

Close Wins, Close Losses By Phil Steele

Give me a computer full of NCAA football statistics and an entire offseason and I'm always going to try and uncover something new. Regular readers of my magazine know that I like to analyze what happens if a team was fortunate and won a lot of close games. Those teams are probably not as fortunate the next year, but on the flip side, teams that suffered many close losses the previous year are generally undervalued. I now have 24 years of data from teams that had close wins and losses (games decided by a touchdown or less). I break it down further by ranking net close wins and losses. For example: In 2015, Michigan St benefitted from 6 close wins with 1 close loss (5 net close wins) and went from a record of 12-2 to 3-9 the following year! In 2016, Notre Dame had 1 close win and 6 close losses, finishing with 5 net close losses and went from 4-8 to 10-3 in 2017.

While I use a 7 points or less as the standard for a close win and loss, if there is a late misleading score, I will either include or exclude it accordingly. An example Temple down 3 was at 1 and UConn got 96 yd fumble return TD :00 to win by 9 (did not kick xp). I count that as a close win. If a team is down 10 and scores a garbage TD on the last play to lose by 3, I do not count that as a close loss.

Here is a chart showing the results from the last 4 years of FCS results. **In the last four years, 110 teams had 2 Net Close Losses or more and 73 improved their record while 6 remained the same!** I did not use 2020 or 2021 which would have been skewed by the Covid year of 2020. The results of 2020 were not used and neither was 2021 which would have been based on the skewed and odd 2020 season.

	Total Last 4 Years	Stronger Next Year	Same Next Year	Weaker Next Year	% STRONGER or Same Next Yr
Previous Year 4+ net Close Losses	12	10	0	2	83.3%
Previous Year 3 net Close Losses	39	23	4	12	69.2%
Previous Year 2 net Close Losses	59	40	6	13	77.9%
2 or more net Close Losses	110	73	10	27	75.4%

Going Up? Here are the teams that had 3 or more net close losses last year:

	2024 CLOSE LOSSES	2024 CLOSE WINS	NET CLOSE LOSSES		2024 CLOSE LOSSES	2024 CLOSE WINS	NET CLOSE LOSSES
Penn	5	0	5	North Alabama	3	0	3
Weber St	5	1	4	Utah Tech	3	0	3
Charleston Sthm	5	1	4	Ole Miss	3	0	3
Beth-Cookman	5	1	4	<i>These are the teams that had 2 net close losses:</i>			
Hampton	3	0	3	<i>Cal Poly, Campbell, Cent Ark, Davidson, E Wash,</i>			
Sacramento St	4	1	3	<i>Gard-Webb, Holy Cross, Lindenwood, Long Island,</i>			
Colgate	3	0	3	<i>Marist, Merimack, Murray St, Norfolk St,</i>			
Fordham	4	1	3	<i>North Dakota, Presbyterian, VMI,</i>			
SF Austin	4	1	3	<i>Wagner, Youngstown St.</i>			
Grambling	5	2	3				

Now let's take a look at how teams performed the next season after having multiple NET close wins. Teams that had 3 or more net close wins the previous year have seen their record either stay the same or get weaker in 260 of 327 cases (80%). Teams with just 2 net close wins still had a weaker or the same record 480 of 649 times (74.0%).

	Total Last 24 Years	Weaker Next Year	Same Next Year	Stronger Next Year	% WEAKER or Same Next Yr
Previous Year 6 or 7 net Close Wins	0	0	0	0	-
Previous Year 4 or 5 net Close Wins	19	14	1	4	78.9%
Previous Year 3 net Close Wins	25	18	3	4	84.0%
Previous Year 2 net Close Wins	64	34	5	25	68.3%
3 or more net Close Wins	44	32	4	8	81.8%
2 or more net Close Wins	108	66	9	33	69.4%

The only team in that top category that has ever finished with a stronger record was Kansas St, as they had +7 net close wins in 2011 going 10-3 and improved to 11-2 in 2012 (HC Bill Snyder was amazing). In '15-'16, 10 teams had 4 or more net close wins and 9 had weaker records including Mich St, (playoffs '15 to 3-9 '16). In '21, 11 teams had +4 or more Net Close Wins and 10 of the 11 had a weaker record in '22 including Baylor & Mich St who both went from Top 10 to a losing year. Clemson was the only exception (10-3 to 11-3). **Last year NINE teams rated +4 Net Close wins from 2023 and ALL NINE had weaker records in 2024!** The FCS has also had a strong success rate with teams that have +3 or more Net Close wins the previous year having a 81.8% chance of a weaker or the same record the next year.

Going Down? Here are the teams that had 3 or more net close wins last year:

	2024 CLOSE WINS	2024 CLOSE LOSSES	NET CLOSE WINS		2024 CLOSE WINS	2024 CLOSE LOSSES	NET CLOSE WINS
Dartmouth	5	1	4	<i>These Are the Teams that had 2 net close wins:</i>			
Eastern Kentucky	5	1	4	<i>Albany, Bucknell, Florida A&M,</i>			
Drake	4	0	4	<i>Georgetown, Harvard, Houst Christian,</i>			
Idaho	5	1	4	<i>Illinois St, Incarnate Word, Jackson St,</i>			
UC Davis	4	1	3	<i>Lehigh, Missouri St, Morehead St,</i>			
Delaware	3	0	3	<i>New Hampshire, North Dakota St, San Diego,</i>			
Rhode Island	5	2	3	<i>SE Louisiana, South Carolina St,</i>			
Tennessee St	4	1	3	<i>Stony Brook, Towson, Valparaiso,</i>			
Mercer	3	0	3	<i>Villanova, Wofford.</i>			
Abeline Christian	5	2	3				
Southern	3	0	3				
Western Carolina	4	1	3				

This year there are 8 teams in the +4 or more Net Close wins category. In 24 years, only 20 out of 139 teams (14%) in that category were able to improve their record.