

‘Bama, FSU, OSU, Oregon star in powerful playoff

By
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GRAPEVINE, Texas (AP) — The first College Football Playoff expanded the national championship race, made the regular season even more intriguing and produced a final four with major star power.

Nick Saban’s No. 1 Alabama Crimson Tide vs. Urban Meyer’s No. 4 Ohio State Buckeyes at the Sugar Bowl.

Marcus Mariota, this season’s Heisman Trophy front-runner, and second-seeded Oregon vs. Jameis Winston, last season’s Heisman Trophy winner, and defending national champion Florida State at the Rose Bowl.

The winners will meet on Jan. 12 in Arlington, Texas, at the home of the Dallas Cowboys.

A new era, indeed, but with the same old problems: What is the best way to pick the teams and what should be the criteria?

After six weeks of ranking teams, the selection committee shuffled its deck Sunday and dealt the Big 12 out of the playoff.

“We’re smarting today,” Big 12 Commissioner Bob Bowlsby said.

TCU, which had been third in the rankings last week, ended up sixth. Big 12 co-champion Baylor moved up a spot to No. 5, but both were squeezed out by Ohio State, which won over the committee with a doozy of a closing statement in its conference championship game: a 59-0 victory against Wisconsin for the Big Ten title.

“I would say that human nature is that the most recent thing that occurs, in this case the most-recent achievements, are

the most impactful,” Bowlsby said. “Ohio State’s victory over Wisconsin was complete domination, and in that regard they played their way into the position they now enjoy.”

The Big 12 doesn’t have one of those anymore. Its teams play only 12 games, compared to 13 for champions of the other Big Five conferences.

Bowlsby and his conference athletic directors are meeting in New York this week and he anticipates the topic of how best to determine a champion will come up.

“This will be a catalyst for discussion for sure,” Bowlsby said.

The Big 12 can’t hold a championship game because it only has 10 teams, but the conference, along with the Atlantic Coast Conference, is trying to change that. The leagues have proposed getting rid of NCAA rules requiring a conference have 12 teams split into two divisions to play a title game.

Holding one with 10 teams that play a nine-game round-robin schedule isn’t ideal because the game would always be a rematch, Bowlsby said.

“I don’t know with 10 it’s something that we would necessarily do,” Bowlsby said. But conference expansion is a complicated issue that goes well beyond whether to hold a championship game.

Bowlsby cautioned about making a “knee-jerk” reaction to one year’s results. He said his faith in the process has not wavered.

“We put a system in place and I helped to put it in place and I have confidence in that system. And I have confidence in the impeccable integrity of the people in that room,” he said.

Baylor coach Art Briles wasn’t so sure.

“I think the committee needs to be a little more

regionalized with people that are associated with the south part of the United States,” he said. “I’m not sure there is a connection on there that is that familiar with the Big 12 Conference.”

There were five active athletic directors on the 12-member committee, one from each of the Big Five conferences. The Big 12 was represented by West Virginia’s Oliver Luck. The Mountaineers have been in the Big 12 for three seasons.

Maybe the most jarring part of Sunday’s unveiling was TCU dropping three spots from the last rankings. The Horned Frogs seemed to be secure at No. 3 last week, and then beat lowly Iowa State by 52 on Saturday.

Committee chairman Jeff Long said TCU’s drop was more about the Buckeyes than the Frogs, but it highlighted a problem with weekly rankings. Commissioners initially leaned toward not having them when they first started putting the playoff together.

While Long would emphasize every week the committee started with a clean slate, traditionally college football polls create a pecking order for teams that only gets disrupted by losses.

The top six teams in last week’s rankings all won on Saturday. On Sunday, the teams were the same, but the order was very different. And it left many fans wondering why.

Long said it was too soon to say what changes the committee would recommend to the commissioners. It’s safe to say the benefit of having weekly rankings will be addressed when Long’s crew reconvenes in a couple of months.

“I think that the committee will look at this year, look at this season, look how the entire process went,” he said.

Until then, let the playoff games begin.

QB stars when Florida St meets Oregon in Rose Bowl

By
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PASADENA, Calif. (AP) — Jameis Winston won the last Heisman Trophy. It looks as if Marcus Mariota is going to win the award this year.

