

# Top bowls to catch this holiday season

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While the landscape of college football is in an ever-changing state, between NIL deals, transfer portals, realignment and expansion, one thing that hasn't changed is the fervor surrounding college football bowl games.

The bowl season has certainly lost a bit of its luster over the years, with players opting out for the NFL, the games have essentially become a glorified exhibition.

Still, there are a handful of bowls that draw the attention from the masses and this year is no exception.

With the Christmas and bowl season both in full swing, here are the top five bowl games fans shouldn't miss:



## 5. Orange Bowl

**No. 6 Tennessee (10-2) vs. No. 7 Clemson (11-2)**  
**Friday, Dec. 30, 7 p.m.**

One thing the college football world has come to expect over the past decade is the Clemson Tigers will have their say in how the national landscape shakes out.

Every year, the Tigers find themselves at the top of the preseason favorites to win the ACC and as one of the favorites to make the college football playoff.

That didn't quite play out for the Tigers as Clemson did win the ACC with a 39-10 blowout win over UNC, but losses to Notre Dame and in-state rival South Carolina kept Clemson from earning a playoff bid this season.

Their consolation prize? The right to fight Tennessee in the orangest Orange Bowl in history.

Come December 30, a flood of Clemson and Tennessee orange will flood Miami in one of the more intriguing college football matchups of the postseason.

What Josh Heupel has done in two years at Tennessee has been nothing short of remarkable, even more so considering the Jeremy Pruitt fallout, player transfers and loss in personnel.

That didn't stop the Vols from forging ahead to claiming the No. 1 ranking after beating Alabama in Knoxville this season.

Heupel's warp-speed offense delivered one of the most electric seasons for Tennessee in years.

With the emergence of receiver Jalin Hyatt and Henderson Hooker turning into the nation's premier gunslinging quarterback, it became a perfect storm for the Vols to play spoiler in the SEC.

That scenario never played out as Georgia soundly beat Tennessee in Athens this season, 27-13.

The biggest loss of the season came to unranked South Carolina who had its way with the Vols in a 25-point dominant showing.

During the loss to South Carolina, Hooker saw his season come to a close with a torn ACL.

With Hooker on the sideline, quarterbacking responsibility went to Joe Milton, who is no stranger to the program.

Milton has been with the Vols for two seasons and is plenty familiar with Heupel's system.

While Tennessee enters the Orange Bowl without Hooker, Jalin Hyatt also will miss the bowl, having declared for the NFL draft.

Like Tennessee, the Clemson Tigers will be relying on a fresh face at quarterback.

During the ACC championship, Clemson starting quarterback D.J. Uiagalelei was benched for Cade Klubnik, who in turned cranked out a 20-of-24 night for 279 yards and a touchdown.

He also added 30 yards on the ground and a rushing touchdown.

There's no question both Tennessee and Clemson have earned the right to be in one of the nation's premier bowls.

And with the way Heupel has built Tennessee up in two years, there should be plenty of fireworks in Miami on Friday night.



## 4. Sugar Bowl

**No. 5 Alabama (10-2) vs. No. 11 Kansas State (10-3)**  
**Saturday, Dec. 31, 11 a.m.**

It's not often there's a national championship conversation without Alabama in the mix.

But, the Tide managed to drop two games this year to Tennessee, on a last-second field goal in Knoxville, and to LSU in overtime on a two-point conversion.

A combined four points kept Alabama out of the four-team college football playoff.

Even with the two losses, there was still plenty of conversation for Alabama to make its way into the playoff after both TCU and USC, who were ranked No. 3 and No. 4 at the time, lost in their conference championship games.

Instead, Alabama found itself sitting at No. 5, on the outside looking in.

With the Sugar Bowl essentially being a glorified exhibition, and with the talent-loaded roster Alabama features, there should be plenty of opt-outs, right?

Not so much. Alabama's biggest stars, like 2021 Heisman winner Bryce Young and presumed No. 1 NFL draft pick Will Anderson have both stated they will play in the Sugar Bowl.

Good news for college football fans, bad news for the Kansas State Wildcats.

Kansas State earned its bid for the Sugar Bowl after upending TCU in the Big 12 conference championship game.

Kansas State has very quietly put together a respectable record this season, suffering losses to just Texas, TCU in the regular season and an early-season loss to Tulane—all three of which will be playing in bowl games this season.

