SOUTHEAST ECONOMIC ADVISORS

Sports Economics | Regional Report

Arkansas Visits Vanderbilt With Both Teams Winless in the SEC

Week Seven: Arkansas at Vanderbilt, FirstBank Stadium, Nashville

A Week Seven preview and economic outlook for Northwest Arkansas, Mississippi County and Middle Tennessee, with a look back at the week six unbeaten teams lost

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October 16, 2026

Arkansas visits Vanderbilt on Saturday, October 17, 2026, at FirstBank Stadium in Nashville, with kickoff at 7 p.m. Eastern (6 p.m. Central) on ESPN2. It is the 11th meeting since 1949 and the first between the schools since Vanderbilt won 45-31 in Fayetteville in 2018. Arkansas leads the series 7-3 and has won all four games played in Nashville, so Vanderbilt is still looking for its first home win against the Razorbacks. Both teams are unranked and winless in the Southeastern Conference, Arkansas at 2-4 overall and Vanderbilt at 3-3, and Vanderbilt is a 6-point favorite.

The matchup looks very different than it did when the schedule came out. Vanderbilt won 10 games last year, finished No. 15 in the final AP poll and reached No. 9 along the way, its first top-10 ranking since 1947. It has since lost three straight, including a 52-17 defeat to Ole Miss last Saturday. Arkansas, in the first year under coach Ryan Silverfield, has allowed 166 points in six games and lost 24-17 to Tennessee after leading in the fourth quarter.

The regional economies are having a better year than either football team, and the economic scoreboard favors Arkansas, which is not the usual story in college football. Fayetteville-Springdale-Rogers was the ninth-fastest-growing metro area in the nation last year, with population up 2.4 percent, and payrolls there are up 2.2 percent over the past 12 months. Nashville added more people, 34,658 against 14,744, but grew at a more modest 1.6 percent and payrolls are up only 0.7 percent. Beyond Bentonville, Mississippi County in the northeast corner of the state has become a major steel-producing area, and Camden in south Arkansas is a central part of the nation's missile replenishment effort.

The South is the fastest-growing region in the country and accounts for the bulk of the nation's population growth. The Census Bureau estimates that the South grew 6.0 percent from April 2020 to July 2025, nearly double the nation's 3.1 percent, which by our arithmetic is roughly three-quarters of all the people the country added. It was the only region to gain population in all five age groups, which is one reason its football teams dominate the national rankings. We are Southeast Economic Advisors, so we reserve the right to brag a little about our region.

The South is also among the most dynamic regions, because its economy is industrializing rapidly at a time when manufacturing is drawing intense geopolitical pressure and influence. Steel mills, munitions plants and data centers are going up across the region, and Washington is paying closer attention to where they are built. Lockheed Martin's $58.62 billion PAC-3 award runs through Camden, Arkansas, and the Korea Zinc smelter in Clarksville,

Tennessee, has a federal FAST-41 permitting designation and a Department of War environmental finding.

We pick each week's game for the economies it brings together as well as for the matchup. Over the season this series covers the metros that host the games, a fun way to convey important economic data about the region. The best game of the week is Notre Dame at BYU, which falls outside our territory, offers a compelling economic story of its own. Arkansas at Vanderbilt lets us compare Northwest Arkansas and Nashville, two of the South's fastest-growing areas.

Key takeaways	
Last week	Six of the 15 teams that began Saturday unbeaten lost their first game: Texas, Alabama, Nebraska, Duke, Pittsburgh and North Dakota State. Oklahoma beat No. 1 Texas 27-24 on a 47-yard field goal as time expired, and nine unbeaten teams remain.
The game	Arkansas (2-4, 0-3 SEC) at Vanderbilt (3-3, 0-3 SEC), 7 p.m. ET on ESPN2. Arkansas has lost two straight and Vanderbilt three.
The line	Vanderbilt is a 6-point favorite with a total of 50.5, and the moneyline is near -225 on Vanderbilt and +190 on Arkansas.
The history	Arkansas leads 7-3 and has won all four meetings in Nashville. Vanderbilt won the last game, 45-31 in 2018.
The economies	Both economies are having a better year than either team. Northwest Arkansas ranks ninth among U.S. metros in population growth and Nashville is growing at a slower but still solid pace. Six large Arkansas steel, data center and defense projects total about $18 billion.
Music City	Country music is having a record run on the charts, Davidson County visitors spent a record $11.6 billion in 2025, and Nissan, Mitsubishi and Bridgestone run North American operations from Middle Tennessee.
The seven themes	Arkansas leads in the AI buildout, defense replenishment and reshoring. Middle Tennessee leads in pharmaceutical and health care investment.
Our call	Vanderbilt by about a touchdown. Turnovers decide the game.

Table 1. Key takeaways, Arkansas at Vanderbilt, October 17, 2026.

