

NCAA Football Playoffs: “December Madness”!

In the last several years, the BCS has taken more than its share of potshots, for good reason. It’s evolved into such a big mess that no one even pretends that this system is capable of providing a legitimate national champion. Opponents of BCS have been crying for playoffs, coming up with various four and eight-team tournaments that frankly does not cure one of the biggest problem in college football – that of inequity.

Let’s face the facts: college football is completely controlled by 63 teams: 62 teams that belong to the “Big 6” (ACC, Big East, Big 12, Big Ten, Pac 10, and SEC) and Notre Dame. The mythical “national champion”, as well as all of the \$10 million paydays, will go to the teams that belong in this exclusive group – the real “Division I”. Meanwhile, the other Division I teams are left to scarp for leftovers, in terms of bowl spots (with a maximum payout of around \$1 million) and TV deals. The BCS, or the Big Conferences System, is what it is: a system to ensure that the “family” gets richer, while the “outsiders” are treated like wicked stepchildren.

In this scenario, there is no Gonzaga, a team from the so-called smaller conferences that receives an opportunity to prove that they can play with the big boys – and beat them. If such a team rises up, say Marshall, Fresno St., or Boise St., big member schools refuse to play them (especially on the road), knowing that they have everything to lose and nothing to gain. They have to protect their reputation, knowing that a loss to an “ugly stepchild” will forever tarnish them and their “family” – never mind the actual strengths of the teams.

There is only one fair way to fix this problem, and that is a real playoff system – a system that gives *every* Division I school a chance to win national championship. What would such a system look like? Here is one person’s idea of a “true” playoff, carefully constructed after many hours of thought.

Playoff System

There are currently 11 conferences in college football. I propose that 10 spots be reserved for conference champions: nine for the nine strongest conference champions, with the final spot decided by a play-in game. In addition, there will be six at-large spots, as determined by the BCS rankings (I’m not a huge fan of this ranking system, but it sure beats having a selection committee.). Teams are seeded as follows:

- (1) For teams in the top 15: the BCS rank of the team
- (2) For teams outside the top 15: A combination of four components (other than poll rankings) that make up the BCS: Computer average, strength of schedule, losses, and quality wins.

When would the games be played? After all, we are dealing with 12, 13, and sometimes 14-game regular seasons in this day and age. Obviously, some sacrifices will have to be made to incorporate a full playoff system, but it won’t be as bad as you might think. Since there are 13 weeks from the first week of September to the last week of November, that would be enough time to squeeze in 11 games, plus a potential conference championship game – with one bye week. If you want to play a 12th game, you have to play in the last weekend of August, which, by the way, is becoming more and more common these days.

With the regular season and conference championship games decided by the end of November, it would leave the first weekend of December free for the annual Army-Navy game

and the play-in game, with all other playoff teams receiving a bye. The playoffs would then start in earnest during the second weekend of December, and continue until the first weekend of January – the second weekend, if you want to play the semifinals on New Year’s Day.

How would this playoff system work in the current year? Here is a proposed schedule, along with a list of projected pairings:

Week 1:

Army vs. Navy, at E. Rutherford N.J.
Play-in game: North Texas at Cincinnati

Week 2: Played at the site of higher seeded teams

Game 1:

(1) Miami-Florida / Big East
(16) Cincinnati / North Texas

Game 2:

(8) Kansas St. / At Large
(9) Notre Dame / At Large

Game 3:

(5) Iowa / At Large
(12) Florida St. / ACC

Game 4:

(4) USC / At Large
(13) Boise St. / WAC

Game 5:

(6) Washington St. / Pac 10
(11) Michigan / At Large

Game 6:

(3) Georgia / SEC
(14) Colorado St. / MWC

Game 7:

(7) Oklahoma / Big 12
(10) Texas / At Large

Game 8:

(2) Ohio St. / Big Ten
(15) Marshall / MAC

Quarterfinals:

Game 9: Sugar Bowl, Game 1 winner vs. Game 2 winner
Game 10: Cotton Bowl, Game 3 winner vs. Game 4 winner
Game 11: Capital One Bowl, Game 5 winner vs. Game 6 winner
Game 12: Gator Bowl, Game 7 winner vs. Game 8 winner

Semifinals:

Game 13: Orange Bowl, Game 9 winner vs. Game 10 winner
Game 14: Rose Bowl, Game 11 winner vs. Game 12 winner

Final:

Game 15: Fiesta Bowl, semifinal winners

Unlike other playoff systems, this would not punish conference champions for having weak schedules – schedules that are, quite often, the result of the “big boys” refusing to play the (often superior) “wicked stepchildren”. Instead, they would get the opportunity to go to the playoffs and stick it to one of the overrated fat cats by winning a first-round game. And when that happens, wouldn't that be quite a story?

