

College Football

Legit gripes? Maybe, but no change to college playoff format

By RALPH D. RUSSO
Associated Press

ATLANTA — Unlike the Bowl Championship Series, the College Football Playoff was built to withstand criticism instead of shifting to respond to yearly griping.

That structure is standing strong despite some blowback.

Two Southeastern Conference teams playing for the championship on Monday night in Atlanta? Not a problem. Two Power Five conferences left out of the final four, including Big Ten champ and bluest of blue bloods Ohio State? That's OK. Undefeated UCF never getting serious consideration for spot in the playoff? Congratulations on a great season, but that's just the way it goes, Knights.

Despite this storm, the playoff is what it is for the foreseeable future. No one in position to fight for changes has given any indication

tweaks are coming. Especially not expansion.

"The CFP was built on a more long-term foundation than the BCS was," College Football Playoff executive director Bill Hancock said Wednesday.

The playoff management committee is made up of the FBS conference commissioners and Notre Dame's athletic director, but the architects were mostly the commissioners of the Power Five conferences. Final approval was given by a panel of university presidents representing each conference. The system was locked into place with a 12-year television contract with ESPN. This is year four of that agreement.

"The BCS contracts were four years," Hancock said. "After two years of every agreement it was time to begin thinking about the next agreement."

The reality is if the



commissioners wanted to expand, ESPN would not stop them, but the contract showed a commitment to the CFP that was often lacking in the BCS. Frequently with the BCS, debates about which teams did or did not make the championship game or the other BCS bowls led to changes to the selection process.

Good intentions, but not good optics.

Hancock said when reacting to complaints the goal was to make the BCS better, but "in hindsight that was not the best approach because it contributed to the public not understanding how it worked or the perceived mystery about it." And also led people to believe that the people who owned and operated it weren't really confident about it.

A month ago, on selection Sunday, after Georgia and Alabama (which did not even

play in the SEC title game), were chosen by the selection committee to play in the semifinals, Big Ten Commissioner Jim Delany expressed full confidence in the playoff and the committee. Pac-12 Commissioner Larry Scott, whose conference was also left out, said he believed there was no reason to begin talking about expansion.

SEC Commissioner Greg Sankey, Atlantic Coast Conference Commissioner John Swofford and Big 12 Commissioner Bob Bowlsby have all echoed those sentiments. Same goes for American Athletic Conference commissioner Mike Aresco, who watched his league member, UCF, finish the season 13-0 with a victory against Auburn in the Peach Bowl on Jan. 1.

Auburn beat both Georgia and Alabama in the regular season.

"At this point I still don't favor expansion," Aresco said. "I do think our teams

need to get a better shake, but that's a separate issue."

UCF athletic director Danny White doesn't agree; he wants changes.

White said he does not question the selection committee's integrity, but he does believe it has a bias against teams from outside the Power Five. UCF was never ranked higher than No. 12 in the selection committee's rankings. White wants a return to the BCS selection process, which used a combination of media and coaches' polls and computer ratings. The BCS rankings were usually kinder to teams from outside what at the time was six automatic qualifying conferences.

"You look at a Utah and a TCU and Hawaii. Boise. They had years like we had they were somewhere near the top five. And we're 12th," White said. "I just think that's a disservice. Because it doesn't solve the second part that I think needs to change and

that's I think the playoff needs to be at least eight teams if we're going to call it a true national champion, because it's not inclusive enough."

And since White does not believe the playoff crowns a true champion, UCF has declared itself national champs. UCF football's official Twitter account has the title 2017 National Champions. School officials plan to hang a championship banner and have a parade in nearby Disney World for the team. White even said he planned to pay former coach Scott Frost, who is now coach at Nebraska, and his staff their championship bonuses.

"I look at schools all across the country that are hanging national championship banners for years they had that weren't even close to the year we just had," White said.

For now, though, White's calls for change to the CFP are just shouts into an empty room. He speaks for many fans, but no one is listening.

RANCHER: Johnston is one of world's best at shaping skiing race courses

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Korea over the past two years to inspect and shape the Olympic terrain. "I really enjoy it."

Johnston has six weather websites loaded onto his phone — including one from South Korea to keep current on conditions — and views them so often that his wife Cassy recently had to increase their phone's data plan.

He likes to give off a gruff first impression — "I really don't have time for all these interviews," he lamented — but, during a leisurely tour of the properties he oversees, it's clear he's something far removed from acerbic.

He's proud of every parcel of this land.

Here lies some of the most sought-after alfalfa in the county. On the other side of a dirt road bordered by badger holes, he shows off his laser-leveled land that produces various classes of hay. They're meticulously planned out so water doesn't gather and ruin the consis-

tency of the crop. Across the two-lane highway, reside his roughly 125 head of Red Angus cattle.

On the horizon, the mountain range.

His life used to be a cycle: haying in the summer and, when it turned colder, heading up to Jackson Hole mountain resort so he could coach and direct events the ski club produced. Johnston's family would follow him there — until the three kids reached school age. He eventually just pulled along a camper or stayed at a cheap place for a few nights before making the 80-mileish drive home.