11th	**0-3**	**9**
meeting since 1949; Arkansas leads 7-3	SEC record of both teams	teams still unbeaten after Week Six

Week Six in Review: Six Unbeaten Teams Lost

Six of the 15 teams that began Saturday unbeaten lost their first game, and the biggest name to go down was top-ranked Texas. Oklahoma beat top-ranked Texas 27-24 on a 47-yard field goal as time expired in the Red River Rivalry, a result that ran against our own preview, which picked Texas. Georgia beat Alabama 20-17 in a game that kept Georgia unbeaten and elevated the Dawgs to No. 1, while Indiana beat Nebraska 20-17. Two Atlantic Coast Conference unbeatens also lost, as Georgia Tech beat Duke 28-25 and North Carolina beat Pittsburgh 21-17, and UNLV beat North Dakota State 13-7.

Team	Lost to	Record entering
Texas	Oklahoma, 27-24	4-0
Alabama	Georgia, 20-17	5-0
Nebraska	Indiana, 20-17	5-0
Duke	Georgia Tech, 28-25	4-0
Pittsburgh	North Carolina, 21-17	5-0
North Dakota State	UNLV, 13-7	5-0

Table 2. The six teams that lost their first game on October 10, 2026. Sources: ESPN; the Associated Press; NCAA.com.

Nine major college football teams are still unbeaten. They are Georgia, Notre Dame, Indiana, James Madison, Miami, BYU, Texas Tech, Utah and UCLA. The last week of results also reshuffled the top of the AP poll, which now reads Georgia, Notre Dame, Miami, Ohio State and Indiana, with Alabama sixth, Texas seventh, BYU eighth, Ole Miss ninth and Texas Tech tenth.

The other upsets came in the SEC and the Big Ten. Kentucky beat No. 10 LSU 35-34 in overtime, South Carolina beat No. 16 Florida 38-19 and No. 21 UCLA beat No. 13 Oregon 17-15. LSU fell to No. 22 and UCLA moved up to No. 12.

Sources: ESPN; Yahoo Sports; NCAA.com; the Associated Press. The count of 15 unbeaten teams follows the NCAA.com tally on October 6, which included North Dakota State.

Week Seven Look-Ahead: Notre Dame at BYU Headlines the Slate

The best game on the schedule is No. 2 Notre Dame at No. 8 BYU, the only meeting of unbeaten teams this week. No. 4 Ohio State visits No. 5 Indiana at noon, and No. 6 Alabama goes to Knoxville to face No. 14 Tennessee. We will be keeping a close watch on the Tennessee game, as Alabama did not take last weekend's loss very well and it may affect their play Saturday. BYU is also expected to provide Notre Dame its first real test of the season Saturday night. Arkansas and Vanderbilt play at 7 p.m. Eastern, in the same window as the other late games.

Game	Kickoff (ET) and TV	Why it matters
No. 4 Ohio State at No. 5 Indiana	Noon, Fox	Top-five meeting in Bloomington
No. 16 Mississippi State at No. 22 LSU	Noon, ESPN	LSU is coming off a loss to Kentucky
No. 6 Alabama at No. 14 Tennessee	3:30 p.m., ABC	Alabama is coming off its first loss
No. 9 Ole Miss vs. No. 13 Missouri	3:30 p.m., SEC Network	Ole Miss beat Vanderbilt 52-17
Arkansas at Vanderbilt	7:00 p.m., ESPN2	Both teams are 0-3 in the SEC
No. 2 Notre Dame at No. 8 BYU	7:30 p.m., ABC	Only unbeaten vs. unbeaten game
No. 18 Oklahoma State at No. 20 Houston	7:30 p.m., Fox	Big 12 ranked matchup

Table 3. Selected games on Saturday, October 17, 2026, with AP rankings of October 11. Sources: NCAA.com; ESPN.

Where Arkansas and Vanderbilt Stand Entering Week Seven

Vanderbilt has the better offense, and neither team has a defense to lean on. The Razorbacks have scored 116 points and allowed 166 in six games, or 19.3 against 27.7 per game, while Vanderbilt has scored 144 and allowed 177, or 24.0 against 29.5. Arkansas beat North Alabama 31-14

and Tulsa 34-6 at home and lost to Utah 43-10, Georgia 45-17, Texas A&M 34-7 and Tennessee 24-17. The Tennessee loss was the closest one. Arkansas led in the fourth quarter, was 2-of-11 on third down and punted trailing by seven with 1:36 left. Silverfield said afterward that a fourth-down conversion probably had a chance of under 5 percent.

Vanderbilt started 3-0 and has lost three straight since. The Commodores beat Austin Peay 28-9, Delaware 35-26 and North Carolina State 35-31 on a strip-fumble touchdown with one second left, then lost 21-15 at Auburn, 38-14 at Georgia and 52-17 to Ole Miss. True freshman quarterback Jared Curtis, a five-star recruit who flipped from Georgia, threw for 199 yards against Auburn, missed the Georgia game with a bruised knee and threw two interceptions against Ole Miss. Wide receiver Junior Sherrill has 529 receiving yards, 12th in the FBS and fourth among SEC players, and has caught a pass in 43 straight games.