The Wildcat's aren't flashy and aren't a team to turn a game into a track meet, but rather the type to lean on a solid defense and a stingy offense that plays clock control.

The Wildcats had to deal with their own adversity this year when quarterback Adrian Martinez went down with an injury, forcing coach Chris Klieman to lean on Will Anderson.

Both quarterbacks feature two completely different skill sets, with Howard being more of a pocket passer.

Again, Anderson isn't the most flashy of quarterbacks, but protects the ball well.

He's completed 61.6% of his passes this season for 1,423 yards and has 15 touchdowns against two interceptions.

For several seasons now, Kansas State running back Deuce Vaughn has found himself among the best in the Big 12. This season, he's rushed for over 1,400 yards and has scored eight touchdowns.

The balance and clock control game will be Kansas State's biggest asset.

How well will the Big 12

champs stack up against the nation's premier college football program, who will be at full strength for the Sugar Bowl?

Tune in on New Year's Eve at 11 a.m. to find out.



## 3. Fiesta Bowl

**No. 3 TCU (12-1) vs. No. 2 Michigan (13-0)**  
**Saturday, Dec. 31, 3 p.m.**

Is TCU worthy to play among the elite programs of college football? Is this the year for Jim Harbaugh to finally win a championship with his alma mater?

There's tons of intrigue surrounding this game for both TCU and Michigan.

For years, the Big 12 has been an afterthought in the landscape of college football and how the playoff race will shake out.

Since the implementation, the general consensus has been that if it's not Oklahoma, the Big 12 shouldn't be considered.

But TCU built a perfect record in the regular season and climbed to No. 3 in the CFP poll—certainly warranting a conversation to be had.

Quarterback Max Duggan earned himself Heisman conversation hype through his steady play and the Horned Frogs certainly have a roster chalked full of talent.

First-year coach Sonny Dykes built one of the most efficient teams in the land through steady play, surgical precision by his quarterback, and talent at the skill positions.

Duggan threw for over 3,300 yards and tossed 30 touchdowns against four interceptions.

He split his targets among three quality receivers, with Quentin Johnson being the top man on the edge for the Horned Frogs.

He caught 53 passes for 903 yards and five touchdowns, while Taye Barber and Derius Davis combined for nine touchdown grabs as well.

Coupled with the balance provided on the ground by Kendre Miller, who averaged over six yards per carry to the tune of 1,342 yards and 17 rushing touchdowns, the Horned Frogs are certainly able to move the ball at will.

But the thing about playing in the Big 12 is in order to win a conference title, you're going to have to beat a team twice in a year, which is a tough ask for any team in any conference.

Their matchup will be among perhaps the best team in the nation in Michigan.

For years, Jim Harbaugh hasn't been able to solve his Ohio State problem.

It would be smooth sailing though the BigTen slate until the big game against their arch-rivals from Columbus, and more often than not, it's been Ohio State getting the benefit of beating the Wolverines.

That all changed last year when Harbaugh claimed his first win over Ohio State.

He followed up with another blowout win against the Buckeyes this season, firmly securing a spot in the College Football Playoffs.

Michigan's closest call came in a 19-17 win against Illinois during the regular season, but aside from that two-point win, the Wolverines have won every game by double figures, including a 45-23 win against Ohio State and a 43-22 win over Purdue in the BigTen championship.

Simply put, the Wolverines are one of the most complete teams in the nation.

Running back Blake Corum has been the driving force in the Wolverine offense, rushing for over 1,400 yards and 18 touchdowns.

J.J. McCarthy has been the guy under center for Michigan and turned in a stellar season, completing 65% of his passes for 2,376 yards and 20 touchdowns and just three interceptions—as a sophomore.

This is certainly an interesting matchup as TCU has plenty of ways to disperse the offense among top-caliber players, which Michigan's vaunted defense will have to account for.

With no Corum, it will be on the sophomore gunslinger to deliver a big game in the semifinal matchup against TCU to earn the right to play for a national title.



## 2. Peach Bowl

**No. 4 Ohio State (11-1) vs. No. 1 Georgia (13-0)**  
**Saturday, Dec. 31, 7 p.m.**

Both Ohio State and Georgia have that been-there-done-that swagger.

