

A Decade In Review

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Though it's a little bit premature - we still have another season before we can call it a decade - but since it's still August, college football season is still a month away, and Buckeye Dan Wismar has our 2009 Ohio State Buckeyes covered from stem to stern, Jesse steps in today to take a look back at this almost-finished decade in college football, to discuss the bests, worsts, progressions, regressions and trends that have marked the last nine years in the game.



Though it's a little bit premature- we still have another season before we can call it a decade- but since it's still August, college football season is still a month away, and my colleague [Dan Wismar](#) has your 2009 Ohio State Buckeyes covered [from stem to stern](#), now is as good a time as any to take a look back on this almost-finished decade in college football, to discuss the bests, worsts, progressions, regressions and trends that have marked the last nine years in the game.

Best Program of the Decade- USC: After a slow start to the decade (a 11-13 combined record in 2000-01) the Trojans kicked it into high gear in '02, going 11-2, trouncing Iowa 38-17 in the Orange Bowl, and finishing fourth in the AP poll. Since then they haven't lost more than two games in a season, haven't finished lower than fourth in the polls, won the AP title in 2003 and the BCS Championship the following season, ripped off a thirty-four-game winning streak from 2003-05, and have seven consecutive Pac-10 titles and three Heisman Trophy winners on their resume. Most impressively, USC is 6-1 in BCS bowls during the 2000's,

losing only to Vince Young and Texas in the '06 title game.

Worst Program of the Decade- Duke: The Blue Devils are a numbing 14-90 in this decade, have gone winless three times, and own losing streaks of twenty-three and twenty-two games. In case you need some perspective, consider that Ohio State won fourteen games in the 2002 season alone. It does look as if David Cutcliffe has this program on the right track, giving Blue Devils partisans hope that the next decade will be better than this one. It can't possibly be worse. For whatever it's worth (not much) Duke does own a victory over USC this decade... in the [2001 NCAA Tournament](#) .

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*- I'm confining this discussion to FBS schools: still, when it comes to futility I'd like to give a shout-out to Indiana State University. The Sycamores of the FCS Missouri Valley Conference have lost fifty of their last fifty-one games dating back to the middle of the 2004 season. They'll need about twenty-two football versions of Larry Bird to right *that* ship.

Best Team of the Decade- 2001 Miami Hurricanes: Ten starters from this powerhouse went on to become first-round selections in the NFL Draft, along with six other reserves and red-shirts- and this group doesn't even include Clinton Portis, who was a second-round pick in 2002. The

[#39;01 Canes](#)

won all twelve of their games by an average score of 43-10 and they saved their biggest beat-downs for some of their best opponents. Miami hammered 15

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-ranked Florida State 49-27, 14

th

-ranked Syracuse 59-0, 19

th

-ranked Washington 65-7 and 8

th

-ranked Nebraska 37-14 in the BCS Championship Game. For sheer talent coupled with performance, no team of the 2000's tops this one.

Worst Team of the Decade- 2008 Washington State Cougars: There have been worse teams in terms of talent and overall record. Indeed, the '08 Cougars won two games and didn't even finish in last place in the Pac-10. But it's hard to find a team that was less competitive, week-in and week-out, than this one. The boys from Pullman were outscored by more than four hundred points and lost by scores of 39-13, 45-17, 66-3, 63-14, 28-3, 66-13, 69-0, 58-0, 59-28 and 31-0. Hard to believe six years earlier Washington State went to the Rose Bowl.

Best Game of the Decade- 2003 Fiesta Bowl: Admittedly I'm biased, and there are some other wonderful contests from which to choose.

You can't go wrong in picking

[Boise State's '07 Fiesta Bowl victory over Oklahoma](#)

,

[Texas's '06 BCS title-game victory over USC](#)

, the

[2005 USC-Notre Dame classic](#)

or even the Marshall-East Carolina shootout in the

['01 GMAC Bowl](#)

for this distinction. But when it comes to stakes, drama and controversy, for my money the

[Ohio State-Miami donnybrook](#)

simply can't be topped. There were two great teams on the field in Tempe that night, two undefeated, untied juggernauts, and their dispute wasn't settled until the end of a second overtime.

Worst Game of the Decade- 2002 Rose Bowl: Well, let's start with the fact that a Big East team and a Big 12 team were playing in the Granddaddy- the equivalent of hanging a Velvet Elvis in the Louvre to a traditionalist like Yours Truly. Then let's move on to the inclusion of

Nebraska- a team that didn't win its conference, didn't even win its *division*

, and coughed up 62 points in its final regular-season game.

