

## End of the Season Musings: '09 Style

Written by {ga=hermanfontenot}  
Thursday, December 10 2009 7:00 PM -

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Along with Dan Wismar, he's been Johnny on the Spot for us on the Buckeye football and college football beat this season. And with the regular season over and the bowl schedule set, it's time for a quick run-through of Jesse Lamovsky's post-season reflections, awards, pans, and other random thoughts. He'll be back in the coming days with his complete predictions of the bowls, but for now let us glance back at the season that was and the postseason that will be.



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**Best Team of the Regular Season- Alabama:** It was tempting to put TCU in this spot; after all, the Horned Frogs also went 12-0, defeated Clemson in Death Valley, and annihilated just about everyone on their Mountain West Conference schedule. But Alabama's regular season was just a tad more impressive, as the Tide bracketed their undefeated record with an opening-night conquest of Virginia Tech and an SEC Championship manhandling of top-ranked Florida

**Worst Team of the Regular Season- Western Kentucky:** The 0-12 Hilltoppers were one of two FBS teams to not win a game, the other being Eastern Michigan. WKU's defense gave up 60 or more points three times and now have a 20-game

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losing streak dating back to last season. As impressive as Alabama was in going undefeated in God's Conference, it's equally impressive that Western Kentucky couldn't eek out a win in the Sun Belt, the weakest conference in all the FBS.

**Penthouse-to-Outhouse Team of the Year- Ball State:** Remember last season, when the Cardinals went 12-0 in the regular season? Well, better hope the folks in Muncie do. With head coach Brady Hoke off to San Diego State and star quarterback Nate Davis off to the 49ers, BSU staggered to a 2-10 finish this season. Perhaps Stan Parrish wasn't the best choice to replace Hoke- in his last two stints, at Kansas State (where he preceded Bill Snyder's first tour of duty in Manhattan) and now at Ball State, Parrish boasts a record of 4-41-1.

**Best Game of the Regular Season- Cincinnati/Pittsburgh:** The setting couldn't have been more picturesque- a bitterly cold Western Pennsylvania afternoon with the snow flying, true football weather. The stakes couldn't have been much higher- the Big East title, a BCS berth and an undefeated season for Cincinnati on the line. And the game couldn't have been more exciting- the Bearcats falling behind by 21 points and rallying to win 45-44 on Tony Pike's 29-yard strike to Armon Binns with 33 seconds remaining.

The Big East may not be the world's greatest conference- it probably isn't even as strong as the non-BCS Mountain West- but it has boasted some memorable late-season showcase games. The Rutgers-Louisville thriller of 2006, the Pitt-West Virginia stunner of 2007, last week's Cincinnati-Pitt donnybrook- you just can't get much more dramatic than these. For most of the season the "Least" can be more or less safely ignored... but when November and December roll around, you'd be well advised to tune in.

**Player of the Year- Ndamukong Suh, Nebraska:** Offensive players get the plaudits and the highlights, but the best player in college football was Nebraska's monster defensive tackle. Playing for a team with an offensive philosophy that makes Jim Tressel look like Mouse Davis is comparison; going against opponents that game-planned for him every week, Suh was simply unstoppable. His

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performance against Texas in the Big 12 Championship Game was the stuff of legend; he dominated the explosive Longhorn offense and very nearly won the game practically single-handedly.

Hopefully Suh will be wearing Seal Brown and Orange at this time next year- although if Mangini is still around, he'll probably have traded his draft rights to the Jets for their first-rounder, David Clowney and a couple of backup linebackers.

By the way- what was Mack Brown thinking at the end of the Big 12 Championship Game? Texas had a timeout remaining; they could have gone with a simple running play or a quick pass and stopped the clock with plenty of time remaining for a game-winning field-goal attempt. Yet Coach Brown let offensive coordinator Greg Davis call a time-consuming rollout play that nearly ended in disaster. Even Les Miles thought the clock management on that play was bush-league.

**Freshman of the Year- Deon Lewis, Pittsburgh:** LeSean who? The 5'8" frosh from Albany, New York, made Pitt fans forget all about Shady McCoy, trundling for 1,640 yards and 16 touchdowns and very nearly leading the Panthers all the way to the BCS. Lewis was the cream of a bountiful crop of first-year backs that include Ryan Williams of Virginia Tech, LaMichael James of Oregon and Bernard Pierce of Temple.

