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# One Nation, Under the BCS

Controversy isn't all bad. It keeps people interested in the game, keeps them talking about it.

*—Former SEC commissioner Roy Kramer, primary architect of the Bowl Championship Series, 1999*

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The BCS is, simply, the worst idea in sports. . . . Worse than the designated hitter. Worse than the possession arrow. If you could find someone playing indoor soccer, they would agree it's worse than that, too.

—St. Petersburg (Florida) Times*, 2004*

Every day, on college campuses all across the country, bright young scholars and renowned professors work to solve many of society's greatest dilemmas. America's universities have helped formulate national and international policy, improve Fortune 500 companies, decode ancient texts, and cure deadly diseases. Yet these same schools can't seem to devise a conclusive way to determine which one has the best football team in a given season.

Since 1998, college football's national champion has been decided by something called the Bowl Championship Series, or BCS. In order to properly explain what the BCS is, it is helpful to first clarify what the BCS is *not*:

1. The BCS is not an actual organization. You cannot walk into some skyscraper in New York City or an office park in Topeka, Kansas, and ask to "speak to someone with the BCS," because the BCS does not physically exist. The phrase "Bowl Championship Series" refers solely to a coalition of college football's four most prestigious bowl games, the Rose, Orange, Sugar, and Fiesta, which between them take turns hosting a fifth game, the BCS National Championship. Technically there is no actual Series, either, just a championship game and four separate, completely unrelated bowls. The phrase "Bowl Championship Series" was devised by a former ABC exec who figured it would make for catchier promos than, "Tune in next week for Some Really Big Bowl Games."

2. Unlike March Madness, the sixty-five-team NCAA tournament that concludes each college basketball season, the BCS is *not* an NCAA-administered event. The NCAA has never awarded an official national championship for its highest level, Division I-A. In fact, other than a largely cursory certification process for bowl

games ("Do you have a stadium?" "Yes." "Will you be selling hot dogs?" "Yup, brats and nachos, too." "How about $30 T-shirts?" "Most definitely." "Perfect, you're certified"), the NCAA has almost no authority over college football's Division I-A postseason. Everything pertaining to the BCS and its national championship game, from payouts to entry rules to uniform colors, is determined by administrators from the nation's major conferences (such as the Big Ten and the SEC) and Notre Dame, which, while unable to beat the top teams in those leagues, manages to retain the same level of clout. Imagine for a moment that the World Series was operated not by Major League Baseball, but by the Yankees, Red Sox, Cubs, and Cardinals, and you have the BCS.

3. Finally—and as its rulers would be the first tell you—the BCS is *not*, nor was it ever intended to be, a playoff. The participants in the national title game are the number 1 and 2 teams at the end of the regular season as determined by a convoluted rankings system (more on that in a moment). The winners of the other BCS games do not feed into that game, nor do the other four bowls necessarily match the next-best teams (that is, number 3 vs. number 4, number 5 vs. number 6). They do, however, hand out some very pretty trophies.

"The current structure is designed to match the number 1 and 2 ranked teams, identified through a ranking system, in a bowl game," Big 12 commissioner Kevin Weiberg explained to a congressional panel in 2003. "It is an extension of the bowl system." Unfortunately, no one bothered to ask college football fans beforehand whether they wanted to see the bowl system extended. And thus the most divisive creation in the history of American spectator sports was born.

The BCS was devised in the mid-1990s by the commissioners of the nation's major conferences (and Notre Dame) in response to years of fan frustration over "split national championships," the semiregular occurrences where different teams would finish the season number 1 in the sport's two recognized polls, the Associated Press and coaches, having never had a chance to meet on the field. There have been ten such

splits since UPI introduced the coaches' poll in 1950, including three (1990, 1991, and 1997) in the eight seasons immediately prior to the BCS's inception. The idea was to stage the sport's first official number 1 versus number 2 championship game while still preserving the longtime tradition of bowl games. There had been similar attempts in the past, including the Bowl Coalition (1992–94) and Bowl Alliance (1995–1997), but none could guarantee a number 1 versus number 2 game due to the Big Ten and Pac-10's exclusive partnership with the Rose Bowl. This proved particularly exasperating in 1994, when Nebraska and Penn State both finished undefeated. The Huskers swept the number 1 spot in both polls after beating number 3 Miami in the Orange Bowl, while the Nittany Lions could do little to impress voters by routing number 12 Oregon in the Rose Bowl. "It's a shame that the two best teams in the country didn't play each other," said Penn State quarterback Kerry Collins. Apparently others agreed. After years of resistance—and at the strong urging of TV partner ABC—the Big Ten, Pac-10, and Rose Bowl signed on to a so-called Super Alliance (later dubbed the BCS) allowing those leagues' champions to play in a different bowl in years they finished number 1 or 2. ABC paid a reported $296 million for the rights to all four games for four years, beginning with the 1998 season. (The championship game did not become a separate entity until 2006, when the BCS expanded to five games.) "The Rose Bowl was the missing link," then-ACC commissioner Gene Corrigan said in announcing the deal on July 23, 1996. "This is the Super Alliance. This is the ultimate."

As officials across college football took turns patting one another on the back following the announcement, the last Big Ten athletic director to sign off on the deal, Michigan's Joe Roberson, expressed his reservations to the *Los Angeles Times*. "The first thing I don't like about it is that it turns the Rose Bowl, in years it doesn't have the national title game, into a loser's bowl. All the attention and focus will be on that title game," said Roberson. " . . . Another thing I don't like about it is that the first year we have three or four claimants to those first two spots, there will be a lot of complaining, and that will result in more pressure, more demands for an NFL-style playoff."

