



Advertisement

ARGOSY UNIVERSITY
Online Programs

Argosy University offers flexible online programs in business, education and psychology.
CLICK TO LEARN MORE

Learn More

BlogU



Finding the Best: The College Football Championship in America

By John V. Lombardi December 9, 2007 5:05 pm

This is the time of endless speculation about which division I-A college football team is the best in America. We have polls, computer rankings, conference championships, and the high profile BCS (Bowl Championship Series) program. Our experts (which include just about everyone who follows college sports) argue with great passion about which scheme is the appropriate method for anointing the "best college football team in America." This controversy lives and repeats itself because we can never get it right.

The notion of "best" in college football represents an unattainable goal. If football were organized like track or swimming with absolute standardized measurements of performance for everyone, we might be able to measure the best. But football is not organized this way. Football is a regionalized team sport (through the mechanism of conferences), and it is constructed in a format that guarantees the impossibility of defining the best.

No college football team in America can play every other college football team. Some football teams play some other football teams. Moreover, not every football team or athletic conference is equal to every other. Some are very rich (the SEC for example), some have institutions with huge athletic programs (like the Big Ten with Ohio State), and some struggle with financial difficulties or low attendance (like the University at Buffalo). Some are in conferences that have 12 teams divided into east and west divisions, play an extra conference championship game, but no team plays every other team in the conference. The won-loss record of one college football team almost always has a different value from the same won-loss record of another team. If a mediocre team plays other mediocre teams, the won-loss record means something different than if the mediocre team had played very good teams. This illustrates why we have no standardized measure of a football team's performance.

Absent a clear measurement of football performance, we end up with subjective measures. For many years, we identified the national champion of college football by consulting expert opinions, expressed in various polls, from sports writers, coaches, and others who, in theory, had seen most of the contenders play during the year and who we hoped had a reasonably objective basis for identifying the best. This, however, violated the fundamental premise of sports which is defined by a competition within a strict set of rules that produces an unambiguous winner. People who play and watch sports keep score. If we only care about the beauty of the game, then we do not need to keep score. Not keeping score is inconceivable to most sports enthusiasts, and so everything in sports turns on determining winners and losers.

This context helps explain why the college football season's end is so fraught with controversy. We can't figure out how to get a clear, single, winner. Some argue that a tournament would make it work better, but that's not any clearer because we have to seed a tournament by using a formula based on season performances of teams that did not play each other. The tournament format gives the illusion of effectively determining a winner, but it only creates a second season of football for a group of teams chosen by a complex ranking process that relies on judgment, not direct competition. At the end of a tournament, a team is crowned champion, but the team is only champion of the group invited to the tournament. Given the inconsistency of collegiate football performance, the wide range of resources and capabilities of the various college athletic programs, and the large number of potential participants in a tournament, one can easily imagine a team not included in the tournament that might well have ended up a winner.

The BCS, the mechanism used to identify a football champion, takes a different approach. It recognizes that football is organized into conferences, that the conferences are of differing quality and significance, and that the teams from these conferences will accumulate records in ways complicated and difficult to compare. The BCS identifies the best football teams by combining first, the opinions of two groups of experts (a panel of observers representative of the experienced public and a poll of coaches), and second, rankings based on six different computer models (that offer an illusion of impartiality and fairness) to identify the best football team. These computer models are of course just as arbitrary as the opinions of the human experts, but at least they eliminate the possibility of individual bias against particular teams by substituting systematic bias in favor of certain characteristics of measurable team performance. The resulting rankings produce a playoff between number one and number two in the BCS formula, and then provides a set of secondary playoffs between other ranked teams paired up for their presumed performance quality and television draw. (For a primer on the BCS see <http://www.bcsfootball.org/bcsfb/about>)

The owners of the BCS, the football conferences and the various bowl organizations, have adjusted the methodology for constructing the ranking to persuade the football-expert public of its validity. However, no ranking system based on subjective or computer analysis can produce a true competition between the best teams for an objectively identified BEST football team in America. We have intentionally constructed a college football system to produce conference champions, not national champions.

Should we worry about all this? No, not at all. While some might yearn for the certainty of knowing which college football team is the best in the country this year, not knowing exactly which team is best has many advantages. The argument over the schemes employed to designate the best two teams to compete for the championship gives us endless conversational opportunity, it gives our alumni and friends something to focus on, it allows newspapers and sports shows to fill their pages and air time with speculation about the relative performances of our teams, and it delivers a discussion that requires no closure because it presents a question that has no answer.

The conference structure of football ensures that we will have many champions, many contenders for the best in the nation, whatever the results of the BCS contests. If our team is very good, but didn't get into the top game, we can feel confident that, but for the vagaries of a peculiar polling system and ranking calculation, our favorite would have been able to demonstrate its supremacy. If we are among the 64 teams playing in one of the 32 bowl games, we have another chance for a celebration.

This is the genius of the BCS system. It invents an imprecise standard based on subjective measurement (the polls and computer models). It applies this standard of measurement to one of the most rigidly structured games in the nation. It then builds a second season of bowl championships of various degrees of importance around this ranking system and the entrepreneurial enthusiasm of bowl promoters. America's sports fans, who spend endless hours debating the merits of the imprecise measurement, consume this manufactured championship process and its subsidiary bowl games with ever-growing enthusiasm.

Whatever else we can say about the Bowl Championship Series, it is a one of the most visible demonstrations of America's unique ability to combine serious academic enterprise with intense competitive spirit, remarkable entrepreneurial ingenuity, and spectacular entertainment value.

[Disclaimer: the author's institution, LSU, will play in the BCS championship game.]

8/6/2009

Blog U.: Finding the Best: The College...

© Copyright 2009 Inside Higher Ed