Date	Arkansas	Vanderbilt
Sep. 5	W 31-14 North Alabama	W 28-9 Austin Peay
Sep. 12	L 10-43 at Utah	W 35-26 Delaware
Sep. 19	L 17-45 Georgia	W 35-31 North Carolina State
Sep. 26	W 34-6 Tulsa	L 15-21 at Auburn
Oct. 3	L 7-34 at Texas A&M	L 14-38 at Georgia
Oct. 10	L 17-24 Tennessee	L 17-52 Ole Miss
Record	2-4 (0-3 SEC)	3-3 (0-3 SEC)

Table 4. 2026 results through Week Six. Sources: Arkansas and Vanderbilt athletics; ESPN.

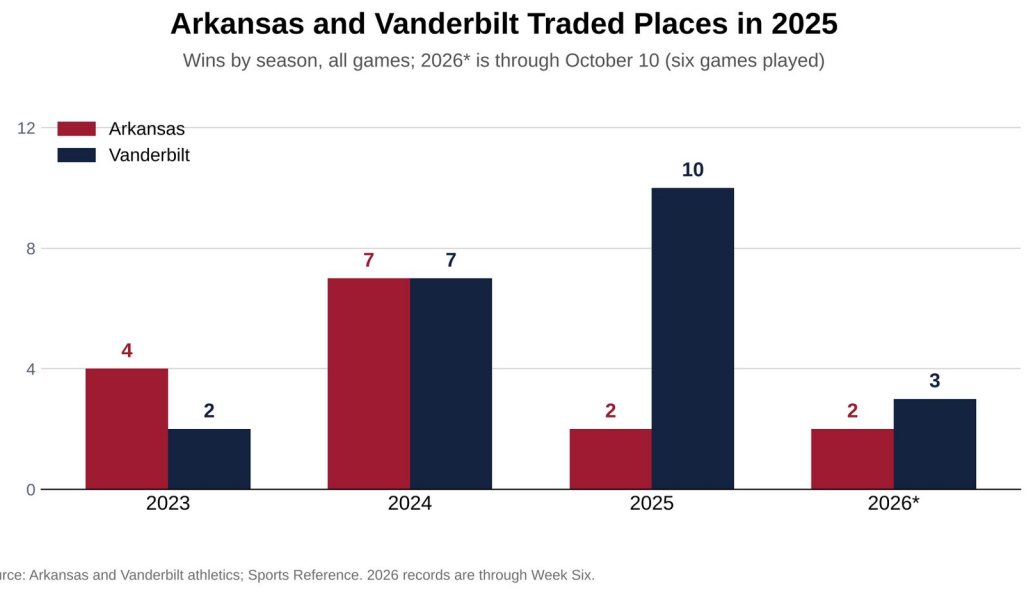


Figure 1. Arkansas won 2 games in 2025 and Vanderbilt won 10. Sources: Arkansas and Vanderbilt athletics; Sports Reference.

The Series: Arkansas Leads 7-3 but Has Not Played Since 2018

Arkansas has won seven of the 10 meetings and all four played in Nashville. The Razorbacks won 7-6 in 1949 and Vanderbilt won 14-13 in Little Rock in 1950. Arkansas then won 48-17 in 1978, 42-6 in 1994 and 35-7 in 1995, and Vanderbilt won 28-24 in 2005. Arkansas won 21-19 in 2006, 49-14 in 2010 and 31-28 in 2011, when it came back from a 14-point deficit in Nashville. The last game was Vanderbilt's 45-31 win in Fayetteville on October 27, 2018.

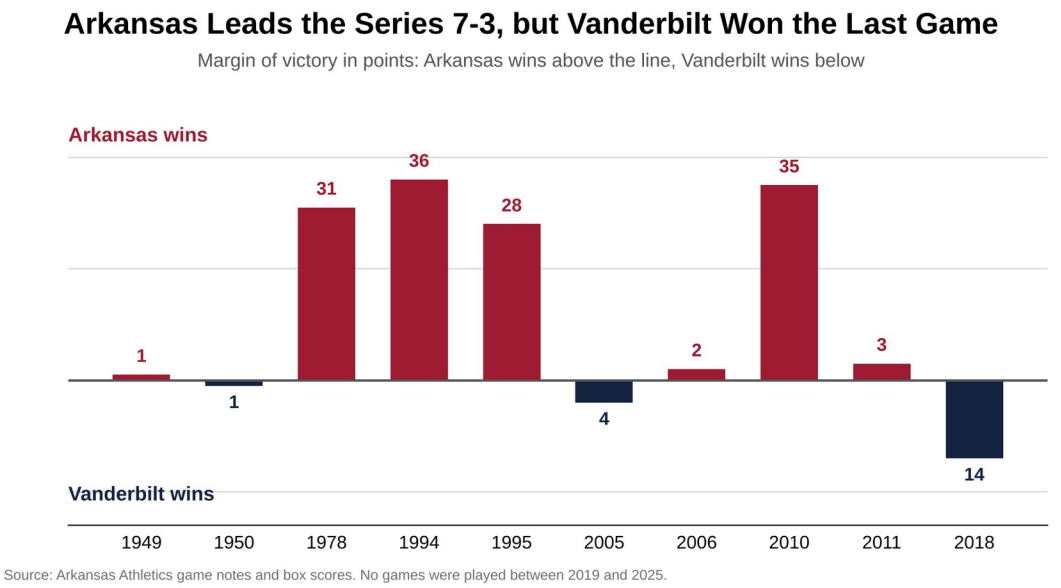


Figure 2. Arkansas has won seven of ten, but the three Vanderbilt wins include the most recent one. Source: Arkansas Athletics game notes and box scores.

