

The Path to a College Playoff

Written by {ga=gdbenz}

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The dominoes continue to fall and now it won't be long before college football finally has a legitimate playoff to determine its national champion. The news that the Big Ten is noodling various playoff scenarios carries with it the significant implication that it not only can be swayed but that it will. To this point the Big Ten served as both the enemy of progress and the 10,000 pound elephant in the playoff advocates' ointment.

There is this overwhelming unmet need of so many to crown a national champion in Division I football on the field. Initially it stemmed from the distinct possibility that the two ranking groups, the Associated Press and the United Press International Coaches Poll, since taken over by USA Today, left open the possibility that there could be, God forbid, a difference of opinion on which team really was the theoretical best for that year. Indeed they did disagree at various times, though it should be noted that it didn't result in rain falling upward or dogs playing with cats.

Despite all the supposedly smart men in hideous blazers paid by universities to wring hands and scratch brows over all things related to college football, no one could quite figure out how to deal with an incredibly antiquated and increasingly irrelevant bowl system that seemed to be an insurmountable hurdle to a national playoff system.

The preservation of this goofy bowl system, which is really a vestige of a bygone day where it was difficult and expensive for teams to travel anywhere but locally, always has been a curious thing. There's no overriding reason, for example, why the Rose Bowl needs to continue to exist except to enhance the pockets of those who run it. Sure it's tradition. So was the Maypole dance. Everything has its time and its expiration date.

What started out as a nice way for a handful of teams to celebrate an end to a football season has since morphed into an impossibly controlled crazy quilt of games that no longer celebrate

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any real success. All it takes to become bowl eligible is for a team to win half its games in a given season and as the number of bowl games propagate faster than Kris Kardashian Jenner the relevance gets even harder to find. Bowl games are now the equivalent of participation trophies that little leagues hand out so that no kid is left to feel bad because his team didn't win.

So a legitimate football playoff season has been hamstrung by the abject refusal of anyone with any guts to admit that the king hasn't been wearing any clothes for at least two decades. Thus we're left to act like the bowl games matter and that taking a back hoe to them would be tantamount to tearing at the very fabric that holds this country together.

Certainly the Big Ten's Jim Delany, whose title is commissioner but who has always seen himself as much more of a deity, has been the biggest advocate for the current bowl system. In the past he has vowed that the Big Ten wouldn't ever consider approving any sort of playoff system. I wonder what's turned his head?

Well, let's start with the fact that his conference has become mostly shut out from winning a national championship for the last 6 years. When the SEC sent two of its teams to play for this year's national championship, Delany had to see it as the disaster it really was. The nation was left to witness a redux of sorts of the SEC Championship game, Delany's conference was losing its competitiveness and the spotlight and the situation doesn't look to change any time soon.

But there is more. When horse-and-buggy thinkers like Delany put the clamps on any talks of a legitimate playoff system it's not as if others didn't still try to make something, anything happen. Thus was born probably the single dumbest creation in college football history next to the flying wedge: the Bowl Championship Series.

Through a convoluted point system that weighs everything from a team's ranking in the more traditional polls to the color of its uniforms, the BCS tries to force a matchup of the two best teams in the country in one super, duper bowl game that takes place at the end of a particularly hellish week of other BCS-related bowls run by the very idiots whose interests run counter to the rest of the college football fan base.

The hope I guess was that by having the BCS align with the traditional bowls and their traditional conference alignments and then throwing millions of dollars at the conference anyone

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with any authority would look the other way at the inequities it caused. It's worked, sort of, except that all anyone really does is complain about the way it works.

It's not just that the BCS system ignores teams/conferences it doesn't deem worthy that causes the problems, although that's a big part of it. It's the fact that despite all the rigor of its ranking process in the end those same guys in the hideous blazers get to ignore those rankings when deciding who will participate in the bowl they represent. The draft used by most fantasy football leagues makes more sense.

How did this lead to Delany's evolution on the subject of a playoff? How about the fact that Michigan got to play in a BCS bowl game which Michigan State, easily the conference's second best team and a team that handled Michigan during the regular season, did not.

No one outside of Ann Arbor thought this was fair and I suspect Delany heard an earful from most of the rest of the conference. The selection of Michigan instead of Michigan State by the Sugar Bowl was indefensible. It wasn't based on on-field accomplishment but more so on which team supposedly traveled better. That's code for which team had the more affluent alumni base that would buy tickets to a game that was played for absolutely no stakes and had even less meaning than that. And don't get me started on Virginia Tech. How they played in anything beyond the Meineke Car Care Bowl remains a bigger mystery than Newt Gingrich.

In truth, it was only a matter of time before the inequities of college football started impacting the Big Ten in a negative way. Until recently, the Big Ten has had it mostly its way and had absolutely no incentive to do anything different than simply being the petulant child who refuses to get into the car so that the rest of the family can leave for vacation.

But the thing we know most about college football these days is that it's not about the athletes and it's not about the students. It's about the money. State legislatures everywhere continually squeeze the budgets of the public universities that taxpayers help support and university presidents are forced to find new revenue streams as well as ways to widen the existing streams.

It shouldn't be a surprise, then, that Delany's whispered sanctioning of a playoff system comes with the notion that it would involve an additional home game for the top two seeds. The best

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teams in the Big Ten have stadiums the size of Rhode Island and fill them with an ease that even a touring Bruce Springsteen would admire. That's a lot of extra money for a conference that splits its proceeds among all its members.

Now nothing comes easy when it comes to Delany and the Big Ten, which is why their kicking around of a 4-team playoff is akin to dipping one's toe in the tub to test the temperature. But Delany is smart enough to know that you can't be a little bit pregnant and understands full well the history of how the NCAA's basketball tournament went from a sleepy little 8-team tournament to the 68 team monstrosity it is today. Once you start there's no going back.

And just like that the bowl system is no longer the insurmountable hurdle to a more equitable system. It will take time and it won't be perfect immediately but make no mistake that the path is being paved. Who knew, except everybody, that money would solve all problems?