

Will your plan participants reach the retirement they envision?

LIVESTRONG
PORTFOLIOS
From American Century Investments

Download the Client Approved Fund Flyer

Dow Jones Reprints: This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. To order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers, use the Order Reprints tool at the bottom of any article or visit www.djreprints.com

[See a sample reprint in PDF format.](#)

[Order a reprint of this article now](#)

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.
WSJ.com

COLLEGE FOOTBALL | Updated November 23, 2012, 12:08 a.m. ET

Last Rivals Standing

Thanksgiving weekend is about rivalries, and there are some great tribal feuds on tap. But many such games matter less now, or are extinct. The battle for the soul of college football.

By **MATTHEW FUTTERMAN**



Getty Images

The Ohio State Buckeyes face off at the line of scrimmage against the Michigan Wolverines at Ohio Stadium in November 2010.

This weekend, one of college football's great rivalry games will actually have a win-or-go-home result of national importance. Savor it, because it's not likely to happen much anymore.

On Saturday, Notre Dame, the last remaining undefeated major college team—it is ranked No. 1 in the nation for the first time since 1993—meets the University of Southern California at the Los Angeles Coliseum. If the Fighting Irish win, their path to the Bowl Championship Series game in Miami in January is virtually assured. USC has underperformed all year and its starting quarterback is injured, but the athletic Trojans still have a shot to play spoiler.

Yet increasingly, today's rivalries are going the way of ancient feuds like last weekend's Harvard-Yale and Lehigh-Lafayette contests, or the Army-Navy game coming up Dec 8.

Historic—but more rarely deciding anything definitive. Others are mismatches.

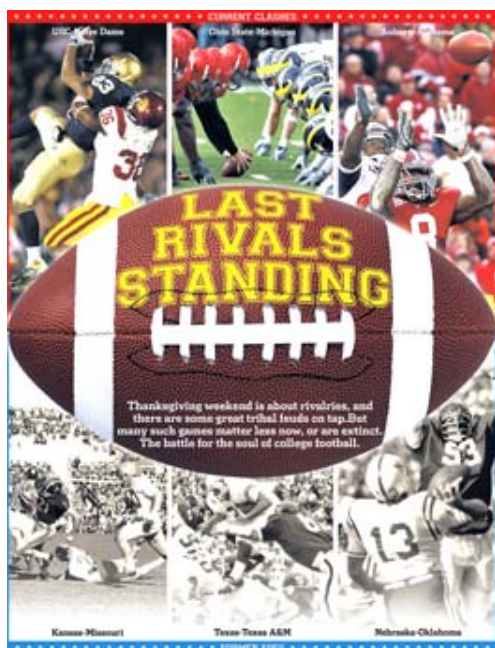


Today's college-football rivalries are going the way of ancient feuds like last weekend's Harvard-Yale and Lehigh-Lafayette contests: historic, but irrelevant or uncompetitively mismatched. Matt Futterman has details on Lunch Break. Photo: Getty Images.

Now the focus of the sport is shifting to next weekend, and the conference championship games, which are about as traditional as Tofurkey at Thanksgiving. All of this is part of a battle for the soul of college football, which each year looks more like every other sport in the U.S. The trend is toward bracketed, moneymaking, attention-grabbing tournaments. Every year a little bit of the traditional tribal passion is pushed to the sidelines.

Revered rivalries, such as Nebraska-Oklahoma and Texas-Arkansas, are gone, victims of the money-fueled game of musical chairs known as conference

realignment. Realignment spelled the end last year of Kansas and Missouri's 120-year contest known as the "Border War." The same fate befell Texas-Texas A&M, a battle that dates to the 19th century. Both would have taken place this weekend.



Dan Jenkins, veteran Texas sportswriter, said there are politicians in his state who want the Aggies-Longhorns game back: "But the two schools don't need the money, and they will both tell you that they have enough tough games on their schedules right now—why add another one?"

Indeed, there are classic matchups over this Thanksgiving weekend, including Michigan-Ohio State and Alabama-Auburn, in the "Iron Bowl," a near-religious fixation for residents of that state. Then there's Florida-Florida State, Arizona-Arizona State and Oregon-Oregon State, in the game known as the "Civil War."

