

TULANE FOOTBALL PREDICTIONS—2010

Tulane's football season in 2009 was basically a repetition of the 2008 season. The seasons were similar in several respects. In both seasons, the Wave started fairly well—Tulane had a record of two wins and two losses after its first four games. However, the Green Wave had very little success after that. In 2008, Tulane lost its last eight games; in 2009, the Greenies lost seven out of their last eight games. The Wave has managed to win only five of its last twenty-four games.

Losing is bad enough, but to make matters worse, many of the losses in 2008 and 2009 were lopsided. It is one thing to lose to an elite team by a wide margin. It is quite another to surrender points in bunches to mediocre teams week after week.

However, Tulane's losses were not solely the fault of the defense. In both 2008 and 2009, Tulane's offense struggled to score points. All too often, the Wave moved the ball into the "red zone," i.e., inside the opponent's twenty-yard line, and came away without scoring a touchdown or even a field goal. And in both seasons, special teams play was woeful. Tulane experienced virtually every misfortune that can happen to a team in kicking or punting situations.

In light of the way things have gone lately, it is not surprising that the preseason magazines and other sources of information relating to college football have been less than encouraging about the outlook for Tulane this season.

In contrast, Tulane's coach, Bob Toledo, has been very optimistic, much more optimistic than he has been in prior years. Toledo, who is beginning his fourth season at Tulane, has stated flatly that this year's team is the best he has had at Tulane, that it is much deeper than it has been in the past, and that his players are bigger, stronger and faster than they have been in previous seasons.

Time will tell if Coach Toledo's optimism is justified. However, there is no doubt that he and his staff have worked hard to build a successful football program at Tulane. It appears that Tulane's recruiting classes have gotten progressively better each year during the Toledo era, and that there are more good players on the team now than there were when Coach Toledo arrived at Tulane.

On offense, the starting quarterback is Ryan Griffin. Griffin became the starter midway through last season, and he maintained that status throughout spring practice. He does not have a cannon for an arm, but he is an accurate passer. He is also cool under fire. Last year, against UTEP, he led the Green Wave on a lengthy drive that resulted in a touchdown that tied the score as time ran out. He then directed the offense to a touchdown that won the game in overtime.

Tulane must replace last year's main playmakers, running back Andre Anderson and wide receiver Jeremy Williams, both of whom are currently trying to make NFL teams. Right now, it appears that several players will share the task of running with the football. Albert Williams, who showed flashes of brilliance as a freshman in 2008, looks to be the starter. In addition, the coaches are very high on freshman Orleans Darkwa, who has been impressive in practice at the running back position and as a kick returner. Payten Jason, who looked very good as a freshman last season before he suffered a serious knee injury, has been able to practice with the team. If he is fully recovered, he could give a big boost to Tulane's running attack.

At wide receiver, the leader is Casey Robottom, who is very sure-handed. The Green Wave will use a three wide-receiver formation frequently this season, so a number of players in addition to Robottom will have a chance to play. These include Ryan Grant and D.J. Banks, who are talented, but do not have a great deal of experience.

On the offensive line, most of the starters are veterans. The line is anchored by a pair of seniors, center/guard Andrew Nierman, one of the Green Wave's co-captains, and tackle Pete Hendrickson. Hendrickson, who is six feet, eight inches tall, and weighs over three hundred pounds, has attracted the attention of pro scouts.

Tulane's defense has been bolstered by the addition of two transfers, middle linebacker Trent Mackey and end Dezman Moses. The secondary may be the strongest area of the team. It includes co-captains Alex Wacha, a safety, and Phillip Davis, a cornerback, as well as Shakiel Smith, who played well last year as a freshman.

If Tulane continues to be plagued by poor special teams play, it won't be the result of lack of practice. The coaching staff has devoted considerable attention to the kicking game in preseason workouts.

Depth should not be a problem on special teams this season. As Coach Toledo has noted, special teams are typically composed of several linebackers and defensive backs. Ten of the recruits Tulane signed last February were either linebackers or defensive backs.

Tulane also appears to have a good group of young kickers. Redshirt freshman Ryan Rome and true freshman Cairo Santos have kicked the ball well in practice. It looks as if Rome will be the kicker on field goals and extra points, while Santos will kickoff. Freshman Jonathan Ginsburgh will probably be the punter. As I have previously indicated, Orleans Darkwa could be a very exciting kick returner.

Tulane's schedule is by no means easy, but I would not say it is backbreaking. Moreover, the Green Wave will have seven games at home this season, one more than it usually has, and will play four of its last five games at home.

I think the 2010 season will be a very interesting one. If you live in or near to New Orleans, I encourage you to go to the Dome to see the Green Wave in action.

Here are my predictions for this year's games.

Game One (Home): Tulane 24, Southeastern Louisiana 20.

The Green Wave has played Southeastern twice within the past five years, and both times, the Lions were very competitive. I expect the same this year. The Wave cannot afford to take Southeastern lightly. However, I think the Greenies will be ready to play and will come away with a victory.

Game Two (Home): Ole Miss 28, Tulane 21.

Tulane will be in a good spot for this game, especially if the Green Wave takes care of business against Southeastern in game one. Ole Miss has a new offensive coordinator, and the Rebels must replace their starting quarterback and their top running back from last year. I'm not predicting a Tulane victory, but in light of the adjustments Ole Miss must make and the fact that the Wave plays the Rebels at home early in the season, I won't be surprised if Tulane wins.