[This game was a blowout](#)

long before the coin toss, and it made a farce out of the BCS selection process.

Coach of the Decade- Pete Carroll, USC: It's easy to forget that Southern Cal was an afterthought in its own conference at the beginning of the decade. In 2000 the Trojans limped to a 5-7 record in Paul Hackett's final season at the helm. Carroll, a two-time washout as an NFL head coach, was athletic director Mike Garrett's fourth choice to succeed Hackett. Garrett is probably glad that Mike Riley, Mike Bellotti and Dennis Erickson didn't return his calls. All Carroll has done is to build USC into the dominant program in college football, and L.A.'s *de facto*

professional team- figuratively and, unfortunately,

[probably literally as well](#)

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Player of the Decade- Vince Young, Texas: There have been more highly decorated players to burst on the scene in this decade, but [none more capable of single-handedly winning a football game than Vince Young](#)

. In 2005 Young had perhaps the greatest season ever by a college quarterback, throwing for more than 3,000 yards, rushing for more than 1,000, and leading the Longhorns to an undefeated season and the National Championship. The man-child from Houston saved his best performance for the biggest stage, throwing for 267 yards, running for 200, and scoring three touchdowns, including the game-winner with nineteen seconds left, as the 'Horns stunned USC 41-38 in the BCS

Championship Game. Tim Tebow might win another Heisman Trophy in 2009, but he'll never be Vince Young- and neither will anyone else (except Terrelle Pryor, perhaps.)

Biggest Upset of the Decade- Stanford 24, USC 23, October 6, 2007: A 41-point underdog going in, the Cardinal overcame a 23-14 fourth-quarter deficit to [shock the Trojans](#) in the L.A. Coliseum, scoring the winning points on Mark Bradford's leaping fourth-down touchdown catch with forty-nine seconds to play. You might suggest that Appalachian State-Michigan was a bigger upset: I respectfully disagree. USC was unquestionably better than Michigan and App State may very well have been better than Stanford- put the latter two teams on a neutral field, and my money is on the Mountaineers. In retrospect, it's easy to understand why Michigan had trouble with App State's team speed and spread offense. But Stanford's conquest of USC remains as inexplicable as on the night it took place.

Play of the Decade- The Hook 'n Lateral, 2007 Fiesta Bowl:

BCS-busting upstart Boise State had blown a 28-10 third-quarter lead and trailed Oklahoma 35-28 with eighteen seconds to play in regulation. Facing 4

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-and-18 at midfield, Broncos quarterback

[Jared Zabransky hit Drisan James, who flipped to Jerard Rabb, who raced the final thirty-eight yards to the end zone to tie the game](#)

. It was only the first in a series of trick plays that eventually got Boise the win, 43-42 in overtime. It was also the signature play of one of the most important games of the decade- the first shot for a non-BCS school against a legitimate power.

Best Story of the Decade- Wake Forest, 2006: A dark horse, just like the Demon Deacons themselves. In the 118 seasons of Wake Forest football prior to 2006, the program had won exactly one championship of any kind- in 1970, when the Deacons took the ACC crown (they didn't get a bowl bid, which tells you how respected the ACC was in football circles back then.) But in '06 Jim Grobe's team put it all together, winning a school-record eleven games- including six road wins without a loss- and upsetting Georgia Tech in the ACC Championship Game to earn a trip to the Orange Bowl, Wake's first January bowl appearance since 1949. Maybe it was the prosaic way the Deacons won games- opportunistic defense, mistake-free offense and a sound kicking game- or maybe it was Coach Grobe's low-key style; in any case, Wake's magical 2006 season didn't get the press it deserved.

Biggest Progressions

Rutgers: When the new millennium dawned the Scarlet Knights were a nowhere program resting at the bottom of the Big East. From 1999 until 2003, they lost twenty-five consecutive conference games. But energized by the youthful vigor of Greg Schiano, Rutgers has climbed to respectability. The Knights have finished with winning records four consecutive seasons and have made bowl trips in all of those years, after reaching the postseason just once in all the decades prior to the 2000's.