Razorbacks at the Top of the Poll

Arkansas football has had four peaks: the 1960s, the late 1970s, 2006 and 2011. The first run belonged to Frank Broyles, who coached the Razorbacks from 1958 to 1976. His 1964 team went 11-0 and beat Nebraska 10-7 in the Cotton Bowl. The Football Writers Association of America and the Helms Foundation named Arkansas national champion, while the AP and UPI had already given the title to Alabama before the bowl games. Arkansas finished second in the final AP poll.

The season turned on a game played 62 years ago today. On October 17, 1964, Arkansas beat No. 1 Texas 14-13 in Austin, helped by an 81-yard punt return from Ken Hatfield, and moved up to No. 4. Arkansas won 22 straight games before LSU ended the streak with a 14-7 win in the Cotton Bowl in January 1966.

The Big Shootout in 1969 is the game Razorback fans still talk about. No. 1 Texas beat No. 2 Arkansas 15-14 on December 6 in Fayetteville, with President Nixon in the stands, after the Razorbacks led 14-0 entering the fourth quarter. Lou Holtz brought Arkansas back to the top in 1977. His Razorbacks, ranked No. 6, beat No. 2 Oklahoma 31-6 in the Orange Bowl on January 2, 1978, and finished third in the AP poll. Holtz went 60-21-2 from 1977 to 1983.

Arkansas joined the SEC in 1992 and reached the national conversation twice more. The 2006 team won the SEC West at 7-1 in the league and lost the conference title game 38-28 to Florida. Running back Darren McFadden was a two-time Heisman Trophy runner-up. The best game of that era came on November 23, 2007, when unranked Arkansas beat No. 1 LSU 50-48 in three overtimes at Tiger Stadium. McFadden ran for 206 yards and three touchdowns, and Peyton Hillis scored four. In 2011 Arkansas reached No. 3 in the AP poll, lost 41-17 at No. 1 LSU on November 25, beat Kansas State 29-16 in the Cotton Bowl and finished 11-2 and No. 5.

Date	Game	Result
Oct. 17, 1964	No. 1 Texas at Austin	Arkansas 14, Texas 13
Jan. 1965	Cotton Bowl vs. Nebraska	Arkansas 10, Nebraska 7
Dec. 6, 1969	No. 1 Texas vs. No. 2 Arkansas, Fayetteville	Texas 15, Arkansas 14
Jan. 2, 1978	Orange Bowl, No. 6 Arkansas vs. No. 2 Oklahoma	Arkansas 31, Oklahoma 6
Nov. 23, 2007	Unranked Arkansas at No. 1 LSU, three overtimes	Arkansas 50, LSU 48
Nov. 25, 2011	Arkansas at No. 1 LSU	LSU 41, Arkansas 17

Table 5. Arkansas in its biggest games. Sources: Arkansas Athletics; Sports Reference; Associated Press.

Vanderbilt Football: From McGugin to Pavia

Vanderbilt is the smallest school in the SEC and the only private one. The Commodores are a founding member of the SEC, which began in 1932. Dudley Field opened on October 14, 1922, with a 0-0 tie against Michigan, and the stadium was rebuilt in 1981 and renamed FirstBank Stadium in 2022. Dan McGugin coached the Commodores from 1904 to 1934, won 197 games against 55 losses and 19 ties, and was inducted into the College Football Hall of Fame in 1951. His teams went undefeated in 1904, 1910, 1921 and 1922.

Vanderbilt's alumni include two first-round quarterbacks, Bill Wade and Jay Cutler. Lynn Bomar was a consensus All-American in 1923, and center Carl Hinkle made first team in 1937. Bill Wade, the 1951 SEC Player of the Year, went first overall in the 1952 draft and led the Chicago Bears to the 1963 NFL championship. Jay Cutler holds the school records with 8,697 passing yards and 59 touchdown passes, was the 11th pick in 2006 and made the Pro Bowl in 2009.

Clark Lea, hired in December 2020, has taken Vanderbilt to heights it had not seen in generations. Vanderbilt beat top-ranked Alabama 40-35 on October 5, 2024, its first win over an AP No. 1 team and its first against Alabama since 1984, and it went on to beat Georgia Tech in the Birmingham Bowl, its first postseason win in 11 years. Last year the Commodores went 10-3, ranked as high as ninth and finished 15th, and quarterback Diego Pavia was the SEC Offensive Player of the Year and a Heisman Trophy finalist. Lea was SEC Coach of the Year for the second straight year. Vanderbilt lost the ReliaQuest Bowl 34-27 to Iowa.

Northwest Arkansas and Nashville: Two Fast-Growing Metros

Northwest Arkansas is growing faster than Nashville, and by a wide margin in jobs. The Fayetteville-Springdale-Rogers metro had 622,177 residents in July 2025, up 14,744 or 2.4 percent, which ranked ninth among U.S. metros. The Nashville metro had 2,197,416 residents, up 34,658 or 1.6 percent. Nonfarm payrolls in Northwest Arkansas were 309,400 in August, up 2.2 percent over the year, and Nashville payrolls were 1,200,300, up 0.7 percent. The Milken Institute ranked Northwest Arkansas first among large metros in its January 2026 index of best-performing cities, up six spots.