But looming larger are next week's games, when Georgia and Alabama likely will play for the right to meet Notre Dame in January. If Oregon were to happen to get into the Pac-12 championship and win decisively, it could put itself back into the picture, too.

Related

[Let the Games Begin: Saturday's Blood Feuds](#)

Three constituencies have arrayed against the old guard—a new generation of fans, schools with upstart teams now challenging the perennial powers, and TV-oriented executives who dream of a broad national following and the lucrative deals that would result from that.

A new world order is coming: In 2014 the NCAA will institute a four-team playoff, culminating in the crowning of a national champion, which will trump all polls and debates. "We're chipping away at what makes college football unique," said Bill Martin, the former athletic director at the University of Michigan.

Rivalry games won't die. Regional hysteria will abide,



University Archives/Spencer Research Library, University of Kansas Libraries

Kansas hosts Missouri in 1951.

marching bands will play and body paint will be applied. In 2010, an Alabama fan distraught over his team's loss to Auburn, poisoned two historic trees on the Auburn campus. But in previous generations, the nation stopped to watch end-of-season No. 1-vs.-No. 2 battles between Texas and Arkansas, or Nebraska and Oklahoma.

The demise of those games, and an increasingly competitive college football landscape, in which schools like Boise State and Kansas State can play with the big boys, shifts the emphasis to winning the conference championship games. Those games are a 1990s creation that take place after the regular season. Because they're

played after the rivalry games, they almost always have more impact on who plays for the national championship and the postseason bowl-game lineup than the traditional rivalries that used to end the season.

The shift is clear, creating an existential crisis among the faithful. Few people embody this conflict more than Mike Golic, a sports-radio host and former NFL lineman, who was a captain at Notre Dame in 1984. In a fit of pregame excitement 28 years ago, he smashed a ceramic Trojan horse on the stage during his pep-rally speech before the showdown with USC. A part of Golic's soul dies each time a traditional rivalry ends. But he also can't wait for the new playoff.

"You hate losing the rivalries, and that's the dark side of all this realignment, which we probably haven't seen the end of," Golic said. "But it all happens in the name of the almighty dollar."

For nearly a century, college football clung to an arcane competition structure. Until 1968, the Associated Press almost always named its so-called national champion before the postseason bowl games. In 1984, Brigham Young University went undefeated and was named national champion without playing in a competitive postseason bowl, because it played in the low-profile Western Athletic Conference. Some years ended with different teams atop the rankings in separate polls, allowing for both to claim the mythical title of "national champion." It led to robust barroom arguments, but Americans tend to prefer unambiguous winners.

For the 1992 season, the leaders of several of the major bowls and conferences began to impose order to the system by agreeing to a structure that increased the likelihood of the two top-ranked teams meeting in a championship game. Those efforts have strengthened during the past 20 years, partly at the behest of television executives looking to expand audiences they say demand a definitive and dramatic playoff. Conferences expanded, then separated teams into divisions and birthed the championship games that will be played next week.

It's a structure that every U.S. sport has largely conformed to of late. A regular season is followed by a playoff and a climactic final. For most sports, conforming has meant simply expanding postseason competition, or creating some stakes, however inorganic, where none had previously existed. (Nascar has its "Chase to the Sprint Cup"; golf, the [FedEx Cup](#).)

But for college football, that shift strikes at the heritage



Zuma Press

Alabama-Auburn madness in 2011.

and grandeur that are the heart of the institution, much of which was packed into the season's final weekend of traditional rivalries. Jay Coulter, an Alabama-based recruiting manager for a life-insurance company who also runs a blog covering Auburn football, said he knows plenty of people who would rather beat Alabama than win a national championship. "Some people would say we're screwed up in the head," Coulter said of that odd order of priorities. "We're a little different down here."

Coulter is also the sort of fan who for the past 25 years has roped off his tailgating/parking spot behind Samford Hall on the Auburn campus the day before every Saturday home game using stakes and orange tape. He typically arrives by 7 a.m. Saturday, and sets up his tents and grills and television sets, even if the game doesn't begin until nightfall.

For Coulter, Saturday's Iron Bowl is a chance, however remote, for Auburn to salvage an awful 3-8 season by ending Alabama's hopes to make the national championship game. The Crimson Tide is currently ranked No. 2.