**Coach of the Year- Chip Kelly, Oregon:** The rookie coach had his hands full right from the opening night of the season, when the Ducks were manhandled by Boise State and lost star running back LeGarrette Blount for most of the season thanks to his sucker punch on Boise's Byron Hout. It looked as if Kelly was in over his head. But he rallied his team, uncovered a new backfield star in LaMichael James, and led the Ducks to the Pac-10 title and the program's first Rose Bowl berth since 1995. It was quite a turnaround from that disastrous night in Idaho, and quite a job done by the rookie head coach.

June Jones deserves a lot of consideration here for leading SMU to its first bowl since 1984, but, fair or not- and it isn't fair- it's hard to give a coach-of-the-year nod to the man in charge of the only team to lose to Washington State.

**Most Pleasant Surprise- Idaho:** The Vandals hadn't had a winning season since 1999 and had limped to a 3-21 combined record in 2007-08. But they enjoyed a revival in '09 under third-year head coach Rob Akey, winning seven of their first eight games and finishing with a record of 7-5. Idaho didn't play well down the stretch, dropping its last four, but the late slide doesn't erase the progress the program made this season. And the Vandals have a golden opportunity to finish on a winning note against Bowling Green in the MPC Computers Bowl in Boise.

**Biggest Disappointment- Illinois:** With almost every component of an explosive offense returning, the Illini were supposed to bounce back strongly from their disappointing 5-7 season of 2008. Instead they got even worse, finishing a dismal 3-9. Illinois was wiped out 37-9 by Missouri in the opening week of the season and never recovered. For some reason- probably involving the size of his buyout- Ron Zook (21-38 with one winning season in five years at Illinois) will be back craning his neck in Champagne next season.

**You Don't Want to Face... Oregon State:** The Beavers have a seasoned fifth-year senior quarterback in Sean Canfield, the sensational Rodgers brothers and Mike Riley, who is a perfect 6-0 in bowl games as the head coach in Corvallis. They'll be a load to handle for BYU in the Las Vegas Bowl on December 22

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*fifth*

consecutive appearance in the Vegas Bowl. With Mountain West brethren Utah and TCU each enjoying BCS bids of recent vintage, you'd think the Cougars might have a slight case of Vegas fatigue at this point.

**You Do Want to Face... Marshall:** The Thundering Herd staggers into their Little Caesar's Pizza Bowl match-up with Ohio at 6-6, coming off a

52-21 rout at the hands of UTEP, and without a full-time head coach, Mark Snyder having resigned after the final game of the season. With a .500 record and a point differential of -37, Marshall might be the worst team playing this December.

Still, the Game Formerly Known as the Motor City Bowl is probably pretty satisfied with this match-up. Marshall and Ohio are old Mid-American Conference rivals, their campuses just two hours apart along a rural stretch of southern Ohio blacktop, and both schools should bring a reasonably sized contingent to Detroit for the Boxing Day showdown.

**Great Powers in Decline:** USC and Oklahoma were perhaps the decade's two best programs going into this season, with a pair of BCS Championships and six Championship Game appearances between them. But the Trojans and Sooners are nowhere to be found in discussions of the national elite this year- and for good reason. Both suffered through woeful seasons, relatively speaking. USC lost nearly as many Pac-10 games in 2009 (four) as in the previous five seasons combined (five) and collapsed completely in lopsided losses to Oregon (47-20) and Stanford (55-21.) Oklahoma struggled through an injury-plagued 7-5 season, its worst since 1999.

I know we get frustrated by Jim Tressel at times- or at least, I know / do. But it is worth noting that none of his Ohio State teams have ever imploded the way USC and Oklahoma did this season. Yes, 2004 was a little rocky, but the Buckeyes improved as that season progressed, while this season's version of USC and Oklahoma trended downward. The offensive play-calling and execution can be exasperating, the big-game losses have been galling- but there's something to be said for

consistent contention in terms of conference titles and BCS bids.

And as far as the big-game losses are concerned, well... this too shall pass. Jim Tressel isn't the first high-profile coach to have trouble in spotlight games. Bear Bryant and Tom Osborne had their problems along those lines as well. At some point the worm will turn and the Buckeyes will start winning those games again. January 1<sup>st</sup> against Oregon would be a good place to start.

**Go Get Gill:** I'm obviously not the athletic director of the University of Kansas, but if I were I'd transform Buffalo head coach Turner Gill from the leading candidate for the job into the man for the job, period. He'd be a great fit in Lawrence. The former Nebraska Cornhusker option quarterback would be on familiar ground in the Big 12 North. A native Texan and former assistant at SMU and North Texas, he'd have a foot in the door of that talent-rich state. Temperamentally, he's an antidote to the departed Mark Mangino: tough like Mangino was, but fair and a former player at a high level who can identify with the young men in his charge perhaps a bit better than the man who preceded him. He also has experience in bringing good players to a place where recruiting for football has never been particularly easy.