Both states have low unemployment, and Arkansas is adding workers. Arkansas's seasonally adjusted unemployment rate was 3.9 percent in August, down from 4.0 percent in July and below the national rate of 4.1 percent. The state added 11,300 payroll jobs over the year, household employment rose by 22,140 and the labor force reached a record high as participation climbed 0.4 percentage points. Tennessee's rate was 3.4 percent. The August metro rates, which are not seasonally adjusted, were 2.9 percent in Northwest Arkansas and 3.1 percent in Nashville.

Northwest Arkansas is also home to some of the nation's largest companies. Walmart, headquartered in Bentonville, ranks second on the 2026 Fortune 500, behind Amazon. Tyson Foods is based in Springdale and J.B. Hunt in Lowell. The Nashville area is home to HCA Healthcare, Dollar

General in Goodlettsville and Tractor Supply in Brentwood. The area is also the North American base for several Japanese companies, including Nissan Americas and Mitsubishi Motors North America in Franklin and Bridgestone Americas, the parent of Firestone, in downtown Nashville. Nashville has also drawn companies from California. A Hoover Institution study at Stanford found that 25 California headquarters moved to Tennessee from January 2018 through June 2021, second only to Texas, and that 15 of them chose Middle Tennessee.

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, Vintage 2025; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics; Arkansas Division of Workforce Services; Tennessee Department of Labor and Workforce Development; Milken Institute; Fortune.

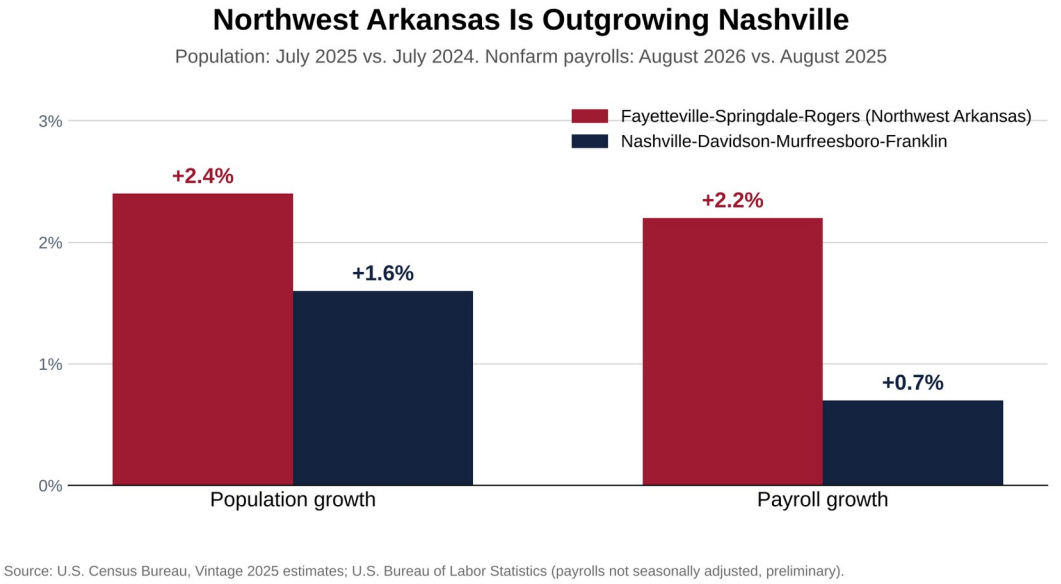


Figure 3. Northwest Arkansas is growing faster than Nashville in people and in jobs. Sources: U.S. Census Bureau; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

+2.4%	**+1.6%**	**9th**
Northwest Arkansas population growth, 2025	Nashville metro population growth, 2025	Northwest Arkansas rank among U.S. metros for growth

The Seven Key Themes in Arkansas and Middle Tennessee

Arkansas and Middle Tennessee each show up in most of the seven themes we track in This Week Across the South. Those are the AI buildout, the energy infrastructure upgrade, defense replenishment, civilian aerospace expansion alongside the next generation defense buildup, the reshoring of critical industries and materials, a new era of pharmaceutical investment and Peak 65. Arkansas has the larger projects in AI, defense replenishment and reshoring, while Middle Tennessee has the deeper health care base.