Game Three (Away): Houston 38, Tulane 17.

Houston will sorely test the Green Wave defense. The Cougars' quarterback, Case Keenum, is one of the top passers in college football and a serious candidate for the Heisman Trophy. Houston's defense has not been all that impressive lately, and if Tulane's offense is really clicking, it could keep things close for a while, but I expect the Cougars to pull away as the game progresses.

Game Four (Away): Rutgers 31, Tulane 21.

Tulane last played Rutgers in 1998, when the Green Wave was on its merry way to an undefeated season. I attended the game, which was played in Rutgers Stadium. I remember being very nervous as I waited for the kickoff. But there was really no need to worry. In that magical season, Shaun King and his supporting cast were unstoppable, so Tulane won easily. Rutgers' football program has improved markedly since then—the Scarlet Knights were 9 and 4 last season—so things probably will not go as smoothly for the Greenies as they did twelve years ago. However, if Rutgers takes Tulane lightly, an upset is possible.

Game 5 (Home): Tulane 27, Army 17.

Last year, Tulane fell behind against the Cadets at West Point, but the Green Wave fought back to take the lead late in the game. Army then drove deep into Tulane territory, and it looked as if a typical heartbreaking Tulane loss was in the offing. However, Army's kicker failed to make a field goal that would have won the game. Hooray! Tulane fans know what to expect from Army this year. The Cadets always give a maximum effort. The Greenies will need to match that effort with a determined effort of their own. I think that they will do what they need to do and thereby secure a victory on Homecoming weekend.

Game 6 (Away): Tulsa 35, Tulane 20.

The Golden Hurricane has been beating Tulane handily for several years now. The games played at Tulsa have been particularly one-sided. The Green Wave may be more competitive this year, but I think Tulsa will win.

Game 7 (Away): Tulane 24, Texas-El Paso 21.

In 2008, Tulane led UTEP for much of the game, but the Miners scored on a long pass play in the final minutes to win. Last year, UTEP seemed to have things well in hand, but the Greenies came

back to tie the game at the end of regulation and won in overtime. I expect another close contest, with Tulane winning by a field goal.

Game 8 (Home): Tulane 31, SMU 28.

The Mustangs have experienced a resurgence under Coach June Jones. Last season, SMU won seven games, including a victory in the Hawaii Bowl. The Mustangs will likely be even stronger this season. However, the Green Wave will have the home field advantage in this year's game. I think the Wave will pull out a narrow win.

Game 9 (Home): Southern Miss 27, Tulane 13.

USM is a model of consistency. Year after year, the Golden Eagles have a lot of good athletes who play physical football, win more games than they lose, and go to a bowl game. They almost always beat Tulane, too. I don't expect things will change very much this season, particularly the part about beating Tulane.

Game 10 (Home): Tulane 30, Rice 24.

Last year, Rice was 0 and 9 when the Owls played Tulane, and the Green Wave was coming off a stirring victory over UTEP, so Wave fans were quite confident that the Greenies would get another win. Things went well at the outset—Tulane took a 14-0 lead. The Wave couldn't stand prosperity, however, and started making mistakes. Rice got momentum and went on to win 28-20. I think things will be different this year.

Game 11 (Home): Central Florida 30, Tulane 27.

Last year's 49-0 defeat at the hands of UCF was very discouraging. Tulane actually played fairly well early on, especially on defense. But as in the case of the Rice game, the Green Wave started making mistakes, and UCF won in a rout. I am sure Tulane's players will try as hard as they can to defeat

the Knights this year. I shall be delighted if they do so, but I think they will come up a little short.

Game 12 (Away): Marshall 31, Tulane 22.

Last year, Tulane was on a two-game winning streak when it met Marshall, and when Tulane took a 7-0 lead early in the game, it looked like the streak would continue. However, Marshall's quarterback had a very good game, and after Tulane's early touchdown, the Thundering Herd's defense gave up only three more points the rest of the way. That same quarterback and several of the leading defenders are back this year. In addition, Marshall will have the home field advantage against the Wave. I don't think Tulane will win, but I could be wrong. If I am wrong, the Green Wave would, by my reckoning, have six victories, making the Wave eligible to go to a bowl. That would be nice.

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Coach Toledo is not the first Tulane coach to state that his team is the "best team" he has had at Tulane. At least one other coach, Jim Pittman, made the same statement during his tenure at Tulane.

Coach Pittman was named the head coach at Tulane following the 1965 season. Although he directed the Green Wave to a winning season in 1966, his teams had losing seasons the next three years. Nevertheless, Pittman was optimistic as the 1970 season approached. Referring to his 1970 team, Coach Pittman declared: "This is my best team."

He was right. The Green Wave went on to win seven games during the regular season, the most wins for a Tulane team since 1949. The Wave was invited to the Liberty Bowl, Tulane's first bowl game in thirty years. The Greenies won that game,

defeating Colorado, and Tulane was ranked 17th in the final Associated Press poll for the 1970 season.

I hope very much that Coach Toledo's assessment of his team proves to be as prophetic as the assessment made by Coach Pittman was.

Roll Green Wave!

**Reuben I. Friedman
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