Moreover, I'd hate to see a coach and man the quality of Turner Gill stuck at the University of Buffalo. The MAC can be a trap for coaches who don't parachute out fast enough- see what

happened to Gregg Brandon's career when he stayed too long at Bowling Green. Gill has done great things in Western New York- it'd be nice to see him get a shot at the big-time.

**More like Siesta than Fiesta:** The brickbats always come out at bowl selection time, and this year they're being swung in the direction of the Fiesta Bowl, where non-BCS qualifiers TCU and Boise State meet in a Poinsettia Bowl re-match that the world wasn't exactly awaiting with baited breath. The majority opinion seems to be that the Horned Frogs and Broncos got screwed, that the Fiesta Bowl is college football's answer to the card table where the little kids sit at Thanksgiving.

And to an extent, that might be the case. No doubt fans of TCU and Boise would have liked to see their teams match up with opponents from the prestigious conferences instead of against one another. But the final pairings were simply a reflection on the possible match-ups and on the order in which the bowls selected their at-large participants. The Sugar Bowl had the first selection and took Florida, as it obviously would. The Fiesta Bowl had the second selection and took TCU. The Orange Bowl had the third selection and took Iowa to match up with Georgia Tech. Back around to the Sugar Bowl, and they took Cincinnati to face Florida. The Fiesta Bowl brought up the rear and was left with Boise. It wasn't a conspiracy. It was simply the way things worked out.

Really, there weren't all that many compelling match-ups to be had. There was no USC or Oklahoma. Clemson and Nebraska, a couple of teams that travel very well, fell short of the BCS by a total of six points. Honestly- would TCU/Iowa or TCU/Georgia Tech have been *that* much more interesting than TCU/Boise?

**Bowl I Would Have Liked to See- Oklahoma/Arizona:** A match-up between the Stoops Brothers in, say, the Sun Bowl would have been a lot of fun, a showcase for the wellspring of Northeast Ohio coaching talent, and a very competitive game besides.

**If There Were No BCS:** Here is what the big-money bowls might look like:

***Rose (Big 10 vs. Pac-10):*** Ohio State vs. Oregon

***Sugar (SEC vs. at-large):*** Florida vs. Cincinnati

***Fiesta (Big 12 vs. at-large):*** Texas vs. Alabama

## ***Orange (ACC vs. at-large):*** Georgia Tech vs. Iowa

TCU and Boise are conspicuous by their absence. Remember this, those of you who are complaining about the unjust treatment of the Frogs and Broncos- if not for the BCS, those teams would be in the Las Vegas and MPC Computers Bowls, respectively. That's not necessarily a defense of the BCS, *per se* - just a point that should be made. Really, when you think about it, the so-called mid-majors have been the biggest beneficiaries of the post-1998 system. The BCS is the only reason those teams are getting the big-game invites. There is no real motivation, aside from the imperative of the system, for the marquee bowls to select those teams at all.

**The Tournament as I See It:** Here are what the first-round match-ups would look like if the NCAA put into effect the Lamovsky Plan\*, the 16-team tournament with 11 automatic bids for conference champions, five at-large bids, a maximum of two bids per conference and at least the first two rounds at campus sites. (Seeds are based on the AP poll):

#16 Troy @ #1 Alabama

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#9 Georgia Tech @ #8 Ohio State

#12 BYU @ #5 Florida

#13 West Virginia @ #4 TCU

#11 Virginia Tech @ #6 Boise State

#14 East Carolina @ #3 Cincinnati

#10 Iowa @ #7 Oregon

#15 Central Michigan @ #2 Texas

\*- I'll give a shout-out here to Dan Wenzel's playoff idea, which is pretty much identical to mine. I'd provide a link to Wenzel's plan, but I just switched over to Firefox and, being a dummy, have no idea how to link from Firefox to Microsoft Word. Just trust me on this one.

Not bad, huh? There are a couple of potentially very interesting first-round tilts here, particularly Boise-Virginia Tech, Oregon-Iowa and Ohio State-Georgia Tech. The games involving the top two seeds are probably dogs, but there would be at least a bit of intrigue surrounding the match between in-state opponents Alabama and Troy. Either way, it sure beats watching Idaho and Bowling Green lock horns on the blue turf in an essentially meaningless exhibition.

**Next:** Dan Wismar and Yours Truly will discuss last week's championship games and the upcoming bowls on the Buckeye Friday podcast.