Joe Roberson resigned from his job a year later, but he could not have been a bigger prophet if he'd predicted the dates of the next ten major earthquakes.

To say the BCS has been "unpopular" since its inception is like saying that Britney Spears's career is starting to suffer. BCS-bashing among fans, newspaper columnists, talk-radio hosts, and even coaches has become almost as common a December tradition as the Army-Navy game, particularly when there is any sort of controversy surrounding the national-title game matchup. "The Bowl Championship Series is a flawed and idiotic way to decide who should be the best and brightest in college football," *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* columnist Bryan Burwell wrote after 12–1 Florida edged 11–1 Michigan for a spot in the 2006 game. "I don't think there is any question that there are flaws in the system," said Wolverines coach Lloyd Carr. "I hope one day we have a system where all the issues are decided on the field."

To defend the BCS for a moment, the bigwigs who devised the thing never claimed their invention would be a foolproof method for crowning a champion. "It's not perfect," said former SEC commissioner Roy Kramer, the BCS's primary architect. "We never said it was." In fact, most of the title-game controversies over the years would have occurred whether there was a BCS in place or not. For instance, in 2004 Auburn fans went ballistic when their 12–0, SEC champions were left out of the title game in favor of fellow undefeated Oklahoma, whom number 1 USC wound up beating 55–19. Prior to the BCS, however, the Trojans would have automatically gone to the Rose Bowl to face Big Ten champion Michigan—ranked just number 13 that season—and both Auburn *and* Oklahoma would have been left in the cold. Furthermore, the two most memorable championship games of the BCS era—Ohio State's double-overtime upset of Miami in the 2002 title game and Texas's last-second 41–38 win over USC in 2005 (which garnered college football's highest TV rating in nineteen years)—involved matchups that would not have been possible before the Rose Bowl came on board. In both cases, the participants were undefeated, consensus number 1 and 2 teams that the nation was eager to see meet. So it's not as if the BCS hasn't been a step forward.

But in a sport where the teams only play twelve or thirteen games, you're inevitably going to have years where the number 1 and 2 teams are not clear-cut. Such ambiguity was part of the sport long before the BCS ever came into existence; it's just that now the disgruntled have a defined target at which to vent. Similarly, taxes were unpopular long before there was an IRS, but guess who gets the hate mail? Plus, much like those Washington bureaucrats, the minds behind the BCS have helped contribute to their image problem by giving the not-so-subtle impression that they're making up the rules as they go along. Nearly every season of the BCS's existence has presented a new, previously unimagined scenario, and with it another tweak to the rules or structure. In just nine years, the BCS has undergone more makeovers than Michael Jackson—and has been the butt of only slightly fewer jokes.

When the standings used to determine the BCS's number 1 and 2 teams first debuted in 1998, they included the AP and coaches' polls, a strength-of-schedule rating, and three computer polls (the *New York Times*, Jeff Sagarin, and the esteemed law firm of Anderson and Hester). This arcane formula, intended to reduce the effect of any human biases in the traditional polls, was the brainchild of Kramer, a former football coach and career athletic administrator with zero qualification as a mathematician. How did he come up with the thing? He had his minions test the formula by applying it to past seasons' results and making sure it spit out the correct two teams each year. Joked then-Florida coach Steve Spurrier, a longtime playoff advocate: "I think Commissioner Kramer's formula is so good that they ought to take it to basketball, baseball, tennis, and golf and make them go through it."

Apparently not convinced that his formula was complex enough, Kramer offered an open invitation the following summer to computer geeks across the country and wound up adding five more computer polls, bringing the total to eight. They included one by some guy named David Rothman. Another, the Dunkel Index, could both rank college football teams and predict the weather. This would be the first of four overhauls of the standings over the next seven years, nearly all of them in response to some previously unforeseen controversy:

1. The first really big ruckus happened in 2000, when Florida State, the number 3 team in both the AP and coaches' polls, reached the title game ahead of number 2 Miami—the one team FSU had lost to during the season.* Whoops. Adding insult to injury, the Seminoles lost 13–2 to Oklahoma in the Orange Bowl, that year's title game, while Miami whipped Florida in the Sugar Bowl. In response, the BCS added a "quality win" component the following season, giving teams a "bonus" for beating top-15 opponents. Had it been in place the previous year, Miami would have finished number 2. I'm sure the Hurricanes were relieved.
2. The next season provided an even bigger head-scratcher when, over Thanksgiving weekend, previously undefeated Nebraska lost its last game of the season 62–36 to 10–2 Colorado—then, over the next two weeks, proceeded to move back up to number 2 in the final standings when four teams above them lost. The Huskers went to the Rose Bowl, site of that year's title game, and got creamed 37–14 by Miami. Because Nebraska had benefited from numerous lopsided victories, the BCS's now-annual formula tweak involved ordering the computer geeks to remove any margin-of-victory factor from their respective rating systems. So, if you're keeping track, the formula now encompassed a team's record, schedule strength—and a bunch of computers that would solely evaluate record and schedule strength.
3. The 2003 season managed to produce the BCS's worst possible nightmare: USC, 11–1 and the number 1 team in both the AP and coaches' polls, managed to finish number 3 in the BCS standings, leaving 12–1 Oklahoma—despite having just lost its conference championship game to Kansas State 35–7—to play 12–1 LSU in the Sugar Bowl. The Tigers beat the Sooners and were promptly crowned national champions by the coaches, who were

*And number 4 Washington had beaten number 2 Miami. People didn't seem as sympathetic about the Huskies' exclusion, but Washington fans would kill me if I didn't mention them.

required to vote the winner of the title game number 1 in their final poll. The AP, free of any such obligation, stuck with the Trojans after their Rose Bowl win over Michigan, creating . . . a split national championship. "The fundamental mistake we made was we thought the public would accept a computer-influenced outcome," Big Ten commissioner Jim Delany said in 2005. "They used to rag on the coaches and the writers so much, espousing the various conspiracy theories about favoritism and regional biases. So we introduced computers, and as soon as the computers reorganized the order from what the voters had, suddenly *they* became the bad guys." In the BCS's most drastic overhaul to date, the formula was promptly rejiggered so that the human polls would account for 66 percent of a team's score—up from 25 percent in the past. Somewhere, the now-retired Kramer held a moment of silence for his de-emphasized computers.

