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A Bloodless Look at the BCS

College Football's Convoluted Bowl System Is Bowing Out, But Is the New One Any Better?

By RACHEL BACHMAN



Getty Images

This college football season, which began Thursday, marks the last step before the sport embarks on a new adventure: a four-team playoff to determine the national champion.

But it also represents the end of another bold initiative: the 15-year, largely loathed reign of the Bowl Championship Series.

To understand what the BCS represents, it helps to imagine that the comparatively well-oiled machine of the NFL playoffs never existed. Imagine, instead, that the Super Bowl was taken completely out of the NFL's jurisdiction and handed over to a bunch of bureaucrats who decided to choose who plays in the title game by consulting a system of polls and rankings they'd cobbled together.

That's essentially what happened in 1998 when Roy Kramer of the Southeastern Conference, together with

The Top 20 Injustices of the Bowl Championship Series Era

The Court judges controversial BCS choices in three categories: fairness, magnitude and whether they were the right calls.

THE INJUSTICE	SEASON WHY?
1 Southern California left out of the national championship game in favor of Oklahoma	2001 USC, the top team in the polls, skipped over for BCS title game but snags a share of title after Rose Bowl rout of Michigan
2 One-loss Florida State chosen for title game instead of one-loss Miami (7-0) or one-loss Washington	2000 FSU lost to one-loss Miami, which lost to one-loss Washington. Somebody got BCS title nod and line to Oklahoma
3 Florida chosen to play in national championship game over Michigan	2006 Florida leads up Michigan to play Ohio State in what would've been a rivalry title game. Gators are clearly better than both
4 Iowa selected for the Orange Bowl, not the Rose Bowl, which traditionally invites Big Ten teams	2002 Orange Bowl takes the Big Ten co-champion before the Rose can. Hawkeyes lose with a loss to USC and without flowers
5 Nebraska chosen to play in the national championship game	2001 Combustible, ranked No. 4, got in double not winning the Big 12. Gets smacked by Miami
6 Kansas State passed over by the BCS bowls	1998 BCS bowls take No. 4 and No. 8 in BCS standings ahead of No. 3-ranked K-State, which loses in the Alamo Bowl
7 Missouri passed over by the BCS bowls	2007 The Orange picks Kansas. Missouri's rival being in the Civil War, a team it beat in the regular season
8 Auburn left out of national championship	2004 One of three undefeated teams out in the title game, the Tigers probably would have lost to USC anyway
9 Tulane passed over by the BCS bowls	1998 The undefeated Green Wave don't play a ranked team and end up in the Liberty Bowl
10 Boise State and TCU play each other in Fiesta Bowl	2009 David gets BCS bowl berth but not their Galathea
11 Boise and TCU play each other in Fiesta Bowl	2008 David gets neither BCS bowl game nor their Galathea
12 Northern Illinois selected to play in Orange Bowl	2012 One play from beating Alabama, SEC power Georgia is left out of BCS. Northern Illinois gets crushed by Florida State
13 Utah left out of national title game	2004 Coach Urban Meyer's team goes undefeated. So do four others
14 Utah left out of national title game again	2008 Consolation for 13-0 Utah beating Alabama in Sugar Bowl
15 Hawaii selected to play in Sugar Bowl	2007 10th year in row, losing 40-10 to Georgia
16 Missouri passed over by the BCS bowls	2006 One-loss Badgers crumpled by Michigan. Ohio State schedule leaving three teams from one conference playing in BCS games
17 Auburn passed over by the BCS bowls	2006 Two-loss seasons costs Tigers a BCS bowl berth
18 Oklahoma reached title game over Texas Tech, Texas	2008 Sooners win three-way Big 12 tie, lose championship to Florida
19 One-loss Oklahoma State left out of title game	2011 One-loss game goes instead, he one outside Stillwater is upset
20 Undefeated TCU left out of national title game	2010 Instead, Auburn beats Oregon in a classic title game

five other conference commissioners in top-division college football, organized what became the BCS. "The amazing part as I look back on it is how many times it did work out," Kramer said.

For all the heartache it has caused the fans of various unlucky teams (*see table*), the BCS has accompanied, if not helped to create, some broad and likely permanent changes in the sport. College football fans, who were once regional tribes, became national consumers under this system, eager for news of developments in once-forgotten lands. Fans in Tuscaloosa, Ala., for instance, became keenly interested in the outcome of a game in Eugene, Ore., because it might affect the home

team's standing or its future opponent.

"It's bigger than we ever dreamed of at the time," Kramer said. "It created a name brand and almost a structure of membership: BCS schools and non-BCS schools."

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Over time, the BCS grew to include four showcase bowls outside the title game, and gave a stage to teams that had been frozen out of traditional bowl games due to a lack of historical prestige or conference pedigree. Boise

State, Utah and Texas Christian all boosted their standing as football programs by landing in the BCS-branded Fiesta, Sugar and Rose bowls. Those bowls, said Jerry Palm, a CBSSports.com analyst who has covered the BCS since its inception, "would have never taken those teams any other way, ever."

Since postseason bowl games like the Rose Bowl predated the NCAA, the governing body never had a chance to institute a tournament or some other way of picking a champion, as it does in other sports. The BCS stepped in with a convoluted combination of human polls and computer rankings to select two teams deemed the best—even if most of those teams hadn't had any common opponents.

The only problem was that nobody had the foggiest idea how the rankings would work. "We were experimenting," Kramer said.

The BCS selection system may have reached its nadir in 2003, when some fans stayed up into the wee hours to watch Boise State play Hawaii—a team that had also played Southern California. Hawaii lost to Boise State, which hurt USC's strength-of-schedule rating in the BCS formula, which eventually knocked the Trojans out of the BCS title game.

The following summer, after that absurd spectacle, BCS leaders pulled the strength-of-schedule component from its formula.

For all the controversy and complexity of the BCS, it doesn't seem to have hurt the sport: College football has become the nation's third-most popular sport behind the NFL and baseball, and is closing the gap, according to a Harris Interactive poll from late last year.

Nonetheless, under intense pressure from fans and TV networks—even President Obama weighed in—the leaders of the new College Football Playoff (the commissioners of all 10 top-division

conferences plus the athletic director at Notre Dame) decided to take an entirely new course. The BCS formula will now be replaced by the verdict of a 12- to 18-person blue-ribbon selection committee that will pick the most deserving schools.

One of the things they'll emphasize: strength of schedule. "Play a good schedule, and win, and you'll be in the hunt," said Bill Hancock, the chief staff member of the BCS and CFP. "It's as simple as that."

The new system may not be quite as populist. Three years of realignment have shrunk from six to five the number of major conferences that command top broadcast money and have the most resources to attract coaches and recruits. Teams outside those conferences will struggle to schedule enough strong opponents. "The non-majors, I would say, have virtually no chance of getting into the playoff," Palm said. On the contrary, Hancock said: Having semifinal games means two more spots up for grabs.

Already, the College Football Playoff is slicker than its predecessor, with a professional staff, an actual headquarters in suburban Dallas and a dot-com website rather than the BCS's dot-org home. That's probably a good thing, given that this season could test the BCS like never before. Four of the nation's top 10 teams have among the nation's easiest schedules: No. 1 Alabama, No. 2 Ohio State, No. 3 Oregon and No. 9 Louisville. If everything goes to plan, the BCS could have four unbeaten teams vying for its two-berth title game.

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