Some 600 miles north, Michigan fans suffering through another disappointing season (8-3, which sounds better than it is) are hoping to knock off undefeated Ohio State in a contest known simply as "The Game." The Buckeyes can't play postseason football because of NCAA violations.

Meanwhile in Florida, fans will converge in Tallahassee for the showdown between the Florida Gators and Florida State Seminoles, ranked fourth and 10th respectively. Both teams are likely out of the running for the national championship, and Florida can't make the SEC title game, making the 57th meeting between the two schools the biggest of the year for the teams and their fans. "It's devastation if you lose," said John Morgan, an Orlando trial lawyer and Florida alumnus who sent four children there. His home-game routine is sharing some grilled alligator with his friends in the stadium parking lot. "If you're having a bad season and you win, it tends to make everything right."

Rivalry games are selling tools. Each school has its top recruits in the stadium. Some watch from the sidelines. The great fear is that a loss, or a string of losses, will tilt a top player to the most hated foe. In 2008, the once-heralded quarterback Terrelle Pryor chose Ohio State over Michigan in the middle of Ohio State's six-game winning streak over their archrivals.

Given all that passion, one might think college football would do everything to preserve it. But the theme of big-time sports the past quarter century is that more is better, especially when it comes to television money. The new TV contract for the football playoff is likely to be worth as much as \$7 billion during the next decade.

The test of whether that investment is worthwhile will be if the regional passion can continue to evolve into national obsession. The traditional rivalries clearly have their enduring appeal. But the tide appears to be turning. Population growth and the growing popularity of football, especially

among young African-American children, have fostered a boom in talent. Now there are enough good players to build quality teams at Florida and Alabama, but also at Boise State and Kansas State, the season's biggest surprise.

In addition, the conference championships have become true crowd-pleasers. The Michigan-Ohio State game has averaged an impressive 7.6 million viewers the past five years, but 7.8 million viewers watched the inaugural Big Ten championship game in 2011 between Michigan State and Wisconsin, according to Nielsen, the media-research firm.

Alabama and Auburn's Iron Bowl has averaged 8.6 million viewers the past four years, another impressive figure considering both teams hail from the country's 23rd largest state. But the Southeastern Conference championship game has averaged about 12.9 million viewers since 2007. In 2008 and 2009 the game brought together the top two teams in the country, Alabama and Florida. Some 15.2 million people watched the 2008 contest, while 18 million watched the rematch in 2009.

As storied as the rivalry between USC and Notre Dame has been, the games have averaged about 4.7 million viewers the past four years. Given Notre Dame's appeal, Saturday's game should be substantially higher. Still, the inaugural Pac-12 Conference championship last year between Oregon and UCLA garnered 4.5 million viewers.

These are the numbers that excite Ben Sutton, president of sports and entertainment conglomerate IMG's college division. According to IMG research there are now 174 million people who say they are fans of college sports. College football is now often the most popular television programming on fall Saturday nights. Increasingly, Sutton said, fans don't just follow their own schools but the pitched battles between the best teams in the game.

In fact, even the new kids on college football's block are capable of drawing eyeballs when they're playing in crucial games. More than 3.3 million people actually watched formerly undefeated and top-ranked Kansas State get pummeled by Baylor Saturday night, compared with 2.4 million for Notre Dame's blowout of Wake Forest. Kansas State has never won a national championship and doesn't even have a rival, since the University of Kansas has spent the past 120 years focused on its "Border War" with Missouri.

"We were the worst university in college football at one time," said Dave Dreiling, a Kansas State booster and local business owner. "It's just a feel-good story."

Of course, college football's ultimate trick is to get lucky enough to have two legendary rivals meet with everything on the line. More than 21 million viewers watched top-ranked Michigan lose to second-ranked Ohio State in 2006. The longtime enemies are in separate divisions of the Big Ten conference. Eventually, they're bound to play their annual rivalry one week, and—in the conference-championship game that will actually mean something—the following one.

Write to Matthew Futterman at matthew.futterman@wsj.com

Copyright 2012 Dow Jones & Company, Inc. All Rights Reserved

This copy is for your personal, non-commercial use only. Distribution and use of this material are governed by our [Subscriber Agreement](#) and by copyright law. For non-personal use or to order multiple copies, please contact Dow Jones Reprints at 1-800-843-0008 or visit www.djreprints.com