4. Wouldn't you know it, just a year after they did that, the pollsters were dealt their own nightmare scenario: three major undefeated teams (USC, Oklahoma, and Auburn) up for two spots in the title game. The Trojans and Sooners had been number 1 and 2 all season, so, not surprisingly, the pollsters kept them that way—but not without some major-league lobbying from Auburn fans, who located voters' e-mail addresses and deluged them with arguments and statistics supporting the Tigers. That 2004 season also saw another controversy when, the last week of the season, voters moved 10–1 Texas ahead of 10–1 Cal for the number 4 position, allowing the Longhorns (whose coach Mack Brown had issued a public plea to the voters) to lock up a Rose Bowl at-large berth that would have gone to the Bears. Though journalists had been in the business of ranking the teams they cover for nearly seventy years, this particular conflict-of-interest crisis was too much for the AP to bear. Within weeks, the wire service's lawyers sent a nasty letter ordering the BCS to "cease and desist" any use of its poll. A simple "we're pulling out" would have sufficed, but it was a damaging image blow nonetheless.

The BCS's consecutive debacles of 2003 and 2004 brought the public's long-mounting frustration with the system to a boiling point, prompting renewed calls for college football to finally join the rest of the civilized world in adopting some sort of playoff. In a December 2003 online survey conducted by New Media Strategies,* a staggering 75 percent of football fans said they'd like to see the BCS scrapped, with 54 percent supporting an NCAA-style tournament. Literally every other NCAA-sponsored sport ends its season with a tournament, including all three of its lower levels (Division I-AA, II, and III) for football. Through the years, fans have taken it upon themselves to e-mail sportswriters, conference commissioners, and university presidents with elaborate proposals for a Division I-A playoff, everything from a two- or four-team mini-tournament to be played after the BCS bowls in January to an extensive eight-, sixteen-, or even thirty-two-team event. In turn, the recipients have learned to get better spam filters.

Yet despite such outward resentment over the sport's status quo, and with the BCS's original agreement with ABC about to expire, BCS officials announced in 2004 they were not only extending the arrangement for another four years, but that starting with the 2006 season, they would be adding a *fifth* BCS bowl game. Not a playoff game, mind you, just a chance for two more teams to play in prime time, presumably sometime between New Year's and Arbor Day. ABC responded to the news with a polite: "Thanks, but no thanks." Having already lost money on its original deal, the network proposed a new, "plus-one" BCS model in which the title game would involve the top two teams left standing *after* the bowl games. Though hardly a full-blown playoff, it would theoretically provide more clarity than the current setup by eliminating some of the contenders. When the idea was rejected, ABC chose to retain only the Rose Bowl, while FOX stepped in to claim the rest of the package, placing four of college football's most revered events on the same network as *Trading Spouses*.

*I don't know what it is, either.

By the end of 2004, college football's power brokers had been given the thumb by both their most loyal television partner (ABC) and their sport's most historic poll (AP), yet marched on unfazed to the tune of "four more years." If Microsoft did a survey and found that 75 percent of their consumers couldn't stand Windows, do you think they'd respond by putting out another edition? I doubt it. Which is why, on the surface, it must seem to the public as if the people who run college football are either extremely stubborn or lack the foggiest idea how to take a hint.

In reality, the politics involved in making any sort of formative change to college football's postseason are only slightly less complicated than bringing peace to the Middle East. In fact, college football's postseason quandary bears a striking resemblance to the political stalemates of Capitol Hill. You have your congressmen (the conference commissioners and athletic directors), your senators (university presidents and chancellors), your lobbyists (the bowl games, the smaller-conference schools), and your fundraisers (the television networks), each exercising their respective influence on the decision-making process while at the same time seeking to protect their own best interests. Meanwhile, there's no singular leader—like, say, the president—to steer the ship in any particular direction. The result: Nothing ever changes.

To better understand the dilemma, let's examine each of the aforementioned groups' respective agendas.

## Conference Commissioners and Athletic Directors

If it were solely up to these guys, there would probably be, at the very least, a plus-one game by now. The commissioners and ADs, contrary to published reports, are not dumb. Their primary responsibility is to generate as much revenue as possible for their schools' athletic departments, most of which are entirely dependent on football and men's basketball to cover the expenses of all their swimmers, golfers, and fencers. While the new five-bowl model did garner a modest 5 percent hike in rights fees from FOX (reportedly $80 million per year, up from $76.5

million under the old ABC contract*), anything remotely resembling a playoff would have netted a mint. "An NFL-style football playoff would provide three to four times as many dollars to the Big Ten as the current system does," said Delany. "There is no doubt in my mind that we are leaving hundreds of millions of dollars on the table."

So why be altruistic? After all, the thirst for more moolah is why these guys created the BCS in the first place, wasn't it? It's also why they invented conference championship games (the SEC's event elicits an extra $1 million annually for each of its schools), regularly move games to other nights of the week at the behest of ABC and ESPN (which pays the ACC nearly $40 million a year to televise its contests), and recently convinced the NCAA to add a twelfth game to the regular season (allowing schools like Nebraska and Auburn to schedule an additional home game against McNeese State or Louisiana-Lafayette and pocket the extra $3 to $5 million in ticket sales that come with it).

