edition gives each team a starting position.

Each update is a complete re-ranking, not an adjustment to the previous week's list. Every team is re-evaluated from scratch on the full body of games played to date, so a team's spot is never locked in from one week to the next. Winning does not automatically hold or raise a team's ranking, and a team can move down even after a win if the wider picture around it shifts. Each update is based only on games that have actually been played, and results are never added in after the fact.

What information goes into the rankings?

Only objective, on-field inputs, applied the same way to every team in the country:

- **Game results** - who played whom, who won, who lost, and the final score.
- **Margin of victory** - how much a team won by, with diminishing returns past a clear-win ceiling (see How does margin of victory affect the rankings?).
- **Strength of schedule** - how strong every opponent proved to be, including out-of-state opponents (see How is strength of schedule reflected? and How are out-of-state games handled?).
- **Timing and type of each game** - the date of the game and whether it was regular season or playoff (see How are playoff games weighted?).
- **Playoff results** - bracket placement and how far each team advanced.

The rankings are driven overwhelmingly by what happens on the field: who you played, how you did, and how strong your opponents proved to be. (Before a team has played enough games to be judged on results alone, the preseason starting point described above provides a sensible estimate; that influence fades quickly as real games come in.)

What does NOT go into the rankings?

The rankings are built from what happens on the field, and the same rules apply to every team. The following do not drive a team's rating:

- Reputation or program history
- Geography
- Enrollment
- Classification, League, Region or Division
- In-season polls, votes, or committee opinions
- Coach or media polls
- Booster support or local popularity

No team is rewarded or penalized for who it is, only for who it played and how it did. A school's enrollment or classification is never used to inflate or discount its strength.

How does the system decide who's better when teams haven't played?

Through shared opponents. Even two teams that have never met can be compared, because the games that connect them carry the information. If Team A beat Team C and Team B lost to Team D, and Team C and Team D played each other, the system uses that connection to estimate how Team A and Team B compare. This kind of indirect connection runs through the entire national schedule, and the system traces it the same way for every team, and no human decides which teams to compare or steps in to favor one. By season's end, almost every team is connected to every other team through a chain of shared opponents.

How is the strength of schedule reflected?

Who you play matters as much as whether you win. Beating a strong team counts for more than beating a weak team, and losing to a strong team is treated very differently from losing to a weak team.

Because of this, a team cannot climb simply by stacking up wins against light competition. An easy schedule is discounted, while wins over genuinely strong opponents earn extra credit. Two teams with identical records can land in very different places if one faced a much tougher slate.

Strength of schedule is measured from how good a team's opponents actually are, and every opponent is re-evaluated each week as the season unfolds. So, a win over a team that turns out to be strong is credited as the quality win it proved to be. The same standard is applied to every team automatically, with no human discretion in how a schedule is weighed.

How is strength of schedule calculated?

- **Opponents are measured by their rating, not their record.** Many traditional systems (like RPI) judge a schedule by opponents' winning percentage. That treats an 8-2 team from a weak region the same as an 8-2 team that survived a brutal slate. Here, every opponent carries its own national rating, built from who *they* played and how *they* did, and that is what your schedule is measured against.
- **Strength flows through the network.** An opponent's rating already reflects the strength of *their* opponents, and so on outward through the national schedule. So the quality of a win is judged against the whole connected picture, not just one team's record.
- **It is re-evaluated every week, in hindsight.** Schedules are never frozen at the time a game is played. If a team you beat in September turns out to be a November

powerhouse, that win is re-credited as the quality win it proved to be. The reverse is also true.

- **It works in both directions.** Wins over strong opponents earn extra credit, and a consistently soft schedule is discounted, no matter the record. This is why a team cannot climb by stacking wins against light competition.
- **Every game counts, including out-of-state games**, and the calculation is automatic and identical for every team in the country, with no human discretion.

How are out-of-state games handled?

The same way as in-state games. The rankings are national, so a Texas team's win over a Florida team contributes to both teams' ratings just like any other game. Teams that play across state lines help connect different regions of the country in the rankings.

What happens with forfeits?

Forfeit games are set aside and do not affect either team's rating. A forfeit is an administrative outcome rather than a contest decided on the field, and often there is no true final score to work from, so it's not treated as a scored win or loss when measuring how strong a team is. For the same reason, a forfeit is not used to judge strength of schedule or to credit a quality win. This is handled automatically and the same way for every team.