Revenue distribution:

In terms of revenue, I would guarantee each conference at least 4% of the take - with the rest of the revenue distributed to the conferences, based on who wins the playoff games. That should ensure that the payoffs are EARNED by actual performance on the field, rather than given out ahead of time based on reputation and prestige. That should ensure that the major conferences get the majority of the pie, while giving the smaller conferences a legitimate chance to move up the ladder.

So here is how it would work:

4% of the take for each of the conferences, plus a "fair share" total (about 2%) for the independents ($11 * 4 + 2 = 46\%$)

3% to the conference represented by each team that makes it to the quarterfinals but no further ($3 * 4 = 12\%$)

7% to the conference represented by each team that makes it to the semifinals but no further ($7 * 2 = 14\%$)

13.5% to the conference represented by the finalists ($13.5 * 2 = 27\%$)

And there you have it, the majority of the money goes to the conferences whose teams are represented in the later rounds, but the money is actually earned.

The big conferences may complain about the revenue distribution, but the 5 smaller conferences would probably only end up with about 25% of the revenue, though they represent nearly 50% of the teams. And this system would allow lower-rung conferences, over time, to

move up the ladder and become a "power" conference. I like the chances of CUSA and perhaps the MWC of joining the elite, if given the opportunity - and isn't competition and parity part of what makes college sports so exciting?

Author's note: Feel free to comment on my playoff system, or propose any alternative playoff system. I will choose some of the best responses, and discuss them in an upcoming article.

Just for fun, I even wrote an article handicapping the fictional playoff. Enjoy; until we have a real playoff in college football, this is about as close as you're going to get!

Handicapping the (fictional) playoffs!

Boy, I really getting carried away – but even the possibility of a real football playoff system has me excited. So I will be handicapping the first two rounds of the (fictional) playoffs, complete with point spreads, possible matchups, and future book plays:

Play-in game: North Texas at Cincinnati (-11)

Ironically, this is the one playoff game that has become a reality, as the two teams are set to face each other in the New Orleans Bowl. Certainly both teams enter this game on a roll, as Cincinnati has covered 6 out of the last 7; North Texas enters with a 6-game winning streak and 4 covers in the last 5. They certainly did it the “old-fashioned way”, with defense – as Cincinnati allowed a mere 19ppg the last 7, while North Texas allowed 8ppg in posting a spotless 6-0 record in league play.

North Texas has had repeated trouble stepping up in class in the last two years (0 wins against Div. I opponents in non-conference play!), as any competent “D” has been able to completely shut down their unbalanced, run-oriented offense. And Cincinnati certainly qualifies, as their rush defense has generally held its own (134 ypg, 3.5 ypc). This could turn out to be an ugly defensive battle, but like Cincinnati’s chances of pulling away at the end.

Prediction: Cincinnati 28, North Texas 15

First Round:

Cincinnati at Miami (-28)

Tricky situation for Miami, as they can’t afford to totally ignore this opponent, who have now won 6 out of their last 7 ballgames. Miami’s straight-up dominance can’t be denied (36 and counting!) but their point-spread performance has hardly been dominating, as they stand just 4-7 against the spread – in particular their “sleepwalk” acts vs. overmatched opponents, Temple, Connecticut, and Rutgers. Their latest performance against Virginia Tech can hardly be encouraging, as they went from “the greatest show on earth” to a farcical clowning act once they built a big lead.

Nevertheless Miami should be properly focused for their first playoff game, and save its gimmickry for later. Miami should win convincingly, but it might not be enough to cover a huge number against a hot team.

Prediction: Miami 40, Cincinnati 13

North Texas at Miami (-35)

Sense real value with the “Mean Green”, who are decidedly overmatched, but solid enough on defense to hold their own against an obviously disinterested opponent already preparing for Roberson, Sproules, and the rest of the Wildcats. Jokes should fly throughout the week, perhaps even from the North Texas players themselves.

As long as Miami decides to treat this game as a glorified scrimmage, North Texas can hang around – relatively speaking, that is.

Prediction: Miami 42, North Texas 10

Notre Dame at Kansas St. (-13)

A good matchup if you go by their season records, but a mismatch in every other way. Kansas St. is perhaps the hottest team in the nation, and have been especially invincible at home. Meanwhile Notre Dame has been struggling on offense, and got blasted by Carson Palmer in their last game. Two teams going in opposite directions, and it continues that way.

Prediction: Kansas St. 28, Notre Dame 12

Possible second-round matchups:

Miami 26, Kansas St. 20 – Possibly Miami's toughest test in their journey to the Fiesta Bowl.