Well, for one thing, the commissioners and ADs want to keep the spoils for themselves. "One big factor [behind the formation of the BCS] was that this would be a system controlled by the commissioners and the major conferences," a source involved in the original 1996 negotiations told *Sports Illustrated*. "There was noise back then about the NCAA getting involved in postseason football, and that was something nobody at the commissioner level wanted." It's no mystery why. Between TV rights fees and payouts by the bowls themselves, the four BCS games played in January 2006 generated $125.9 million in revenue, of which all but $7 million was pocketed by the six founding conferences (and Notre Dame). The rest was split among the other five Division I-A conferences ($5.2 million†) and eight I-AA conferences ($1.8 million). Any move to add games to the postseason, be it a plus-one or a multiround

*Those figures do not include the Rose Bowl, for which ABC has a separate contract worth a reported $300 million over eight years (2007–14). The deal includes two BCS titles games the years they're played in Pasadena.

†Starting with the 2006 season, the take for the five non-BCS conferences was raised to about $9 million, or 9 percent of net revenues. When one of those leagues' teams qualifies for a berth, as Boise State did in 2006, that share is doubled.

playoff, would have to be approved by the NCAA's entire Division I membership, of which the six BCS conferences are in the minority. It stands to reason that their peers would vote to let the NCAA take over control of any proposed playoff and, in turn, invoke a more egalitarian revenue distribution. "The foundation of college football is the institutions, the conferences and the bowls, and the sport is healthier than it's ever been," said SEC commissioner Mike Slive. "There's really no reason to look at it any differently." Not when your conference is raking in $17–$21 million a year by serving as its own BCS banker.

It should also be noted that the primary source of revenue for most athletic departments is not TV or bowl dollars but ticket sales for their home games—and the fact that schools are able to sell out their ninety-thousand-seat stadiums on a weekly basis is not something to be taken for granted. A primary reason most commissioners and ADs remain lukewarm about a playoff is their fear that it would devalue the twelve games leading up to it. College football's regular season is unique among all other sports in that every single week truly does matter. One loss is often all it takes to crush a team's national or conference title hopes, so a game between two top-ten teams in September carries as much weight as it would if they played in December. "In a sense, the BCS makes every weekend a playoff," said Slive, the BCS's coordinator in 2006–07. When rivals Ohio State and Michigan, both undefeated and ranked number 1 and 2 in the country respectively, met on November 18, 2006, the game served as a de facto championship play-in, creating intense national interest that resulted in the sport's highest regular-season TV rating in thirteen years.* Under a playoff, however, both teams would have already been assured of a berth. While the game would have still meant the world to fans of the two teams, to the rest of the country, they would have been playing for little more than seeding. "What we've got is a really exciting regular season that the BCS actually enhances by making so many games important, not only in the

*The game earned a 13.4 Nielsen rating (21.8 million total viewers), the sport's highest since another number 1 vs. 2 game, Florida State vs. Notre Dame, scored a 16.0 in 1993.

regions in which they were played, but nationally," said Slive. "Attendance is up, ratings are up, interest is up."

Beyond the championship race, there's also the fact that more than sixty teams—over half of Division I-A schools—remain in contention for a bowl berth right up through the final weekend, giving fans of even mediocre teams reason to stay interested. Even in a sixteen-team playoff, nearly 80 percent of Division I-A teams would be out of contention by the final weeks. ADs and commissioners rue the day when fans of an otherwise respectable 7–4 Arkansas team—which in the past would have been playing for a potential New Year's Day bowl berth—figure, "Why bother" attending the season finale, instead spending Saturday at Home Depot.

Finally, commissioners and athletic directors remain reticent to step on the toes of their friends at the bowl games. Bowls have been part of the fabric of the sport for more than a century, and any administrators old enough to remember life before the BCS—that is, every one of them—are devoted to preserving their place in the landscape. Of course, all the loyalty in the world didn't stop the founding BCS commissioners from walking all over the bowl tradition once already, so why would it stop them now? Because there's this pesky little matter of their bosses . . .

## University Presidents and Chancellors

In theory, college athletic departments are merely one subsidiary of the larger university, their leaders ultimately reporting to the same head honcho as the dean of the business school or the head of the physics department. In reality, most major football programs long ago morphed into their own monstrous, nearly autonomous corporations. In the past, university presidents were too busy doing such menial things as raising money and hiring professors to bother poking their nose into the football team's business. It was the conference commissioners and athletic directors—not presidents—who played the biggest role in the original creation of the BCS.

But as the dollar amounts surrounding big-time college football grew to staggering proportions in the 1990s—and with them, an increasing number of embarrassing headlines about teams with 19 percent graduation rates and more players in police lineups than the starting lineup—calls for athletic reform at the presidential level began to sweep through the academic community. The movement's telltale moment came in 2002 when, for the first time in its history, the NCAA hired a university president, Indiana's Myles Brand, as its chief executive officer. Brand had become a household name two years earlier when he stood up to longtime Hoosiers basketball coach/bully Bob Knight, controversially firing the Hall of Famer for repeated bad behavior. Reformists viewed Brand as just the guy to usher in a new era of actually being able to say the term "student-athlete" with a straight face. Addressing reporters at his first NCAA basketball Final Four—an event for which the organization is netting *$6 billion* from CBS over an eleven-year period—Brand showed no reluctance whatsoever to put his foot down when necessary. "There was a request [to air the] Miller Lite catfight commercials [during the Final Four]," said Brand. "We exercised our option in the contract with CBS not to permit that."

