

# WHO'S NUMBER ONE? THE NCAA BLOWS A CHAMPIONSHIP DECISION

College baseball has its world series. Basketball and hockey have post-season tournaments. But college football is the only major NCAA sport that does not have a championship playoff. Coaches, players and fans agree that no team can ever call itself the best in the land without some sort of post-season tournament.

U. of Nebraska Cornhuskers coach Tom Osborne says that a playoff on New Year's Day would settle the dust around who is No. 1. "The ideal way to settle it is on the field with a playoff, but we can't seem to come up with a format everybody can agree on."

The polls determine the rankings, but too often there is large room for doubt. At season's end, two teams can end up "sharing" the fictional title of champion. For the past six months, a group, creatively titled the NCAA Special Committee to Study a Division I-A Football Championship, has been researching the feasibility of a playoff and championship system.

The group studied the facts and figures and presented its findings to the NCAA president's commission. In the 350-page tome, the committee made the decision not to decide. In fact, the entire issue has been tabled and the research committee disbanded. The group felt that other matters, like the restructuring of the NCAA and revenue distribution, take precedence.

"The issue is tabled, and before it can be brought up again, someone would have to take it off the table, and I don't see that happening in the near future," says NCAA executive director Cedric Dempsey.

But fans don't care about the commissions and the committees and the reports. They want to know who's No. 1.

"A playoff would settle all disputes of who's most deserving of the championship," says West Chester U. sophomore Craig Kaliser. "One team would actually beat the other on the field, not in the boardroom."

Issues that complicate the decision include the effects on student-athletes, the sanctity of bowl games and money. The committee researched a hypothetical eight-team playoff system, and each of these points was addressed. A panel of 12 student-athletes was con-

sulted for opinions on the pros and cons of a playoff system.

A football championship might mean a longer year, with participating teams continuing to play throughout January. These extra games would cut into the players' study time, a major concern for all involved.

Kansas State U. athletic counselor Patricia Brandt says the timing of the game would determine how a national championship would affect student-athletes academically.

"If the game doesn't take place until the mid or late part of January, it could have an adverse effect," she says. "But football is really just a weekend sport, so the players leave Friday and are usually back on Saturday night."

Student-athletes practice 20 hours a week during the season. Brandt says if this timetable is followed through the championship game, stress on athletes could be controlled.

"What isn't controllable, though, is the amount of distraction that a playoff game could create," she says.

Arizona quarterback and panel member Dan White says he doesn't think extended time for a playoff would be a problem.

"It would only affect a small number of teams each year, and if you have the chance to play for the national championship, you can make time to study," he says.

Opposition to a playoff system is often more emotional than practical.

"The bowl experience is second to none for athletes and fans. To take away that tradition is not an easy decision," says Big Ten Conference assistant commissioner Mark Rudner.

Virginia Tech coach Frank Beamer agrees. "This bowl situation is just right. You shouldn't fix something that isn't broken.... I don't think it's bad if there are two national champions."

Some fans don't buy the tradition argument. "That's baloney," says Shawn Bissetta, a Syracuse U. graduate student. "A playoff is the best way to decide who's champion. They could still use the bowl games as part of the playoff system." Bowl host cities could be playoff sites, he suggests.

As always, the bottom line is money. And where there's money, the media aren't far behind.

"Fiscally, a school is trying to support all the sports, including nonrevenue and women's sports," says assistant commissioner of the Big Eight Conference Tim Allen. "Why would a conference like the Big Ten support a playoff system, when they always make \$6 million from the Rose Bowl?"

Some universities, specifically those locked into bowl games, are happy with the amount of money they get from the bowl system and worry that a playoff might jeopardize that boost of income.

Others view a playoff leading to a championship game as a money-making bonanza that could benefit every school and conference.

Dempsey says an extensive study was done to assess all the revenue that would be generated from an eight-team, seven-game playoff.

The 19-bowl system brought in \$60-70 million during the 1993-94 college football season, according to the NCAA. Projected take for a playoff system is \$125-130 million.

Distribution of the money is a major stumbling block, says Mike Bohn, director of marketing for the College Football Association.

"With 70 percent of the NCAA schools facing a deficit, it's imperative that the revenue distribution issue is settled," he says.

Wisconsin tight end and panel member Mike Roan says he got the impression that a playoff system is in the cards within three or four years, although he is partial to the bowl system.

"It's not necessarily what the players and coaches want. It's what [NCAA officials] think you need," Roan says. "They see all the money they can get from the NCAA basketball tournament, and they think football needs a shot in the arm."

Allen says there is no consensus regarding a playoff format but that there isn't a campus that hasn't considered the possibility. The bowls benefit a big conference's third- and fourth-place teams, he adds, and those teams would be left out of a playoff.

As far as deciding a national champion is concerned, the Big Eight is in a perfect position: the conference's champion is locked into the Orange Bowl, but the opponent's slot is open. If a Big Eight team is vying for the championship, it can face another top-ranked



1994's Rose Bowl

opponent, not a set champion from a different conference. This happened last year, when No. 2 Nebraska, which won the Big Eight, played No. 1 Florida State for the "national title."

Student panel member White says no one on the panel was completely against a playoff. "It was the question of which format and how many teams... that people disagreed on."

The NCAA has abandoned the drawing board and there's still no single No. 1, although it seems likely that a playoff game will exist in the future. For now, the issue of a championship screams for a new game plan.

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