

The BCS Mess

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Once the January 7, 2008 match-up of Ohio State and LSU for the national championship was announced, you would have thought that no greater crime against humanity had been committed. And in his latest, Gary Benz says that while the BCS helped our Buckeyes this season, it also exposed the BCS for the flawed system that it is. Gary explains the flaws as he sees them, and also warns fans anxious for a playoff system to not hold their breath.



Those complaining for the 10th straight year about the mess that is the BCS have long since missed the point. Calling out its faults as if it will lead to some greater truth is roughly akin to pointing out Willie McGinest's age and hoping it makes him younger.

Once the January 7, 2008 match-up of Ohio State and LSU for the national championship was announced, you would have thought that no greater crime against humanity had been committed. But for all those coaches out there complaining (yea, we're pointing directly at you Mike Richt of Georgia) and the fans they're firing up over the slights, perceived or real, it may be best to remember the words of Hyman Roth as he dressed down Michael Corleone, "this is the business we've chosen."

The BCS isn't perfect. In fact, it's a joke, but not for the reasons most think. Its existence, plain and simple, is a fraud. It's a jerry-rigged system whose sole purpose is to try and work around the majority of college presidents who like the way things have always been and have

no real appetite to change it. Put it this way, if the majority of college presidents wanted a playoff system, they'd get one. They get everything else they want and the gleaming new buildings that dot most major campuses are a testament to that. But they like these traditional, antiquated bowls and the conference affiliations and the pageantry. They like being courted by men in plaid sport coats who take fact-finding missions in October and November to their campuses to see if the team is worthy of playing in their bowl game. In other words, they like things just the way they are.

If you're still unconvinced, consider this: according to the BCS website, the NCAA hasn't even considered a proposal to create a national championship in Division I-A since 1988 when a proposal presented at the Division I conference went down in flames, 98-13. The last time there was even any official discussion about a playoff, again according to the BCS website, was 1994 when a panel presented information about the viability of establishing a playoff system to the NCAA Presidents Commission which, not surprising, tabled it indefinitely.

Thus, if you want to shave a few points off your blood pressure reading, just move on past the notion that a playoff system is anywhere close to becoming a reality. Browns head coach Romeo Crennel has a better chance of winning three straight Super Bowls as a head coach than college football fans have of seeing the kind of playoff system that exists at every level of college football except Division I. In fact, even the NCAA tacitly accepts this fact. This past season, it renamed Division I-A and I-AA, with the former referred to as the Football Bowl Subdivision (Bowl, get it?) and the latter referred to as the Championship Subdivision (that's Championship, meaning playoff champion, get it?).

The inevitable rub in all of this debate is the abject desire of the colleges to preserve their bowl system and the perceived wants, disguised as needs, of the fans who want to see a "national champion" crowned. But if the underlying thought is that this would somehow settle matters, as if matters actually needed settling in the first place, it won't. No matter who is crowned champion in any given year hardly eliminates the arguments from the other two or three teams who feel they were screwed out of playing in the game in the first place.

This isn't to suggest, by the way, that all the arguing about which team is better doesn't have its place. It does. That's why God invented bars and internet chat rooms. But expecting that a consensus will ever emerge on this topic or any other for that matter is wishful thinking. There are still folks who deny the Holocaust.

But given that this is the business we've chosen, it probably is worth at least pondering whether this year's brand of controversy, which is just different but no less intense than last year's controversy when Florida got into the BCS title game, should bring forth any changes. It should.

The first suggestion, and one I modestly made in the [past](#), is to simply disband the BCS and accept the rather scary notion that different polls may have different opinions about who is number one. My reasoning then and my reasoning now stems from the fact that it has effectively rendered every other bowl game, including the other BCS games, meaningless. There is nothing about any game short of the title game that holds much interest to the casual fan, which seems to run contrary to the intent of the BCS in the first place. But its mere existence has created, in fact, less overall interest, not more. The Rose Bowl may be

the granddaddy of all bowl games, but it's now a granddaddy that just kind of sits in a chair and mumbles to himself and the rest of the family ignores.

Given that blowing up the BCS isn't any more likely than implementing a playoff system, the one change that ought to be legitimately considered in college football is a delay in any polling until at least halfway through the season. Any polls taken prior to that point simply lack context and are based more on reputation and bias than any consequence of what may have taken place in that season.

Much has been made about the supposedly crazy football season that just completed. But those who made those observations were also the same ones who were responsible for the placement of the teams in the polls in the first place. It may be interesting to note that five supposedly number one and number two teams lost this past season, but no one seems to ask whether those teams were rightly ranked in the first place.

LSU, which finds itself in the BCS title game by virtue of its status of champion of the greatest football league there ever was, just ask them, is a particularly interesting study in this regard. Twice they were ranked number one and couldn't hold it because they lost, ultimately, to unranked teams.

The argument goes, of course, that those losses were in triple overtime. So what? They were still losses and to not very good teams, either. The other argument goes that when LSU lost to Kentucky, the Wildcats

were highly ranked. True, but that's the result of tremendous overrating of a team by an incompetent media panel and the lemming coaches that followed them, as the final results more than prove.

But this isn't to just pick on LSU. The polls are literally laced with example after example. West Virginia almost got into the title game with a resume that was far worse than Ohio State's. They lost early to South Florida, another early favorite of the pollsters that, in the end, turned into an unranked average team in an average conference, and the late loss to a lousy Pitt team only proves that the Mountaineers were mostly a good MAC team in the first place. On the opposite side of that coin is Ohio State. Their loss to Illinois, as it turns out, wasn't nearly as bad as initially figured, given where the Illini ended up at season's end. Heck, they made the Rose Bow which, the last time I looked, is a BCS game.

The overarching point to all of this is that time and again those voting in the polls were incompetent, unqualified or easily manipulated, but in any case consistently wrong. That was fine in the days when there was no BCS title game, but given the emphasis the arcane BCS formula places on these polls, it is more relevant than ever.

In fact, if there's anything the BCS architects get right it is the fact that they don't start publishing their poll until about six weeks into the season in recognition that anything prior to that point is essentially meaningless. The AP, the USA Today Coaches Poll, the Harris Interactive Poll and every other geek with a computer and a homegrown algorithm should sit back and let the season unfold in the same way before they even begin to think about publishing any sort of poll. It may not have completely avoided the perceived chaos that took place this

year, but it would have come close.

But, too, just as there is no chance that the BCS will quietly disappear, there is no chance that the polls will fix their own procedures. In other words, you can forget about any sort of meaningful change. The desire just isn't there. The numerous constituencies involved, be they fans, coaches, college presidents, network television executives, are not only absolutely convinced in the rightness of their views, they're hell-bent on convincing everyone else of the wrongness of their views. And the reason, I guess, that we continue to argue about this still? Well, it's kind of like the answer the person gives for continuing to bang his head against the wall: it feels good when we stop.