It didn't take long for the newly energized presidents to offer their input on college football's postseason debate. When a committee of presidents and chancellors from the six founding BCS conferences convened in the summer of 2003 to begin exploring future postseason possibilities, they made it crystal-clear that one option was not on the table. "We have instructed the conference commissioners to not pursue . . . an NFL-style playoff system for postseason collegiate football," said Nebraska president Harvey Pearlman.

Pearlman's allusion to the NFL was no accident. University presidents have come to view the mere mention of the word "playoff" as a terrifying threat to college football's last remaining strand of innocence. To stage a playoff, they say, would be to turn the sport into a mirror of its professional counterpart and all the excess commercialization that comes with it—a somewhat feeble argument considering that their schools already participate in a gargantuan basketball tournament bathed in corporate influence (only water cups bearing a Dasani logo

are permitted at courtside), as well as the Champs Sports Bowl, the Chick-fil-A Bowl, the Pioneer PureVision Las Vegas Bowl . . . need I go on? The presidents also contend that the season would become too long, intruding on players' academic calendars and interrupting either final exams in December or the beginning of a new semester in early January. Never mind that lower-division college teams already participate in playoff games during the time period in question, and that the March basketball tournament coincides with finals for schools on quarter systems. "There is no sentiment of any significance [among university presidents] for a national playoff, [with] academic reasons and the welfare of student-athletes being the primary reasons why that is opposed and opposed strongly," said Oregon president David Frohnmayer.

The presidents' continued adamancy against a Division I-A playoff is, in essence, a last stand. It's their most visible opportunity to show that the ideals of academics and amateurism remain a higher priority than financial motives. (And that Big Foot is real.) For that, there's at least one constituency that is eternally grateful . . .

## The Bowl Games

Walk into the press box of any major college stadium during the heart of the season and you'll see what reporters affectionately refer to as "the blazers." They are the bowl scouts—staff members or volunteers from their respective games, donned in gaudy sport coats (orange for the Orange Bowl, yellow for the Fiesta Bowl) affixed with a seal of their logo. Their purpose, in principle, is to scout one or both teams as a possible participant for their upcoming contest, but in reality they mostly go for expense-account dinners and to watch a good game for free. The scouts' jobs were far more important in the old days, back when the bowl-selection process was a virtual free-for-all and back-room deals were brokered as early as October to send certain teams to certain bowls. Today, though, the pairings have been taken almost entirely out of the bowls' hands. The BCS selection process is spelled out on paper, leaving little room for flexibility, and nearly every other game has contractual partnerships with certain conferences that significantly limit

their pool of potential teams. It's why Virginia Tech has played in the Gator Bowl seemingly every other year.

The blazers are, in essence, dinosaurs, and their industry in general operates under a cloud of fear that the games themselves will soon become the same. A Web site for the Football Bowl Association—a loosely organized coalition of the thirty-two current bowl games—breathlessly extols the virtues of the bowl system ("Bowl games are as much a part of the tradition of college football as any other aspect of the game," reads one passage) while not so subtly dissing playoff proponents ("A playoff system would be an unmitigated disaster," reads a 2003 quote from a Colorado columnist displayed prominently at the top of one page).

Mind you, few people if any want to see bowl games abolished—especially anyone who's ever participated in or attended one. Why would anyone want to voluntarily part with spending a week in a high-end resort being showered with gifts and attention? For the 2006 championship game hosted by the Fiesta Bowl, participating teams were housed in the Scottsdale Plaza and Fairmont Princess, treated to dinner at Drinkwater's City Hall Steakhouse, and feted with Torneau watches and XM satellite radios. Special events were held for visiting fans at numerous Tempe and Scottsdale bars and restaurants. Even my usually cranky colleagues in the media found themselves lacking for anything to complain about after spending a week at the opulent J.W. Marriott Camelback Inn.* "Everybody is treated like a king around here," Florida receiver Andre Caldwell told the *Arizona Republic*. "It's nice to relax and get pampered a bit."

Of the playoff concepts most commonly bandied about, the smaller-scale ones involve a short tournament played *after* the existing bowl games, while the more lavish ones suggest using the bowl games as playoff sites. For instance, the Rose or Fiesta Bowl might host a Final Four

*I spent the majority of the week drinking Fiji water, eating unlimited Tostitos, and bathing myself with scented Camelback soap. It would have been even better if I hadn't had to work.

game one year, the championship game the next. None of this, however, makes bowl honchos feel any better. For them, any sort of playoff is viewed as a death knell to their business, which is dependent on large numbers of people (for the major bowls, as many as forty thousand per school) traveling great distances to follow their team. Bowl types contend that if their games were to suddenly become just one step in a team's postseason path rather than an ultimate destination, fans might not be quite as eager to make the trip. Even if they did, they might not arrive as early in the week, thus reducing the financial impact for the local economy and rendering irrelevant such timeless traditions as the Orange Bowl Beach Bash and the Fiesta Bowl Block Party. In a playoff, the traditional, collegial atmosphere of bowl games, with the two teams' colors splitting stadium stands, would likely be replaced by a more buttoned-down, corporate crowd. "I've been to Super Bowls," said Fiesta Bowl CEO John Junker. "It's a big event, good for them, but they can keep it. I wouldn't trade the spirit in this stadium [for the Fiesta Bowl] for all the Super Bowls in the world." And that's assuming the bowls would actually remain a part of said playoff. "The big losers in a playoff are going to be the communities that host the bowl games," Rose Bowl CEO Mitch Dorger told *National Public Radio*. ". . . It's only going to take a couple of years of quarter-full stadiums before the conferences realize that they could do better by playing the games in the home stadium of the highest-ranked team, in the way that the NFL does. We think that that's the way that they would go to increase their revenues, and who's left out in the cold are the 935 volunteers for the Tournament of Roses and the city of Pasadena who've been supporting college football and universities and conferences for 102 years."