Back then, Johnston was sometimes spotted wearing a jacket with these words embroidered on the back: "I'd Rather Be Haying." He honed his craft at Jackson Hole — becoming a course-shaping artist who would water the slopes in extremely cold temperatures to create an icy surface that would hold up from the first racer all the way to the last.

In 1998, the U.S. ski

team contracted with the local organizing committee for nationals. As director of Alpine events with the ski club, it was his show.

Johnston's twists and turns were a hit, along with his organizational skills. Soon after, he became a technical adviser for the U.S. team. He credits Tim "Swampy" LaMarche, his predecessor and another course guru, for teaching him the ins and outs of the profession.

It's all been trial by error, too.

Johnston was chief for the women's speed events at the 2002 Salt Lake City Olympics and ran the show for the women's side at the 2014 Sochi Games. He's known for his aggressive and durable snow, which is precisely the way racers like it. His preference is making it with a snow gun instead of letting Mother Nature do the work.

"Manmade can be super-fine particles so it's really dense," explained Johnston, who left for South Korea on

Christmas Day. "The natural snow can be dry, fluffy — a real pain."

He prepared the World Cup course for the women in Killington, Vermont, last month and lent a hand at the World Cup stop in Beaver Creek, Colorado, which is one of the racers' favorite venues on the circuit.

"The course crew in Beaver Creek is probably the best in the world," Svindal said. "We always have perfect conditions."

In South Korea, Johnston's main tasks include: Build and maintain the snow surface, including the macro features such as jumps and rolls, manage the snowcat operators and installation of safety features. His aim is to help Russi's downhill design spring to life.

The men's and women's downhill tracks vary only slightly, with the men starting at a higher spot and diverging at one point through a narrow gully before merging again. Along the way, there will be four major jumps, which have

been modified since a test event held at the site nearly two years ago. The changes should provide smoother, safer landings for the skiers who will be traveling around 80 mph (128.7 kph).

"We have changed the landing zone of the jumps," Russi said. "(It) means that the jumps will go longer this time. For sure, I will like it. But I will be nervous as well."

On his farm two months ago, Johnston was worrying more about his hay crop than the ski slope after a quick visit to South Korea for course inspection. There was a snow storm about to blow through and he still had to stack 200 tons of hay. His wife — who works as a dental hygienist and helps in the fields in the afternoon — was driving a truck to haul the bales, while two more workers pitched in. They were up until 1:30 a.m. to accomplish the feat. It snowed three hours later.

Tom and Cassy met at the Green Mountain Valley ski school in Vermont as teenagers and got married

in 1986. She occasionally travels with him to races, where he's been known to ride with the snowcat operators at night as they groom the course or sleep with a radio next to his pillow so he can hear the chatter of those working on his hill.

Quality speed courses and hay are his pride and joy, and they have more in common than you might think. Both take attention to detail. Both depend on Mother Nature. Neither can ever be perfect.

Not that he'll ever stop trying.

"I get really fussy with every element," said Johnston, a former racer at Montana State and Whitman College in Washington, where he earned his degree in English literature. "The guys that hay for me, my wife, it drives them crazy. I've never put up a good hay bale, because there's always this wrong with it or that wrong with it. Same with a course."

"But give me good weather and it will be a good course," he said.

OSAA: Committee also supports pilot program to explore six-man football

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The OSAA staff is contacting schools this week to find out if they would exercise that option. The information collected will be part of the discussion at the committee's next meeting Jan. 9.

"The reality is there maybe are schools that don't want to do it," Weber said.

Schools opting to move down would do so on a two-year basis, after which

the OSAA would review their status.

The committee has yet to consider benchmarks for those schools returning to their original classification.

"What if you send a 6A school down to 5A and they go 7-2 and 8-1?" Weber said. "Then it probably becomes easier to say, 'We should probably move them back up.' But those are conversations that the details haven't been fleshed out."

With the potential

movement of so many schools, the ad-hoc football committee has proposed its own districting plan, a break from the one the executive board approved in October. The football-only plan would include larger districts to address competitive balance and scheduling concerns.

Class 6A would have 43 schools in four special districts and Class 5A would have 36 schools in three special districts. Each special district would have the

option of splitting into two divisions.

"Our schools, at least in 6A, are looking for some flexibility, and they believe that having those larger leagues provides them with that," Weber said. "It leaves them open to determine their nonleague, and make sure they're getting those competitive matchups where they can."

"Depending on how it's done, it could mean an increase in nonleague games.

If there are 12 schools in a league, they could split into six, and say, 'Hey, we're going to play five games on this side, and then go find our nonleague games.' They may be on the other side of the district, or they may be from somewhere else."

The special-district plan would add a wrinkle into the playoff qualification process, to be addressed by the state championship committee.

"We'll get to that as we go," Weber said. "I'm sure the

football ad-hoc committee would weigh in on that."

The football committee also is supporting a two-year pilot that would allow schools with an adjusted enrollment of 89 or fewer to play six-man football.

The committee is aiming to present its recommendations at the next meeting of the executive board Feb. 12. Changes would require approval of the executive board and the delegate assembly.

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