Both teams have climbed the ranks and have won national championships in the College Football Playoff era and for the most part, both teams sat inside the top four teams throughout the entirety of the regular season.

Georgia looks like it hasn't missed a beat after winning last year's national championship against Alabama in convincing fashion.

For the past several years, Georgia has boasted the nation's top defense and the 2022 season hasn't been any different.

While the offense hasn't been pretty at times, what has been clicking without pause was the defensive effort.

The Bulldogs allowed only 30 points to be scored once this season—the SEC Championship game against LSU.

And even that game ended up being a 20-point blowout in favor of Georgia.

Kirby Smart certainly has a winning recipe and for the time being, it's everyone chasing the Bulldogs right now.

Georgia quarterback Stetson Bennett finished fourth in the Heisman voting this season, but is certainly capable of leading the Bulldogs to another title.

Bennett has thrown for over 3,400 yards and completed nearly 68% of his passes, with 20 touchdowns and six interceptions this season.

Kenny McIntosh has been the top back for the Bulldogs, rushing for 10 touchdowns and over 700 yards.

Again, nothing super flashy, but with a historically great defense, it's been more than enough to lead Georgia to a 13-0 record heading into bowl season.

On the flip side, C.J. Stroud has led the Buckeyes with eye-popping statistics, completing over 66% of his passes for 3,340 yards and 37 touchdowns against just six interceptions.

Miyah Williams has led a balanced backfield with 817 rushing yards and 13 touchdowns, while Marvin Harrison Jr. Emeka Egbuka both eclipsed 1,000 receiving yards.

The pair also combined for 21 receiving touchdowns this season.

While Ohio State has been extremely flashy on offense, facing Michigan, one of the top defenses in the nation, it was tough for the Buckeyes to maintain that video game-caliber of offense.

They will face another stellar defense in the second

playoff semifinal in Georgia.

Should it have been Alabama in the playoffs instead of Ohio State? Maybe, maybe not.

What's for certain is the Peach Bowl will pit one of the nation's best offenses against one of the nation's best defenses.

What happens when you get an unstoppable force against an immovable object?

Check this game out on New Year's Eve.



## 1. Reliaquest Bowl

**No. 24 Mississippi State (8-4) vs. Illinois (8-4)**  
**Monday, Jan. 2, 11 a.m.**

The biggest bowl to look forward to has to be the national championship, right?

Wrong.

For years and years, Mike Leach, known as the Pirate, left his imprint all over college football, with his air-raid style of offense and how it's transformed the game into a high-octane, score as much as possible style game.

Leach suffered a heart attack at his home on December 11 and passed away the next day from complications stemming from his heart attack.

Just how much of an impact did Leach have on college football? A quick glance at his disciples and their current posts reflects what he's done for the game: Dave Aranda (Baylor), Neal Brown (WVU), Sonny Cumbie (Louisiana Tech), Sonny Dykes (TCU), Josh Heupel (Tennessee), Dana Holgorsen (Houston), Kliff Kingsbury (Arizona Cardinals), Seth Littrell (North Texas), Lincoln Riley (USC) and Ken Noland (Nevada).

Everywhere you look, Leach's impact can be felt on the game.

Even with his untimely passing, Mississippi State will carry on and attempt to win one for their fallen coach.

No matter who it is, former coaches to current players, all loved Leach.

In 2022, the Bulldogs went 8-4 in a gauntlet of a SEC West schedule, with the only losses coming to LSU, Kentucky, Alabama and Georgia.

In true air raid form, quarterback Will Rogers had no issue piling up stats as the Mississippi State quarterback, tossing over 3,700 yards and completing over 68% of his passes. He threw 34 touchdown passes and had just six picks.

Their opponent, Illinois, also went 8-4 this season, but didn't produce near the stats Mississippi State did.

Quarterback Tommy DeVito completed nearly 70% of his passes, but tallied just shy of 2,400 yards and had just 15 touchdown passes and four interceptions.

With so much raw emotion fueling Mississippi State, this feels like one that everyone will be tuned in for the support of the Pirate.

And there's the top five bowls games to watch this holiday season. No matter who you're with or where you are, there are bowl games a-plenty to be enjoyed with friends and family this holiday season. Follow this list and you'll be treated to some of the best sporting gifts of the season.