Joe Q. Fan, sitting in Pennsylvania miffed about the latest national championship controversy, isn't all that concerned about the welfare of those poor Tournament of Roses volunteers. Most school and conference officials, however, remain sympathetic to the bowls' unique circumstances—that is, unless they happen to represent the sport's "other half" . . .

## Smaller-Conference Schools

In the summer of 2003, outspoken Tulane president Scott Cowen organized a coalition of forty-four schools from the so-called non-BCS conferences—leagues like the Mountain West and Conference USA, whose champions, unlike those of the Big Ten, SEC, and so on, do not receive automatic BCS bowl berths—to rally against the system's inherent unfairness. When the leaders of the six major conferences (and Notre Dame) originally set up the BCS, they hadn't given much thought to including their less prestigious colleagues because 1) that would mean having to share the money with them, and 2) it's not like there was any precedent that said they *should* be included. During the twenty years prior to the BCS's inception, all 160 teams that played in the Rose, Sugar, Orange, and Fiesta bowls were members of or went on to become members of the big six conferences (and Notre Dame).* Since World War II, all but one national champion (BYU in 1984) fit the same category. The Alabamas and Penn States of the world had been beating up on the Louisiana Techs and Toledos of the world for the better part of a century, so you'll have to excuse the BCS founders if they didn't spend a whole lot of time in those original meetings discussing their mostly harmless little stepbrothers.

As it turned out, a couple of fundamental changes took place that happened to coincide with—and partially resulted from—the BCS's creation. For one, the little guys started beating the big guys with more frequent regularity—including Louisiana Tech over Alabama in 1999 and Toledo over Penn State in 2000. While still hardly the norm, such upsets started giving credence to the notion that perhaps some of the elite smaller-conference teams could compete at a BCS level, such as when Fresno State of the WAC knocked off a Fiesta-bound Colorado team in 2001 or C-USA's Louisville upended eventual ACC champ and Sugar representative Florida State in 2002. Under the BCS's rules, though, the only way such smaller-conference schools could be assured

*Louisville, which played in the 1991 Fiesta Bowl, was a non-BCS school until 2005, when it joined the Big East.

a berth was by finishing in the top six of the BCS standings. It's not like the bowls themselves—whose lone concerns are selling tickets and producing TV ratings—were going to voluntarily pass up a Texas or Auburn in favor of a Boise State or Marshall. They'd sooner call the thing off. Only one such team, Alex Smith–led Utah in 2004, was able to climb that high during the first eight years of the BCS' existence, qualifying for that season's Fiesta Bowl.*

Beyond the on-field ramifications, the advent of the BCS also caused what its leaders would later refer to as "unintended consequences." The term "BCS" was only supposed to be a catchy name for the four major bowls. Just because they set the thing up to be as favorable as possible to their own teams while nearly doubling their revenues, never in a million years, swore the BCS commissioners, did they ever imagine the media and the public would start using the terms "BCS" and "non-BCS" as a de facto form of branding to distinguish between, say, a Michigan and a Western Michigan. The non-BCS schools did not take kindly to their newfound stigma, or to the fact that the BCS bowls were now paying out more than fourteen times as much as the lower-end bowls to which their teams found themselves relegated. "It is absolutely classic cartel behavior," State University of New York at Buffalo president William R. Greiner said of the BCS. "What we have is some people who think they are the 'haves,' and for reasons that escape me . . . do their damndest to beat on the have-nots." They don't *think* they're the haves, William—they *know* they're the haves.

In a teleconference with national reporters in July 2003, Cowen's group called the BCS a bunch of nasty names, then called for an all-inclusive Division I-A playoff, an utterly unrealistic goal considering the BCS-conference presidents' steadfast opposition to *any* sort of playoff. Cowen would, however, prove extremely successful in effecting change, especially upon convincing Congress to hold hearings that fall on

*The Utes' reward for their historic run was a forgettable matchup with 8–3 Big East champion Pittsburgh. It would become the only BCS game to date in which both teams' head coaches, Utah's Urban Meyer (Florida) and Pitt's Walt Harris (Stanford), had already accepted other jobs.

possible BCS antitrust violations. Uh-oh—potential lawsuits. Soon the BCS's Presidential Oversight Committee was holding a series of peace summits with Cowen's Coalition for Athletic Reform, with NCAA president Brand serving as a facilitator, and on February 29, 2004, the two sides announced a stunning agreement that caught even the BCS's own commissioners by surprise. From now on, they decreed, all 11 Division I-A conferences (and Notre Dame) would have a seat at the table when decisions were made; a fifth game would be added to the lineup starting in 2006; and while the Coalition conferences still wouldn't be afforded automatic entry to the BCS bowls, the rules would be loosened so that such a team need only finish in the top twelve instead of the top six.* In a teleconference from Miami's Fontainebleu Hilton Resort, site of the meeting where this historic agreement was brokered, Cowen proclaimed, "Today is a very good day for intercollegiate athletics and higher education. Our agreement is a positive and important step forward in developing an inclusive, fair system to govern postseason play in football." Gushed Brand: "This agreement that's been reached today is a significant victory for college sports and higher education. It will benefit the institutions of both groups, and most especially the student-athletes." A fifth bowl game—the greatest thing to happen to academia since the pencil sharpener.