And on New Year’s Day, the two most decorated quarterbacks in college football will go head-to-head in the Granddaddy of Them All.

Defending national champion Florida State (13-0) will face West Coast king Oregon (12-1) in the 101st edition of the Rose Bowl. The tantalizing matchup was determined by the College Football Playoff committee on Sunday.

“You have two of the greatest of all time at their position,” Oregon coach Mark Helfrich said.

The schools will meet for the first time in a playoff semifinal that could be a showcase for Winston and Mariota, who both finished up their regular seasons by leading their teams to victories in their conferences’ championship games.

Winston threw for 309 yards and

three touchdowns in the Seminoles’ 37-35 win over Georgia Tech in the ACC game, and Mariota threw two TD passes and ran for three more in the Ducks’ 51-13 rout of Arizona in the Pac-12 final.

“You have two of the greatest college football players right now,” Florida State coach Jimbo Fisher said. “It makes for great TV and great competition.”

The Seminoles have never played in a Rose Bowl, but they were in Pasadena just last January, beating Auburn in the BCS national title game on the same hallowed turf in Arroyo Seco. Winston capped one of the greatest freshman seasons by a quarterback in the sport’s history by throwing the winning TD pass to Kelvin Benjamin with 13 seconds left in Florida State’s 34-31 victory, capping a 79-yard drive.

Oregon will be in the traditional postseason destination for the Pac-12 champion for the third time in six years, and the stands will be filled with green-clad faithful. The Ducks lost to Terrelle Pryor and Ohio State in 2010, but outlasted Wisconsin 45-

38 in a thriller in 2012 for Oregon’s first Rose Bowl win in 95 years.

Mariota hasn’t won a national title or played in a Rose Bowl yet, but the junior from Hawaii has done nearly everything else during three incredible seasons as the Ducks’ starter. He has thrown a touchdown pass in all 39 games of his college career while throwing just 12 interceptions — the same number Winston has thrown in his last six games.

Mariota is highly likely to pick up the Heisman in New York later this month before focusing on ending Florida State’s 29-game winning streak.

“Everything starts with him at Oregon,” Fisher said. “He’s a tremendous football player, and he can affect you in so many ways. Not with just the arm and the feet, but with his mind and his intangibles.”

Here are more things to know about that annual football postscript to the Tournament of Roses Parade:

SEEDS OF DOUBT: Oregon is the second seed in the playoff, ranked higher than the unbeaten defending

champs likely on the Pac-12’s strength and the Ducks winning their last eight games by an average of 26 points. Florida State, which ended up seeded third despite its perfect record, appeared to work much harder down the stretch, yet remained unbeaten for the second straight regular season.

“Wherever you’re ranked right now, I don’t think matters that much,” Fisher said. “Because every team in this playoff is going to be a great team.”

NOLES CAN’T LOSE: It’s not always pretty, but Winston and his Florida State teammates keep winning each week — 29 straight after outlasting Georgia Tech for their third straight ACC title. The Seminoles make defensive mistakes, and Winston has thrown 17 interceptions, but they execute well near both goal lines, ranking among the nation’s best in red-zone defense and offense.

“When you get to 29, that’s just extremely, extremely impressive,” Helfrich said.

CALIFORNIA LOVE: Oregon should have a decided home-field advantage in Pasadena, given the

comparatively easy travel time from the Pacific Northwest to Southern California — along with a local base. When the Ducks beat UCLA here in October, the stands were filled with alumni and fans of the school jokingly known as the University of California at Eugene for its large percentage of Golden State students.

BANQUETCIRCUIT: Defenses have rarely slowed Mariota during his three years as Oregon’s starter, yet the Heisman Trophy ceremony and the surrounding hoopla might have an effect. Winston and Fisher candidly acknowledge the grind of postseason banquets and recognition before the bowl games even arrive, and Mariota is likely to be feted repeatedly during the holidays before the teams get to Disneyland on the day after Christmas.

OFFENSIVE IDEAS: While the quarterback matchup is unparalleled, these teams’ offenses have little in common. Florida State runs a pro-style offense designed to take advantage of Winston’s arm and legs, while Oregon runs Helfrich’s version of Chip Kelly’s spread offense.

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