Boise State: For much of the '90s the Broncos were a member of the I-AA Big Sky Conference- in fact, they lost to Jim Tressel and Youngstown State in the 1994 I-AA title game. They didn't move up to the top level of college football until 1996, a season in which they went 2-10. But they gradually improved, first under Dirk Koetter, then Dan Hawkins, and finally Chris Peterson. Boise first cracked the final AP poll in 2002, and with the exception of two seasons, the Broncos have finished in the rankings ever since. In 2006, just ten years after moving up from I-AA, Boise went undefeated and knocked off Oklahoma in the Fiesta Bowl.

Oklahoma: For most of the 1990's, Sooner Magic was nowhere to be found in Norman or anywhere else. The once-proud Crimson & Cream never finished higher than 16th in the AP poll in that decade and went a woeful 12-22 from 1996-98. But the arrival of Bob Stoops in 1999 breathed new life into a program on life support.

[In 2000 the Sooners ran the table and won the BCS Championship](#)

, and despite some [embarrassing pratfalls](#), they have stayed in the thick of national contention throughout the decade.

LSU: The Bayou Bengals suffered through seven losing

seasons in the '90s and failed to reach a single January bowl game for the entirety of the decade. But Nick Saban's arrival in Baton Rouge in 2000 was just the tonic the program needed. LSU has put together winning records every season in the new decade and owns two BCS Championships. The dark days of Mike Archer and [Curley Hallman](#) are but a distant memory.

California: In 2001 the not-so-Golden Bears went 1-10, their fifth consecutive losing season. Then head coach Tom Holmoe was replaced by quarterback wizard Jeff Tedford- and Cal hasn't had a losing season since. All that remains to climax the revival in Berkeley is a trip to the Rose Bowl, a game Cal hasn't played in since [1959](#).

Biggest Regressions

Washington: No program fell as far over the course of this decade as U-Dub. In 2000 the Huskies powered to

an 11-1 record, the Pac-10 title, and a third-place ranking in the final polls- and one could make a serious argument that they should have received an invite to the BCS Championship Game. Eight years later, after a string of [scandals](#)

and

[questionable coaching hires](#)

, they were the only winless team in major-college football. Washington was arguably second only to USC as a Pac-10 power during the second half of the twentieth century. Now it just wants to win a football game.

Miami: In the first four years of the 2000's the Hurricanes went 46-4, won the National Championship in '01, put together a thirty-four-game winning streak at one point, and from 2001-04 had nineteen players selected in the first round of the NFL Draft. Then they began to slide. In 2007 the 'Canes struggled to a 5-7 record, their first losing season in a decade. Just one Miami player was selected in the 2009 Draft- in the sixth round. It's been quite a fall from grace for what was the nation's top program when the decade began.

Marshall: The Thundering Herd was the preeminent mid-major in college football at the turn of the century. They went 25-1 in the last two seasons of the '90s, including a perfect 13-0 mark in 1999. No Division-I program won more games in the '90s. But in 2005 they made an ill-advised conference switch, jumping from the MAC to C-USA- and they haven't had a winning season since. Quite frankly, it serves them right. In 1969 the MAC expelled Marshall for a laundry list of recruiting violations. In '97 the conference was magnanimous enough to take the Herd back- only to be dumped at the first opportunity. Well, they're learning a hard lesson about the wages of infidelity down in Huntington.

Nebraska: No major college program dominated the '90s like Nebraska. The Cornhuskers won three National Championships in the decade, went undefeated three times, and from 1993 through '97 had a record of 60-3. The 1995 team might be the most dominant in the history of college football. Only a missed field goal at the end of the '94 Orange Bowl deprived Nebraska of a 38-game winning streak. But the new century has been a different story for Big Red. The program has struggled through its first two losing seasons since the early '60s and hasn't won the Big 12 title in this decade.

Syracuse: The Orangemen posted winning seasons every single year in the 1990's and [won the Big East title in 1998](#)

. But the program went into a tailspin early in this decade, one it hasn't pulled out of. Currently Syracuse is working on a string of four consecutive losing seasons, the longest such streak for the program since the 1940's. Even in a Big East weakened by the defections of three of its strongest members, the Orangemen have found themselves unable to compete.

Trends of the Decade

Relative stability: At the beginning of the 1990's things were the same as they seemingly had always been in the world of college football. There was still a Big Eight Conference, still a Southwest Conference, and Penn State, Florida State, Syracuse, Boston College, Pittsburgh and Miami were still independent. The Big Ten, true to its name, still had ten members. The Big East did not exist, at least in football, and the ACC was still seen as somewhat of a sideshow, a conference that didn't even have an automatic bowl bid for its champion.