One group not quite as thrilled by the news was the original BCS commissioners (and Notre Dame). "This [was] not a commissioner-driven decision," said Delany. "Scott Cowen did an exceptional job of selling his idea to national media members. Our presidents recognized that there was congressional concern, they recognized that no matter why we did what we did, it wasn't a winning argument why some were in, some were out. . . . What came out of the political pressure was this compromise." While the presidents had concerned themselves largely

*One of these teams can also receive a bid by finishing in the top sixteen and higher than the lowest-rated BCS-conference champion. For that, non-BCS teams are eternally grateful for the existence of the ACC.

with issues of fairness and collegiality, it was the commissioners who would be charged with actually implementing the presidents' inspired solution—which would mean attempting to sell the concept to a marketplace where fairness and collegiality rank a great bit farther down the priority list than, oh, Nielsen ratings . . .

## Television Networks

On January 1, 2007, Boise State, a one-time junior college only a decade removed from I-AA competition, became the first non-BCS school to take advantage of the new, less stringent BCS requirements, finishing ninth in the standings and receiving a berth to that year's Fiesta Bowl. The WAC champion Broncos were listed as a touchdown underdog to Big 12 champion and college football aristocrat Oklahoma. Not only did the orange-and-blue-clad Broncos upset the Sooners, but they did so with one of the most thrilling finishes in bowl history, sending the game to overtime on a 50-yard, hook-and-lateral touchdown, then winning it with an old-fashioned Statue of Liberty play. To top it all off, Boise's star running back, Ian Johnson, got down on one knee and proposed to his cheerleader girlfriend, Chrissy Popadics, during a live postgame interview. "Lord almighty, I nearly fell out of my chair," legendary broadcaster Keith Jackson told the *Los Angeles Times* the next day. "What we saw was pure, raw emotion. What we saw, you can only see in college football."

Actually—not that many people saw it. Despite the obvious human-interest story and jaw-dropping finish, the Boise-Oklahoma Fiesta Bowl drew a disappointing 8.4 Nielsen rating, tying it for thirty-fifth out of the thirty-seven BCS games played to date. The two that finished lower? The Utah-Pittsburgh Fiesta Bowl 2 years earlier (7.4) and the Wake Forest-Louisville Orange Bowl played a night after Boise State-Oklahoma (7.0). It's no coincidence that all three games involved non-traditional powers.

It's numbers like these that ABC execs had feared when they declined to pony up for the BCS's new five-game, everyone's-invited

format for 2006–2009.* Like any good business, the network was only interested in a concept that would bring "added value" to its product—that is, lure more eyeballs and advertising dollars. With ratings for the non-title games having declined in recent years, ABC felt the only way to accomplish this would be to create a "plus-one" game, which, at the very least, would increase interest for at least two of the four BCS bowls (the ones involving the number 1 and 2 teams) while putting the championship game itself on an even greater pedestal. While one of the most compelling aspects of CBS's NCAA tournament coverage is the presence of Cinderella teams—unheralded schools like George Mason or Coppin State that miraculously knock off one of the big boys in the early rounds—there's no evidence to suggest football fans are interested in a similar David-versus-Goliath element to their bowl games, particularly if there is no championship at stake. "Over the years, the marketplace has established that the major revenue streams go to the bigger schools and conferences because they generate larger audiences," said former CBS Sports president Neal Pilson. "That has nothing to do with the credibility of their education, nothing to do with the quality of their play, it has to do with the viewing preference of the American public."

As should be crystal-clear by now, college football's decision to stick with its current postseason format has very little to do with the viewing preference of the American public. It has everything to do with an institutional resistance to change, caused by the divergent interests of the sport's many decision-makers. In this most recent political go-round, it was the university presidents—particularly Cowen's coalition of smaller-conference schools—that got their way, somehow pushing through a new BCS model that did little to resolve the sport's national-championship dilemma while providing greater access to teams that the vast majority of fans don't care about enough to watch. Is there any doubt Cowen will one day be a senator? However, had FOX not been desperate to break into the college football market (the

*ABC did actually make an offer—for about $17 million per game, down from $25 million. That's when FOX stepped in.

network previously aired just one game all season, the Cotton Bowl) and offered just enough to make the BCS's five-bowl proposal financially viable, it's entirely conceivable that the BCS leaders would have had to go back to the drawing board, and that the commissioners, athletic directors, and television networks would have been able to adopt something more to their liking.

In fact, there's been a notable shift in the company line ever since Slive took over as BCS coordinator at the beginning of 2006. Whereas his predecessors* mostly evaded discussing anything radical, Slive has embraced the ongoing debate over the current format and has hinted on numerous occasions that he would endorse a plus-one game. "We need to continue over the next few years to look at the postseason to be sure it works the way we want it to work," said Slive. "I think the regular season has been enhanced [by the BCS]. The question is, where is the magic point where you maintain the quality of the regular season as it currently exists and at the same time maybe provide more opportunity for a deserving team?" Dissension is also being raised by a growing number of coaches, most of whom were content in the past to dish standard throwaway lines like, "The system is what it is." Auburn's Tommy Tuberville has been a relentless playoff proponent ever since his team got left out in 2004. "From a competitive standpoint, you can't make a good argument against it," Tuberville told *Sports Illustrated*. "Let's just go to a playoff and be done with it." Florida coach Urban Meyer was extremely vocal about the issue over the final few weeks of the 2006 season, when it appeared his team might be nudged out of the title game by a potential Ohio State–Michigan rematch, and did not let up even after his team was ultimately chosen over the Wolverines. "If you want a true national championship," said Meyer, "you have to let the teams go play it on

*The conference commissioners take turns serving two years as BCS coordinator. So far there have been five: the SEC's Kramer (1998–99), the ACC's John Swofford (2000–01), the Big East's Mike Tranghese (2002–03), the Big 12's Weiberg (2004–05), and the SEC's Slive (2006–07). "Being BCS coordinator is my two years in the penalty box," joked Slive.

the field." Even Michigan's Carr, one of the sport's most noted traditionalists, has changed his tune in recent years. "I never thought I would say this, [but] I think we should go to a playoff," he said in 2005. "I think we should play the top sixteen teams, and do it on the field, because I think that's only fair to the guys that play the game." Let me guess—Carr then turned on his iPod Nano and started text-messaging on his Blackberry?