How does margin of victory affect the rankings?

Winning by a large margin is treated as evidence of strength, but the system does not reward running up the score. Margin of victory is capped, so a team cannot climb the rankings simply by piling on points in games that are already decided. The same rule applies to every team and every game.

Why might a team with more wins rank below a team with fewer wins?

Strength of schedule. A 12-1 team that beat mostly weak opponents may rank below a 9-3 team that played a national-caliber schedule and lost three close games to top-ranked opponents. The rankings measure how strong each team is, not how often they won, and that same standard is applied identically to every team in the country.

Why might the rankings differ from editorial rankings or polls?

The rankings and editorial rankings or polls are answering slightly different questions, so some differences are normal and expected.

The rankings' job is to measure, as consistently as possible, how strong each team is based on the season's games (who they played, who won, and by how much), applying that same standard to every team in the country. There are no in-season votes, committees, or reputations tipping the scale; every team is held to the same results-driven yardstick.

Editorial rankings and media or coaches' polls reflect human judgment about the same season, and they may weigh things a numbers-based view doesn't fully capture, such as program history, a marquee result, or how a team looked in a given game. (The rankings do use expert judgment in one narrow, transparent way: a sensible preseason starting point before games are played. But that influence fades quickly as real results come in.)

So when the rankings and a poll agree, it's a good sign both are reading the season the same way. When they differ, it usually isn't that one is right and the other wrong. They're emphasizing different things, and that contrast can be a useful reference point for editors, coaches, and state staff.

Can a team game the system by scheduling weak opponents?

No. A team that schedules only weak opponents will rank below its record, because the system recognizes that easy wins say less about a team's strength than hard-fought games against strong competition. Strength of schedule is judged from who a team actually played, so a soft schedule pulls a rating down no matter how many of those games the team won. The flip side matters just as much: beating genuinely strong opponents earns real credit. A team gets ahead by playing and beating good teams, not by padding its record against weak ones.

Why do rankings change week to week even when a team didn't play?

Because every team's rating depends on the strength of the opponents it has already played, and those opponents keep playing their own games each week. When a team's past opponents win or lose, that updates how strong its schedule looks, which can nudge its rating up or down even in a week it doesn't take the field.

A bye week is never treated as a loss. A team that doesn't play simply holds its own results; any movement comes only from the rest of the national schedule continuing to play out around it.

What's the minimum number of games to be ranked?

There isn't one. Every eligible team appears in the rankings, including teams that have not yet played. Before a team takes the field, its position reflects a preseason assessment that gives every team a sensible starting point, and there is even a preseason edition published before any games begin.

Once games start, on-field results progressively take over. As a team plays its first games, its ranking shifts away from the preseason starting point and toward what its results and schedule actually say; once it has played four games, the preseason influence is gone entirely and the ranking is driven purely by what happens on the field for that season. The same rule applies to every team, so a high preseason ranking is only a starting point. It has to be earned on the field, and it fades quickly if results don't back it up.

Naturally, a rating becomes more reliable as the season produces more game evidence, so early-season positions are less settled than late-season ones.

How is this different from a simple power rating?

Simple power ratings typically look only at win-loss records and average opponents. The MaxPreps system uses the full season-long network of games, evaluates teams against the entire connected national schedule, and accounts for the timing and context of each result (regular season vs. playoff, early-season vs. late-season). The output is a single national rating that allows direct comparison between teams across states, divisions, and conferences.

How are playoff games weighted?

Playoff games count, and they count more than regular-season games. But the adjustment isn't just "win = good." It's about **how you did versus what was expected**:

- **Win when you were supposed to win?** Your rating barely moves. That's the expected outcome.
- **Pull an upset, or go deeper than your seed suggested?** You move up more.
- **Lose?** It depends *how* and *to whom*. Losing to an eventual powerhouse late in a tough playoff run costs you very little. An early exit you should have avoided costs you more.
- **Win a championship?** That can only ever help you, never hurt.

We also look at how the team that knocked you out did *afterward*. Losing to the eventual champion looks a lot better in hindsight than losing to a team that promptly flamed out, and the rating reflects that.