Theme	Arkansas	Middle Tennessee
AI buildout	Google, West Memphis ($4B); AVAIO, Little Rock area ($6B, phase 1)	Oracle, Nashville (8,500 jobs pledged); Meta, Gallatin
Energy infrastructure	Entergy Arkansas: 1,200 MW of new gas, 600 MW of solar, 350 MW of storage	TVA board approved over $13B through fiscal 2029
Defense replenishment	Lockheed Martin PAC-3 at Camden; L3Harris at Camden; Hanwha at Pine Bluff	Arnold Air Force Base, Tullahoma (testing role)
Aerospace and next generation defense	L3Harris solid rocket motors, Camden; Dassault Falcon, Little Rock	No projects of scale identified
Reshoring	U.S. Steel DRI plant and Hybar rebar mill, Osceola	Korea Zinc smelter, Clarksville
Pharmaceutical investment	No projects of scale identified	HCA Healthcare; Vanderbilt University Medical Center
Peak 65	Ventas bought two senior communities in Northwest Arkansas	Tennessee 65-plus share at 18.6 percent; Del Webb in Lebanon

Table 6. The seven key themes in Arkansas and Middle Tennessee. Sources: company and state releases; Talk Business & Politics; Fortune.

Mississippi County: Arkansas's Steel Country

Mississippi County, in the northeast corner of Arkansas along the Mississippi River, has become a major hub for electric-arc steel. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics counted 19,442 jobs in the county in the first quarter of 2026. In August, 19,798 residents were employed and 814 were unemployed, an unemployment rate of about 3.9 percent on a not seasonally adjusted basis.

Big River Steel Works in Osceola, now owned by U.S. Steel, which Nippon Steel acquired, is the anchor. Big River 2 cost more than $3 billion, is in full production and brought the campus to four electric arc furnaces. The 2022 announcement put the combined capacity of the two mills at 6.3 million tons. On April 29, 2026, U.S. Steel announced a $1.9 billion direct-reduced-iron plant that it said will employ about 200 people permanently, with about 2,000 workers at the peak of construction. The company did not give a tonnage or a schedule.

Hybar and Nucor add to the county's steel capacity. Hybar opened a rebar mill in Osceola in November 2025 at a cost of nearly $1 billion, designed to produce over 700,000 tons a year, about 7 percent of U.S. rebar demand, and it comes with its own solar and battery supply and a river port. In Blytheville, Nucor-Yamato makes over 2.5 million tons of structural shapes. MISA Specialty Processing is adding 35 jobs with a $37 million investment.

Energy is part of the story. Google and Cypress Creek announced the Steel River Energy Center on July 14, 2026. The first two phases will add 1.6 gigawatts of solar capacity and 1.9 gigawatt-hours of storage, and the full build will reach 2.5 gigawatts and 2.9 gigawatt-hours. The project will employ about 700 people during construction, is scheduled to be operating in 2029 and will use steel made at Big River.

19,442	3.9%	$1.9B
jobs in Mississippi County, first quarter 2026	county unemployment rate, August 2026	U.S. Steel direct-reduced-iron plant, announced April 2026

Sources: U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics; U.S. Steel; Hybar; Nucor; Google; Arkansas Economic Development Commission.

Defense Replenishment and the AI Buildout Reach Arkansas

Camden, in south Arkansas, is the center of the Army's missile replenishment effort. Lockheed Martin received a multiyear PAC-3 MSE award of $58.62 billion on July 29, 2026, and Camden performs the final assembly. Lockheed expects employment at the Camden plant to rise about 50 percent, from 1,200 to about 1,850, and capacity is expected to triple by the end of 2030. On October 12, L3Harris received a $250 million follow-on award for GMLRS rocket motors, and a new 60,000-square-foot Camden facility opens later this year. A large solid rocket motor expansion at Camden will add 50 jobs, with production starting in 2027.

Hanwha announced a $2.2 billion investment at Pine Bluff Arsenal on September 21, 2026, with up to 400 jobs. A January Army notice had described the project at $1.3 billion and 200 jobs, so the size has grown since the first filing.

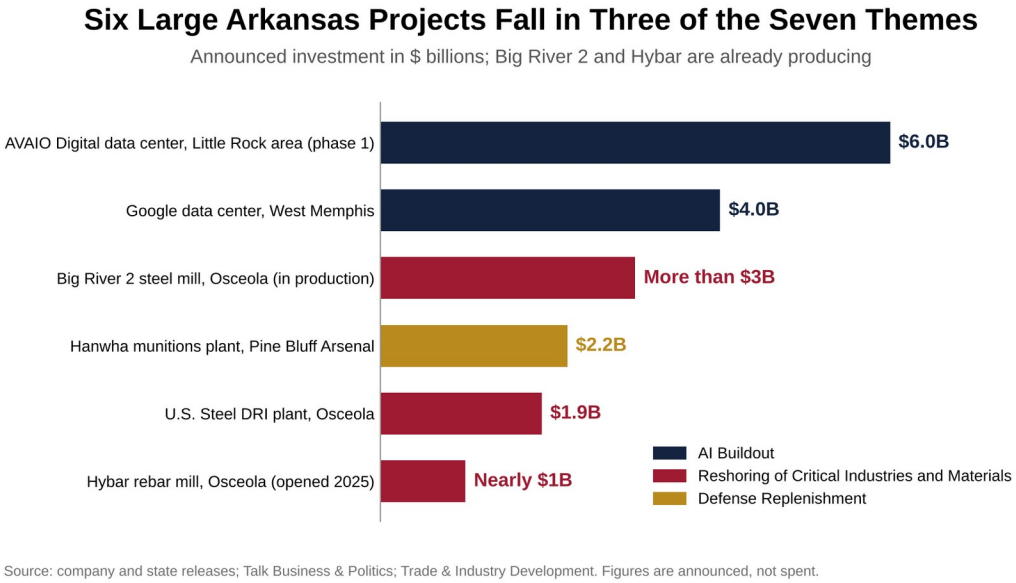


Figure 4. Six large Arkansas projects fall in three of the seven themes. Sources: company and state releases; Talk Business & Politics.

