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College Football Games Are Far Too Long

As offenses get faster, college football games are getting longer. When will it reach an end?



Florida State's Kermit Whitfield during the game against Ole Miss that exceeded four hours. *PHOTO: STREETER LECKA/GETTY IMAGES*

By **BEN COHEN**

Sept. 14, 2016 7:14 p.m. ET

One morning last week, a plane left Los Angeles at 8:01 a.m. PDT. It was carried across the country by an extraordinary tailwind and made it all the way to Washington, D.C. by 3:02 p.m. ET. Total flight time: 4 hours and 1 minute.

Later that day, a football game between Florida State and Ole Miss kicked off at 8:06 p.m. It smacked into the sport's ordinary headwinds—short touchdown drives, long television breaks and a longer halftime—and the fourth quarter wasn't over until 12:10 a.m. on Tuesday. Total game time: 4 hours and 4 minutes.

It was the most absurd sign yet of the sport's creeping bloat: You can fly across the country in the time it takes to play a regulation college-football game these days.

The average length of college football games has increased steadily since 2008. But after two years that produced the longest non-overtime games in the sport's history, this season is on pace for yet another uptick. Through two weeks, the average game has lasted 3 hours and 26 minutes, according to Stats LLC, which is 15 minutes longer than the 1996 season, 20 minutes longer than the 2006 season and even four minutes longer than the record-breaking suffering of the 2014 and 2015 seasons.

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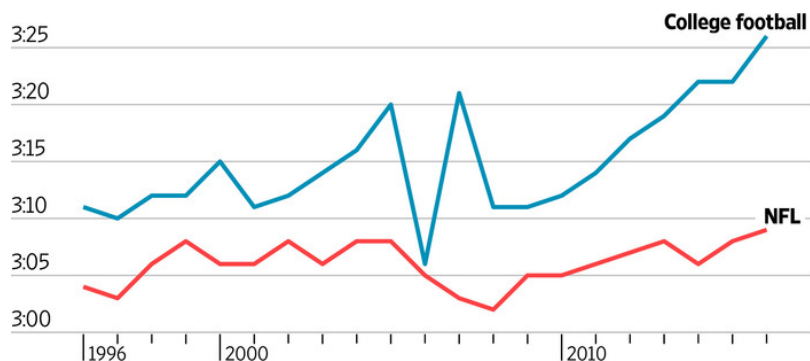
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Finebaum.

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work analyst Paul

Clock Management

Duration of regular-season football games, annual average

3 hours 30 minutes



Notes: College average based on all Football Bowl Subdivision games. The NCAA approved time-related rule changes before the 2006, 2007 and 2008 seasons.

Source: Stats LLC

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College games seem even more endless in comparison to the NFL games a day later. For all the flaws of the average NFL game—player safety, coaching blunders, the quality of the actual football—length is not one. NFL games lasted 3 hours and 8 minutes last year. Which was the same as 2013. And

2005. And 1999.

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The game last week that took more time than a transcontinental trip, according to FlightAware, was that shootout between Florida State and Ole Miss. What took so long? All the stuff that wasn't football. In more than four hours, there was a grand total of 16 minutes and 12 seconds of action, according to a Wall Street Journal film review.

Pac-12 Conference commissioner Larry Scott would like games to be closer to three hours than three and half hours to “adapt to the changing habits and tastes of consumers,” he said. “If we start seeing a lot of games more than 3:15, 3:20, 3:30, we start getting concerned,” he said. But before introducing any rule changes, he believes it's important for the sport to reach a consensus view about the ideal game length through a competition committee that's being formed by the NCAA.

“The length of the game will be one of the key agenda items,” Scott said.

But the nature of college football —with its variety of playing styles and different officiating crews—makes it trickier to regulate than the NFL. One strange truth of this sport is that faster offenses lead to slower games. More first downs result in more clock stoppages, and more touchdowns result in more television commercials. In other words, the more exciting a team is, the more excruciating its games are.



Referees gather to review a play during the second quarter of a game between Eastern Michigan and Missouri.

PHOTO: L.G. PATTERSON/ASSOCIATED PRESS

It's almost impossible now for a high-scoring, highly entertaining matchup to wrap up in a reasonable amount of time. That's why it makes sense that one fast team is most responsible for the sport's epic slowdown: Baylor.

Last season, of the hundreds of schools that play major college football, Bowling Green's non-overtime games were the longest, clocking in at 3:39. Not far behind was Tulsa at 3:36 and then Baylor at 3:34. Baylor, though, was partly to blame for both Bowling Green and Tulsa: All three schools used the Baylor offense to put up ginormous statistics that dragged out their games.

Syracuse was bound for that list this season as soon as it hired former Bowling Green coach Dino Babers. His very first Atlantic Coast Conference game last week against Louisville took 3 hours and 55 minutes—longer than any Syracuse game in the previous three seasons.

It doesn't take two such teams to turn a game into a slog, either. Saturday's game between Alabama and Ole Miss is a perfect example. Last year, up-tempo Ole

Miss dealt the national champions their only loss. It was also Alabama's only game that crossed the four-hour mark.

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Some fans have found an outlet for their ire. It's the same person it has always been: the referee.

It's common at Louisiana State, for example, to hear fans raining boos on the red-capped official who coordinates TV breaks and stops games for several minutes at a time.

"At home, it's nothing," said Ritchie Quinn, an LSU season-ticket holder. "In the stadium, it's an eternity."

Finebaum put it another way. "It's like waiting for a root canal," he said.

—*Max Cohen and Andrew Beaton contributed to this article.*

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