

Emerging Irrelevance

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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The Buckeyes beat Michigan a couple nights ago, and no one even seemed to notice. In his latest, Gary Benz makes a good point. As great as the NCAA basketball tournament is, it really makes the regular season and matchups like that one meaningless and without drama. Gary also notes that for as much heat as Division I college football catches for its BCS bowl system, in it, they have a process that makes every last regular season contest compelling.



As February rolls into its deepest darkest and coldest corners, there's been much talk about which 65 teams might make it to the NCAA's so-called "big dance" come March. Here we are, weeks away from the tournament and speculative brackets and seedings are being created.

This isn't a story, ladies and gentlemen; it's what most call the dead zone. Pro football is through for the year, its ridiculous Pro Bowl notwithstanding, and pitchers and catchers have yet to report to spring training. The only game in town right now is the Cavs but this is about the time of year when the sameness and blandness of the NBA really kicks in. Most players are anxiously awaiting the All Start break and actual, intense basketball that will determine playoff seeding is still several weeks away. It's getting so bad, poor Bill Livingston at the Plain Dealer has essentially written the same column three of his last four times out.

But all this talk of the potential seedings for the NCAA basketball tournament serves as a nice reminder of the college football season just ended and all the controversy it generated because of the absence of a playoff system. The real question, though, is whether the presence of the NCAA tournament and it's fairly inclusive field of 65 has made the regular season mostly irrelevant for all but the teams playing in minor conferences.

The season Ohio State is enjoying provides a nice backdrop for the discussion. The other night they played that team from up North and hardly anyone seemed to care. While it is true that the Ohio State/Michigan rivalry is more football based, it's still Ohio State vs. Michigan, still a chance to further cement the recent dominance of the Buckeyes over the Wolverines. But the Buckeyes lineup this season all but assured that they'd be in the NCAA tournament before the first jump ball of the season, making the only mystery to be played out where they'd be seeded and which bracket they'd be in. This is hardly compelling stuff to the average fan.

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For teams like Ohio State and the rest of the Big Ten, the NCAA tournament has made the regular season nearly irrelevant. Making matters worse is the presence of the post-season, pre-NCAA conference tournament. The only real value in being the regular season conference winner is that it typically carries a first round bye in the conference tournament and gives athletic directors a reason to order another banner to hang in the rafters of the arena. But these days, the Big Ten conference champ in basketball carries all the prestige of being the 98th person to walk in space. Of arguably even lesser relevance is the actual winner of the conference tournament. In fact, the conventional wisdom now seems to be that losing early in the conference tournament is not a negative because your team gets a few more days rest before the NAAs.

This isn't a call to abandon the NCAA basketball tournament, although eliminating the blatant money grab that is the conference tournament would be a good idea. It's to demonstrate the stark contrast between college basketball and football and the approach to the post-season. There is little doubt that if the NCAA wasn't so tied into the current bowl system, Division I would likely have a playoff system similar to what they have in their smaller divisions. But the presence of the bowl games coupled with the lack of political will or courage by the college presidents to bring about a worthy playoff system and not some jerry-rigged mess that is the BCS or any of the other similar proposals still kicking around all but assures the preservation of the current system.

But is that all bad? As this column is being written, Ohio State and Purdue are locked up in a game that is closer than it out to be. But in the grand scheme, whether or not the Buckeyes prevail or Purdue pulls the upset means little. But how critical, on the other hand, was the Buckeyes football game against a lesser opponent like Illinois last November? The nail-biting outcome made all the difference in whether or not the Buckeyes would even play for the national championship.

In other words, the lack of a playoff system brought a level of intrigue to the football season that might not have otherwise existed. Had a playoff system been in place, it's still likely that the Buckeyes would have been part of it, even if they had lost to Illinois instead of squeaking by. Similar scenarios played out all over the country. Had Florida, for example, not prevailed in the SEC conference championship, Ohio State likely would have faced Michigan in the National Championship game. In fact, if Ohio State had not beaten LLLLLloyd Carr and Michigan in the season finale, the Wolverines would have been the fodder for Urban Meyer's Gators. And don't forget the USC meltdown against its archrival UCLA or the last-second loss by the Louisville Cardinals to surprising Rutgers. The list goes on and on.

But however the football season would have played out or did play out, it kept the interest level high for virtually every regular season football game, which is the way it ought to be. It's an element that has been missing now for several years in college basketball and with the emphasis on the NCAA tournament only increasing each season, it promises to get worse.