Data centers are the other big driver. Google announced a $4 billion data center in West Memphis in October 2025. AVAIO Digital is planning a Little Rock-area campus that would cost $6 billion in the first phase and more than $21 billion at full buildout, with over 500 permanent jobs. Entergy Arkansas announced a plan in December 2025 to add 450 megawatts of gas generation at Ironwood, 750 megawatts at Jefferson, 600 megawatts of solar and 350 megawatts of storage, which Entergy says would support about 1,860 construction jobs.

Greater Nashville: Health Care, Data Centers and a Smelter

Health care and an aging population shape investment in Nashville. HCA Healthcare guided to $5.0 billion to $5.5 billion of capital spending in 2026, and Vanderbilt University Medical Center is building the Jim Ayers Tower, estimated at $500 million or more in 2022 and scheduled to open in early 2027. Tennessee residents aged 65 and older made up 18.6 percent of the population in 2025, and that group has grown about 30 percent since 2016, according to the Sycamore Institute. In addition, Del Webb is building more than 700 homes at Barton Village in Lebanon.

The data center projects are further along than the hiring. Oracle has pledged 8,500 jobs at its Nashville campus, but Fortune reported in January that hiring was behind schedule, and site work is under way. Meta has invested well beyond $1 billion in Gallatin since 2020. The Tennessee Valley

Authority board approved more than $13 billion of capital spending through fiscal 2029 on August 20, 2026.

The biggest industrial project in Middle Tennessee is a smelter in Clarksville. Korea Zinc plans to spend $6.6 billion on the plant, or about $7 billion including financing, and to employ 740 people directly. The project received FAST-41 designation on April 24, 2026, and the Department of War issued a finding of no significant impact on September 21. Construction is expected to start in early 2027, with operations in 2029, though approvals are still pending. Arnold Air Force Base in Tullahoma contributed an estimated $1.1 billion and 6,454 jobs to the regional economy in fiscal 2024, though its role is testing, not replenishment.

Music City: Country Music, Tourism and Professional Sports

Nashville is the center of country music, and the genre is riding a wave of popularity. In early August, the top five songs on the Billboard Hot 100 were all country or country-influenced for the first time. Ella Langley's "Choosin' Texas" has now spent 23 nonconsecutive weeks at No. 1, an all-time record that passed Mariah Carey's "All I Want for Christmas Is You," and her album Dandelion reached No. 1 on the Billboard 200. Morgan Wallen's "Been By Now" debuted at No. 2, and Taylor Swift, a pop star, had a song in that top five as well. Shaboozey's "A Bar Song (Tipsy)" held No. 1 for 19 weeks in 2024, so the crossover audience has been building for some time.

Tourism is a key industry, and 2025 was a record year. The Nashville Convention and Visitors Corp reported that 17.4 million people visited Davidson County in 2025 and spent $11.6 billion, up 3.5 percent from 2024 and about 35 percent of all visitor spending in Tennessee. Visitor spending in the greater Nashville region reached $15.2 billion, up 50 percent since 2018, and that spending generated $1.2 billion in state and local taxes in Davidson County. The Corp forecasts $12.2 billion for 2026. The payroll data agree. Leisure and hospitality employment in the Nashville metro was 145,800 in August, up 4.9 percent over the year, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, while total nonfarm payrolls rose only 0.7 percent. The music industry itself is harder to count in payroll data. The Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce put its economic impact at about $20 billion in 2024, and its 2020 music industry report estimated that the industry potentially supports more than 80,000 jobs in the metro, including more than 41,000 directly. Those are Chamber impact estimates, not BLS payroll counts.

$11.6B	145,800	23
Davidson County visitor spending, 2025	Nashville metro leisure and hospitality jobs, August 2026, up 4.9%	weeks at No. 1 for "Choosin' Texas," a Hot 100 record

Professional sports add to the draw, and two of the buildings carry the names of Japanese companies. The Nashville Predators of the NHL play at Bridgestone Arena, which Bridgestone has named through 2030, and renovation work began there on April 20, 2026, with the building closing each summer for construction. The Tennessee Titans will move into a new $2.1 billion enclosed stadium for the 2027 season, and Nissan North America holds the naming rights to Nissan Stadium under a 20-year agreement. The state contributed $500 million and Metro Nashville $760 million in bonds, repaid in part through a hotel sales tax increase. NFL owners voted on May 19, 2026, to award Super Bowl LXIV to the new stadium in 2030. The 2019 NFL Draft drew 600,000 fans and generated $224 million. Nashville SC of Major League Soccer plays at GEODIS Park, and Vanderbilt plays at FirstBank Stadium.

