

FCS 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 25 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 being that, Temple down 3. was at the 1 and UConn got a 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 25 years. In the last eight years, 123 teams had 3 Net Close Losses or more and 95 improved their record while 13 remained the same! I modified the chart for 2020 to account for uneven games which created some decimal points but we have been back to normal since 2021. The FCS has had similar success. Teams in that had 4+ Net Close Losses one year have have improved or been the same 87.5% of the time and teams with 2+ are 74.8% overall. Here is the chart.

	Total Last 5 Years	Stronger Next Year	Same Next Year	Weaker Next Year	% STRONGER or Same Next Yr
Previous Year 4+ net Close Losses	16	13	1	2	87.5%
Previous Year 3 net Close Losses	46	28	4	14	69.5%
Previous Year 2 net Close Losses	77	50	8	19	75.3%
2 or more net Close Losses	139	91	13	35	74.8%

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

	2025 CLOSE LOSSES	2024 CLOSE WINS	NET CLOSE LOSSES		2024 CLOSE LOSSES	2024 CLOSE WINS	NET CLOSE LOSSES
Campbell	6	1	5	The Citadel	3	0	3
Norfolk St	6	1	5	Morgan St	5	2	3
North Dakota	5	0	5	Princeton	4	1	3
North Alabama	4	0	4				
Holy Cross	5	1	4				
Wofford	5	1	4				
Central Arkansas	4	1	3				
VMI	3	0	3				
Northwestern St	3	0	3				
Alcorn St	3	0	3				

These are the teams that had 2 net close losses:

*Alabama A&M, Cal Poly, Colgate, Columbia
Eastern Illinois, Marist, Merrimack, NCar A&T,
Northern Colorado, Robert Morris, St Thomas,
Stonybrook, Tenn St, Utah Tech, Valparaiso.*

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%). Those are the FBS numbers. The chart below has the FCS numbers. **Last year there were 12 teams with 3 or more Net Close Wins and 9 had a weaker record with 0 improving their record and 3 having the same for a 100% success rate! In the 5 years this has an 85.4% success rate!**

	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	23	18	1	4	82.6%
Previous Year 3 net Close Wins	32	22	6	4	87.5%
Previous Year 2 net Close Wins	84	46	6	32	61.9%
3 or more net Close Wins	55	40	7	8	85.4%
2 or more net Close Wins	139	86	13	40	71.2%

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). The last 2 years 17 teams rated +4 Net Close wins and 16 had weaker records in 2024 and 2025! Here are this years FCS teams.

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

	2025 CLOSE WINS	2025 CLOSE LOSSES	NET CLOSE WINS		2025 CLOSE WINS	2025 CLOSE LOSSES	NET CLOSE WINS
Villanova	5	0	5				
South Dakota	6	1	5				
South Car St	5	1	4				
West Georgia	4	0	4				
Dartmouth	4	1	3				
Lamar	5	2	3				
Presbyterian	4	1	3				
Grambling	5	2	3				

These Are the Teams that had 2 net close wins:

*Bethune Cookman, Bucknell, Delaware St,
Drake, Duquesne, Lafayette, Mercer,
Montana, Morehead St, New Haven,
Richmond, Sacred Heart, South Dakota St,
TennTech, Texas Southern, Towson,
UCDavis, UT Martin, Wagner. .*