THE GAME

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GET'CHA HEAD IN THE GAME HIGH SCHOOL MUSICAL

Yale eyes fifth straight win over Crimson

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The Yale Bulldogs (5–4, 3–3 Ivy) travel north this weekend to take on the school from Cambridge (8–1, 5–1 Ivy). The two teams will face off at Fenway Park on Saturday afternoon.

The Bulldogs, who have won the past four contests against the Crimson, have already been eliminated from postseason contention, while their opponents are guaranteed at least a share of the 2026 Ivy title. It is a different set of circumstances compared to last year's matchup, when Yale entered The Game on a five-game win streak and held the second-best record in the conference. Its opponents sat on top of the Ivy leaderboard, the same spot they occupy now.

However, after a dominant 28-0 win over No. 23 Princeton on Senior Day last weekend, Team 153 will be riding a huge wave of momentum as the Bulldogs look to win their fifth straight game over the team from the north.

"We're fired up for the opportunity to compete in such a storied rivalry at Fenway Park," head coach Kevin Cahill said, according to a Yale Athletics press release. "There's nothing quite like the energy, tradition, and atmosphere surrounding this game. We recognize what it means to the Yale community."

Previewing the opposition

The Crimson offense is led by sophomore quarterback Charlie Smith, who has won as many games against the Bulldogs as former quarterback Jaden Craig did in three fewer starts. Smith has thrown for a tad over 2,000 yards on the season while completing nearly 70 percent of his passes. He has accumulated 19 touchdown passes but has been picked 11 times, the most in the Ivy League this season.

A variety of players have been on the receiving end of Smith's passes. First-year wideout Nate Bailey and sophomore wideout Ryan Tattersall, the younger brother of Yale receiver Robby Tattersall '27, have accounted for half of the team's total receiving yards, with eight touchdowns between them.

From there, Smith has another five targets mixed into the rotation, each with at least 130 yards and a pair of scores.

On the ground, the Crimson have been average at best. Senior Xaviah Bascon and junior DJ Gordon have picked up the majority of the rushing yards, a combined 732 out of the team's 1,295-yard total.

As a group, the Crimson have 12 rushing touchdowns, but half come from big-bodied Kise Flannery, a first-year quarterback brought in with short-yardage jumbo packages. Should the Crimson reach the red zone, Flannery will likely replace Smith near the goal line.

Switching to the other side of the ball, the Crimson have been one of the best-scoring defenses in the country, ranking seventh in the FBS and FCS combined while allowing just 13.9 points per game.

Although it seems that past defenses have flaked out on the last couple of games between the Bulldogs and the Crimson, this year's squad is much improved and should provide at least a little resistance on Saturday.

A large factor in the team's defensive success has been winning the turnover battle. The team from Cambridge leads the Ivy League in both interceptions and fumble recoveries, totaling 20 takeaways in just nine games this season.

The boys in blue will have their eyes on three key players on the Crimson defense this weekend. One is Dorsey Benefield, a junior linebacker who has led his team in tackles all season while demonstrating a knack for wreaking havoc in the pass rush.

Next is Xaden Benson, a junior defensive back who leads the nation in interceptions with nine. After being embarrassed by the Bulldog receiving corps a season ago, he will be out for blood and deadset on locking down Yale's top wideouts.

Last but not least is another linebacker, Sean Line. A senior, Line is still looking for his first victory over the Bulldogs, something last year's Crimson seniors failed to achieve. Line has totaled 61 tackles this season, along with two sacks, and has also demonstrated his prowess dropping back into pass coverage.

Yale's keys to victory

Before the Bulldogs' victory over Princeton last week, the team's ability to score points seemed uncertain. However, after thrashing the Tigers, the Bulldogs will be rolling hot into Fenway as they look to pick up yet another senior sweep of their rivals.

The first key, and perhaps the most obvious, will be playing together as a defensive unit. Led by captain Abu Kamara '27, the Bulldog defense has one of the highest ceilings in the nation when it comes to defensive firepower.

If Team 153's defense plays even a fraction as well as it did against Princeton, it will be very difficult for the Crimson to score points on them. The pass rush, run stoppers and defensive backs all seemed to be perfectly in sync as Yale shut out the Tigers.

The next key is controlling momentum. The last handful of contests between the Bulldogs and the Crimson have been full of highlight reel plays capable of either breaking the game wide open or sealing the deal.

For Team 150, it was the late-game turnover that led to the Nolan Grooms '24 to Mason Shipp '25.5 touchdown pass that won the Bulldogs the game. A year later, Josh Pitsenberger's '26 39-yard touchdown, where he juked out the entire defense, was the nail in the coffin for the 2024 game. Last year, it was Nico Brown's '26 long bomb before halftime that gave the Bulldogs an insurmountable lead.

To defeat the team from up north, Yale will need to stay on the right side of the big play category and maintain control of the momentum in a game where emotions are certain to play a large role in the outcome.

The final key to victory is a solid offensive game. Quarterback Dante Reno '28 doesn't need to throw for 400 yards and four touchdowns, and running back Hugo Djeumeni Kemeni '29 doesn't need to run for a school record in rushing yards. The Yale team is complete enough for the burden to be balanced across multiple backs.

The Bulldogs should look to mix in a steady ground game led by Djeumeni Kemeni with short- to medium-yardage passes from Reno to his group of adept receivers and tight ends.

Limiting turnovers is also crucial. Given the strength of its defense, as long as Yale can play a clean offensive game free of mental errors, Team 153 should not have any problems overpowering the Crimson.

"The boys are ready to go," star tight end Graham Smith '27 wrote in a text to the News. "We're feeling prepared and are excited for the opportunity to play at Fenway."

Kickoff is set for 3:30 p.m. on Saturday. The game will be broadcast on ESPNU.

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LIZA KAUFMAN / PHOTOGRAPHY EDITOR
Yale is set to play its final game of the 2026 season when the Bulldogs ship up to Boston to take on the Crimson, who have lost the previous four games in the historic rivalry series. Kickoff is slated for 3:30 p.m. at Fenway Park.