Sources: Billboard; NPR; Axios; Nashville Convention and Visitors Corp, August 31, 2026; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics; Nashville Area Chamber of Commerce (music industry report, 2020, and remarks by its president and CEO, 2024); Tennessee Lookout; Nissan; Nashville Predators.

Middle Tennessee's Auto Sector and Its Japanese Roots

Japanese automotive companies have made Middle Tennessee their North American base. Nissan North America is headquartered at One Nissan Way in Franklin, builds the Rogue, Pathfinder, Murano and Infiniti QX60 at its Smyrna assembly plant and makes engines, castings and electric motors at Decherd. Nissan says it employs more than 8,000 people in Middle Tennessee. The company said in June 2025 that it has invested more than $8 billion in Smyrna, expected to build more than 350,000 vehicles that year and planned to keep two shifts, though it offered voluntary buyouts to workers at Smyrna and Decherd in early 2025 as part of a global cost-cutting effort.

Mitsubishi Motors and Bridgestone add to the corporate base. Mitsubishi Motors North America moved its headquarters from California to Franklin in 2019, investing $18.25 million and announcing about 200 office jobs, after choosing between Franklin and Dallas. Bridgestone Americas, the parent of the Firestone brand, opened its 30-story Bridgestone Tower in downtown Nashville in December 2017, and at the time said about 1,700 employees would work there. General Motors builds vehicles at Spring Hill, south of Nashville. Manufacturing employment in the Nashville metro was 88,700 in August, up 0.6 percent over the year, a slower pace than leisure and hospitality.

Sources: Nissan; NewsChannel 5, August 17, 2026; Eastern Tennessee Economic Development Agency; Modern Tire Dealer; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Northwest Arkansas and Nashville, Side by Side

Indicator	Northwest Arkansas	Nashville metro
Population, July 2025	622,177	2,197,416
Population growth, 2025	+2.4%	+1.6%
Nonfarm payrolls, August 2026	309,400	1,200,300
Payroll growth, 12 months	+2.2%	+0.7%
Metro unemployment rate, August	2.9%	3.1%
State unemployment rate, August	Arkansas 3.9%	Tennessee 3.4%
Largest local headquarters	Walmart, Tyson, J.B. Hunt	HCA, Nissan Americas, Bridgestone Americas, Dollar General
Comparability note: metro rates are not seasonally adjusted and state rates are seasonally adjusted, so the two should not be compared directly.		

Table 7. Northwest Arkansas and Nashville, side by side. Sources: U.S. Census Bureau; U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics; state labor agencies.

Previewing the Game

Vanderbilt has the better offense on paper, but neither team has played well lately. The Commodores score 24.0 points per game against 19.3 for Arkansas, and Sherrill gives them a reliable target. Arkansas has the slightly better defense, allowing 27.7 points per game against 29.5 for Vanderbilt, though both numbers are poor and both defenses have been run over by ranked teams.

	Arkansas Razorbacks	Vanderbilt Commodores
Record	2-4 (0-3 SEC)	3-3 (0-3 SEC)
Coach	Ryan Silverfield (first season)	Clark Lea (sixth season)
Points per game	19.3	24.0
Points allowed per game	27.7	29.5
Last game	L 17-24 Tennessee	L 17-52 Ole Miss
Line	+6	-6
Moneyline	+190	-225

Table 8. Arkansas vs. Vanderbilt, by the numbers. Sources: ESPN; Dimers; Arkansas and Vanderbilt athletics.

Turnovers will probably decide the game. Curtis threw two interceptions against Ole Miss and is still learning the offense. Arkansas has its own problems, as its quarterbacks completed 22 of 48 passes against Utah and the offense went 2-of-11 on third down against Tennessee. The kickoff is at 7 p.m. Eastern. The forecast calls for a cold evening, with temperatures in the 50s after sunset, according to WSMV.

Vanderbilt is a 6-point favorite and the total is 50.5. The moneyline is near -225 on Vanderbilt and +190 on Arkansas. The odds are as of October 15 and 16 from Dimers and other sportsbook trackers, and they may move before kickoff.

The Bottom Line

We are conflicted because Arkansas has been playing better recently, while Vanderbilt has stumbled against tougher opponents. We expect Vanderbilt to win by about a touchdown, which is close to the line. Vanderbilt is at home, has more offense and has a receiver who has caught a pass in 43 straight games. Arkansas has won all four of its trips to Nashville, though, and it led Tennessee in the fourth quarter last week. If Vanderbilt protects the ball, it should win. If Curtis turns it over twice again, Arkansas can make it five for five in Nashville.

About this report

This Week Seven preview is published by Southeast Economic Advisors and pairs an on-field preview with an economic outlook for the two regions, written for economic developers, real estate investors, lenders and anyone else who follows the regional economy. Economic figures come from the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, the U.S. Census Bureau, state labor agencies, the Nashville Convention and Visitors Corp and the sources cited in each section, and are subject to revision. Job counts attributed to the Nashville Area Chamber are impact estimates; BLS payroll data are the measure of actual jobs. State unemployment rates are seasonally adjusted; the metro rates are not. Football statistics run through Week Six of 2026, and AP rankings are from the poll of October 11. Odds and the weather forecast are as of October 15 and 16, 2026.

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