The bowl system was its old archaic self. All five major bowls- Cotton, Rose, Sugar, Orange, and a relative newcomer, the Fiesta- were played on January 1st, unless it was a Sunday, in which case they were moved back to January 2nd

. The old arrangements- Big Ten and Pac-10 in the Rose, SEC in the Sugar, SWC in the Cotton, Big Eight in the Orange- were still cast in stone. There was no guarantee of a one-versus-two National Championship game- you had to hope both of the top two were independents, or one independent and the other a school with a bid to a bowl that had an at-large slot. Sometimes the pieces fell into place, like in 1992 when Miami and Alabama met in the

[Sugar Bowl](#)

. Other times they didn't. When a member of the Big Ten or Pac-10 was one of the top two, and the other wasn't- you were out of luck. In 1991, Miami and Washington each ran the table and finished on top of the polls, but couldn't meet on the field because the Huskies were locked into the Rose Bowl and the Hurricanes were locked out.

Then the revolution came. In 1992, most of the major Eastern independents banded together to form the Big East football Conference. The same year, independent South Carolina and SWC member Arkansas joined the SEC, which staged the sport's [first-ever conference championship game](#) that December. Also in '92, Florida State joined the ACC, and in '93 Penn State joined the Big Ten. In 1995 the

[Bowl Alliance](#)

came into being, with every major conference save the Big Ten and Pac-10 agreeing to stage a National Championship Game in the event of two of their members finishing at the top of the polls. In 1996, the

[Southwest Conference](#)

broke up, with four of its larger affiliates joining the Big Eight to form the Big 12 Conference. Finally, in 1998, the Big Ten and Pac-10 signed on to the Bowl Alliance, and the BCS was born.

Voila

- college football as we now know it.

Compared to the seismic upheavals of the 1990's, the present decade has been downright tranquil. Sure, there have been some alterations- the ACC's poaching of Big East members Boston College, Virginia Tech and Miami in 2005 being the biggest- but for the most part, the music has stopped and everyone is securely in their seats. The method for deciding the mythical National Championship has been tinkered with, but essentially hasn't changed in the last ten years. The college football landscape in 1999 was dramatically different than it had been in 1990. In contrast, a fan from the millennium could hop into his DeLorean, set the date for 2009, crank it to eighty-eight miles per hour and when he arrived in the future discover that things look pretty much the same as they'd been when he left- although he might wonder what lock Hawaii picked to get into the Sugar Bowl two years ago. Which brings us to our second trend...

Rise of the Mid-Majors: Invasion of elite turf by schools from outside the power conferences isn't a new development- Wyoming and Air Force of the

WAC received Sugar Bowl bids in
[1968](#)

and

['71](#)

, and

[BYU won a mythical National Championship](#)

in 1984. But the 2000's for the first time saw the introduction of a formal system that allowed mid-majors to play in the big postseason games, provided they met the qualifications. In previous years the likes of Boise State and Hawaii wouldn't have been permitted to sniff the rarified air of Fiesta and Sugar. They would have been shunted off to their little December bowls to play on syndicated television, their cries for respect unheard. Not so anymore. The mid-majors have their day. The next step is to be allowed to play for a National Championship- a development we might just see in the next decade.

BCS Controversy: The 2000's have also opened eyes to the fact that the BCS is a long way from foolproof in terms of deciding a National Champion.

In every season but two- 2002 and 2005, when the last two undefeated teams met on the field- the process has been accompanied by dissatisfaction and discomfiture. In 2000 Miami fans wondered why Florida State, [which lost to the Hurricanes](#), went to the BCS title game instead of their team. In 2001 and '03 Nebraska and Oklahoma received title shots even though neither won its conference during the regular season. In 2004 a pair of unbeaten teams- Auburn and Utah- were left out in the cold while USC and Oklahoma played for all the marbles. In '06 one-loss Florida got the nod over one-loss Michigan for no reason other than a desire on the part of the BCS to avoid a re-match between the Wolverines and Ohio State. 2007 was a total mess, and we all know about the Texas-Oklahoma imbroglio from last season. The reality has been brought home that, short of a tournament, a flawless method of deciding a National Champion remains beyond the grasp of this wonderful game.

And when will this tournament come into being?

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Well, it won't be in this decade and from the looks of it, probably not the next one either. So we'll just have to content ourselves with this glorious mess for another ten years at least.