

# Change norm in NCAA football

*Collegiate offseason filled with turmoil*

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College football was living high in January: A thrilling championship game with no controversy about its participants capped a season full of excitement.

Then came the offseason.

Two prominent coaches lost their jobs — Rick Neuheisel for gambling and Mike Price for allegedly partying with strippers.

Ohio State's title was called into doubt with questions about the academic eligibility of its star, Maurice Clarett, and then an NCAA investigation into his claim that he had thousands of dollars of stereo equipment stolen from a car.

Most importantly, civil war broke out when the ACC lured Miami and Virginia Tech away from the Big East, altering the balance of power in the sport and leaving one of the six major conferences fighting to maintain its prominence.

Finally, it's time for the games to begin.

"It's great to get a chance to talk football again," Miami coach Larry Coker said at his final Big East media day. "Once the games begin, all this fire and brimstone will wane a little bit."

The impact of last year's championship game and the offseason's chaos will be felt all season.

Hours after 31-24 double-overtime loss in the Fiesta Bowl to Ohio State, Miami's players were eager to eliminate the bitter taste from the game.

Every time they watched the tape, every time they practiced, almost everywhere they went, the Hurricanes couldn't help thinking about the missed opportunities that cost the Hurricanes a repeat championship.

"All those two-a-days, all those practices, all those seven-on-sevens, the team meetings, were for nothing, and we only had 2 yards to go," said Miami

## PRESEASON POLL

The Top 25 teams in The Associated Press preseason college football poll, with first-place votes in parentheses, 2002 records, total points based on 25 points for a first-place vote through one point for a 25th-place vote, and final ranking:

	Record	Pts	Pvs
1. Oklahoma (32)	12-2	1,573	5
2. Ohio St. (27)	14-0	1,532	1
3. Miami (2)	12-1	1,484	2
4. MICHIGAN (2)	10-3	1,329	9
5. Texas	11-2	1,322	6
6. Auburn (1)	9-4	1,300	14
7. Kansas St. (1)	11-2	1,221	7
8. Southern Cal	11-2	1,126	4
9. Virginia Tech	10-4	1,046	18
10. Pittsburgh	9-4	952	19
11. Georgia	13-1	928	3
12. Tennessee	8-5	766	—
13. Florida St.	9-5	737	21
14. LSU	8-5	736	—
15. Maryland	11-3	705	13
16. N.C. State	11-3	678	12
17. Washington	7-6	643	—
18. Virginia	9-5	557	22
19. Purdue	7-6	468	—
20. Notre Dame	10-3	439	17
21. Wisconsin	8-6	350	—
22. Arizona St.	8-6	248	—
23. Colorado St.	10-4	205	—
24. Oklahoma St.	8-5	156	—
25. TCU	10-2	95	23

tight end Kellen Winslow Jr.

Five turnovers, blown assignments, a bit of overconfidence and a questionable pass interference call helped Ohio State snap Miami's 34-game winning streak and give hope to many teams that they, too, have a title chance.

Heading into this season, teams are hoping to become this year's Buckeyes — a team that came off a five-loss season to run the table and win the championship.

This year's top contenders are missing some usual names. Nebraska, Florida State and Florida — which together won at least a share of the national title every year but one from 1993-99, all begin the season outside the Top 10.

Eight times from 1991-2001, one of those three teams was the preseason No. 1. But coaching changes at Nebraska and Florida and turmoil at Florida State have changed things.

"I've had to face the reality of losing games for the first time in a long time — and I don't like it," Florida State coach Bobby Bowden said.

The ACC, once considered among the weaker major conferences, is in position to be



The Associated Press  
**Miami's Frank Gore (32) breaks through during practice. The Hurricanes turn to a third different starting running back in hopes of getting to a third consecutive national title game.**

among the toughest in the country once Big East powerhouses Miami and Virginia Tech join in 2004.

The Big East figures to have its best year yet in the what could be its final year as a major player. Miami, Virginia Tech and Pittsburgh will all compete for the conference title and figure to play a major role in deciding who plays in the Sugar Bowl in New Orleans, the site of this season's BCS national title game.

Few expected Ohio State to be in the game last season; even fewer thought the Buckeyes could snap Miami's winning streak.

But coach Jim Tressell, using an offense more suited to Woody Hayes' era than today's wide-open one, led Ohio State to its first title in 34 years.

Clarett led the Buckeyes to the title as a freshman, but has found himself in constant trouble, making a repeat even more difficult.

"We're going about our business as we usually do, focusing

on what we have to do out on the field," running back Lydell Ross said. "We have a stable of solid running backs. We're all here to play and to contribute."

There are plenty of teams poised to dethrone the Buckeyes, including Oklahoma, Miami, Texas, Kansas State, Michigan, Southern California and Virginia Tech.

There will be 18 new coaches in Division I-A. None will receive as much scrutiny as Mike Shula at Alabama.

Shula took over in May from Price, who was fired without coaching a game for the Crimson Tide after reports that he spent hundreds of dollars at a Pensacola, Fla., topless bar and that a woman ordered about \$1,000 in food and charged it to his hotel bill the next morning.

"I'm going to work as hard as I can to get this team ready to play," Shula said. "We're at Alabama. We should go out and take the field thinking we can win every week. If we don't, we shouldn't be here."

The other big coaching change came at Washington, where Keith Gilbertson took in June when Neuheisel was fired.

"If there's anybody to replace coach Neuheisel, it would have to be coach Gilbertson," Pickett said. "We're going forward. It's a situation we have no control over."

Williams is just one of many game-breaking receivers who should make this season exciting, including namesakes Roy Williams at Texas and Mike Williams at Southern California.

Pittsburgh's Larry Fitzgerald, Oklahoma State's Rashaun Woods and LSU's Michael Clayton could be just as dangerous.

But the best pass-catcher of all — and perhaps the best player in the country — might be Winslow, who almost single-handedly won the Fiesta Bowl for the Hurricanes.

"I just want to win a national championship," he said. "I wouldn't be happy if I had 20 catches and we lost."