The coaches can stand on their soapboxes all they want, but they do not have the final say on the matter. And the people who do are only slightly closer to installing a sixteen-team playoff than they are to launching giraffes into space. However, many observers believe the BCS's move to a stand-alone championship game, not to mention its unusually late date (the first such game was played on January 8, 2007, four days later than the previous year's), is a not-so-subtle precursor toward eventually converting the game into a "plus-one" when the current contract expires in 2010. The BCS bowls themselves may even prefer it to the current model because it might make nonchampionship games more meaningful. In 2006, for instance, number 1 Ohio State, number 2 Florida, and number 3 Michigan could have all gone into the bowls with their national-title hopes still intact. "We'd be encouraged by [a plus-one]," said the Fiesta Bowl's Junker. "We believe there is merit and value to a plus-one after the bowls." "It's no secret that every one of the [TV] folks we talked with would prefer to see us move in the direction of some sort of a plus-one type of approach," said the Big 12's Weiberg. "That was a very uniform message throughout our television negotiations."

In a December 31, 2006, article, the *New York Times* polled all eleven commissioners (and Notre Dame) as well as several athletic directors and presidents from those conferences. Nine of the eleven commissioners were open to the possibility of a plus-one, as were the five athletic directors. "There is more open-mindedness at this point than there was a few years ago," ACC commissioner John Swofford told the *Times*. "We have some presidents and athletic directors that are very sold on the Plus One model as the next step." Just as they were a decade ago, however, commissioners and presidents from the Big Ten and Pac-10 remain

adamantly opposed to any such change. "I oppose a Plus One," Pac-10 commissioner Tom Hansen told the *Times*. "All you do is weaken the bowl games to set it up." "The system we have right now is a good system," said Penn State president Graham Spanier. "The overwhelming majority of the presidents in the Big Ten are against any type of expansion." Once again, the future of college football's postseason will be directly tied to its impact on the Rose Bowl, which was able to host its preferred Big Ten–Pac-10 matchup just twice in the six seasons from 2001 to 2006. While one scenario for a plus-one involves the bowls returning to their traditional conference tie-ins—which the Rose Bowl would obviously love—more realistically, the numbers 1 through 4 teams would have to be seeded, effectively ending conference tie-ins altogether. "The Rose Bowl is the most important external relationship we have," Delany told the Associated Press. "It's more important than the BCS." Suffice to say, the other BCS bowls aren't big fans of the Rose Bowl.

Within the rest of the presidential ranks, the traditionally united stand against a playoff is starting to show some cracks. In March 2007, SEC presidents for the first time formally added a playoff discussion to the agenda of their regularly scheduled meetings. "A playoff is inevitable," Florida president Bernie Machen told Bloomberg News in 2006. "The public strongly favors a playoff, but university presidents are in denial about that. They just don't see it. Whatever the format, I believe we need to get ahead of it and create the system rather than responding to the external pressures." Florida State president T.K. Wetherall has joined Machen in supporting a playoff. Like many, Machen points to Boise State's Fiesta Bowl victory—which, combined with Ohio State's BCS title-game loss a week later, left the Broncos as the nation's only undefeated team that season but with no way of playing for the national title—as an indictment against the status quo. "The Boise State game makes it clear that there is no longer a clear delineation between BCS and non-BCS schools," Machen told the *Palm Beach Post*. "It's going to make the case that this small collection of six conferences has no right to control how college football settles who's the champion." Machen is unlikely to receive many Christmas cards next

year from his colleagues within those six conferences.* In fact, there are plenty of presidents who are diametrically opposed to his viewpoint. "A number of [presidents] in the Big Ten and Pac-10 would rather go back to the old bowl system than go to a playoff," said Oregon's Frohnmayer. No word whether they would also cheerfully return to the days of horse and buggy or outdoor plumbing.

The fact is, the precedent has now been set for a true national championship in college football, and there will be no turning back. In fact, the large majority of fans would happily spit in the face of tradition altogether if it meant finally resolving the sport's repeated, frustrating end-of-season controversies. But like the bowls themselves, controversy has been a part of the sport since nearly its inception, and it won't be going away anytime soon, even if a plus-one comes to pass. "You're never going to eliminate controversy," a by-then-retired Kramer told the *Florida Times-Union* in 2004. "Fans of the number 3 team this year may be unhappy, but if you have an eight-team playoff, fans of the number 9 team will be unhappy. If you have a sixteen-team playoff, number 17 is going to be unhappy."

Rightly or wrongly, college football will turn to a playoff one day. As Machen said, it's inevitable. The presidents will not be able to defy the wishes of the general public forever, nor will the commissioners be able to resist the potentially absurd financial benefits.† However, barring a dramatic change of heart by either group—or a particularly harsh kick in the rear from the television networks—that day is at least a decade away. In the meantime, fans would best be advised to save their voices. There's going to be a lot more yelling to come.

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*Machen has seen the other side of it firsthand, however: he was Utah's president in 2004 when the Utes went undefeated but had no chance to play for the national title.

†No one has ever managed to pin down with any certainty exactly how much more lucrative a playoff would be than the current system. Television experts have estimated anywhere from a 60 percent spike in rights fees to about triple the current amount. As it stands now, the BCS's annual TV revenue (about $120 million) pales in comparison to that of the NCAA tournament ($545 million).