Miami 32, Notre Dame 17 – "Luck of the Irish" runs out.

Kansas St. 27, Cincinnati 13 – Cincinnati keeps it respectable, but Kansas St. merciless.

Kansas St. 31, North Texas 10 – "Mean Green" still celebrating, but Wildcats party.

Notre Dame 20, Cincinnati 16 – Irish in for a dogfight.

Notre Dame 23, North Texas 12 – Like the "under" more than the side.

Boise St. at USC (-14)

Much has been said about USC's recent success, but no one might be hotter than Boise St., who have covered 9 out of the last 10! They didn't do it all on their infamous "Blue Carpet" either, as they have covered their last 5 on the road – and have been equally impressive on offense (led nation in scoring) and defense (7ppg the last 5).

That said, let's not forget the gap between the WAC and the Pac-10. Carson Palmer very well might have won the Heisman had he played for a East-Coast team, as no one in the country is hotter. USC's defense has been equally as impressive, as they forced 5 turnovers against UCLA and held Notre Dame to under 100 yards in their last outing. Still, considering Boise's St.'s recent play and their well-balanced offense, USC might have trouble extending the margin.

Prediction: USC 32, Boise St. 21

Florida St. at Iowa (-4)

You can be sure that the Seminoles enjoy their reprieve after a tumultuous regular season that saw them suffer second-half collapses and QB and RB-shuffling. Now they get a second chance to prove themselves, against a hot Iowa team that was arguably the best team in the Big Ten this year. Though Florida St. has slipped a little, they still own the better athletes and Bowden might be ready to throw in a wrinkle or two before hanging it up. Upset no surprise.

Prediction: Florida St. 29, Iowa 28

Possible second round matchups:

USC 34, Iowa 28 – Edge in a shootout goes to the better defense.

USC 29, Florida St. 26 – Florida St.'s bowl success continues; they go down fighting.

Florida St. 30, Boise St. 23 – Seminoles play down to the level of competition.

Iowa 30, Boise St. 26 – Clock strikes midnight for Boise St., but not before throwing a scare.

Michigan at Washington St (-4)

The Pac-10 and Big-10 preseason favorites slug it out in this duel, though only Washington St. was able hold up their end of the bargain. But the Wolverines won't go quietly, if their performance against Ohio St. was any indication – though Washington's offensive fireworks might give Wolverines flashbacks of their nightmare performance against Iowa. If Gesser is ready to go, so are the Cougars – and that will mean a victory.

Prediction: Washington St. 29, Michigan 24

Colorado St. at Georgia (-12)

Giant-killer Colorado St. faces the often-slain Georgia, though Georgia finally put an end to their underachieving ways this year. Though their record was impressive, Georgia showed maddening inconsistency all year – lucky victories vs. Clemson, South Carolina, and Auburn, as well as an awful loss to Florida overshadowed by some heroic performances, the most recent in the SEC Title game vs. Arkansas.

Even if the Mr. Jekyll version of Georgia shows up, Colorado has faced this level of competition on a regular basis, and is ready to fight to the end.

Prediction: Georgia 27, Colorado St. 17

Texas at Oklahoma (-7)

Whoa, Nellie! Chris Simms gets yet another chance against the Sooners, and here is a great chance to put all the ghosts to rest. The pressure on Texas will be enormous, and we all know how Texas has performed in pressure situations.

Meanwhile Oklahoma continues to sizzle in the big games, beating Texas earlier in the year, routing Texas Tech in a showdown for the Big 12 South, and crushing Colorado twice with dominating defensive efforts. Yes, Oklahoma stumbled at Texas A&M and Oklahoma St., but that was on the road – this one is not.

Prediction: Oklahoma 31, Texas 22

Marshall at Ohio St. (-10)

I can sense it already; the “wise guys” will be all over Marshall, talking about how Marshall's passing game will present horrible matchup problems for Ohio St.'s secondary. No doubt, they will conveniently ignore Marshall's own ability to stop the run, and the possible return to health for superstar Claretts.

Nevertheless can't completely dismiss expert opinion, as Marshall has scored at will when Leftwich was healthy, and look to have improved from the team that received a shellacking at Blacksburg. And that is what Marshall will be counting on, to force a shootout and hope that they get the ball last. This strategy will probably fail – but not by much.

Prediction: Ohio St. 32, Marshall 24

Possible second-round matchups:

Oklahoma 26, Ohio St. 19 – Sooners demonstrate their championship pedigree.
Oklahoma 37, Marshall 23 – Marshall vulnerable away from Huntington.
Texas 24, Ohio St. 20 – After overcoming their biggest obstacle, Buckeyes pose no problem.
Texas 37, Marshall 26 – Texas's balance overcomes Thundering Herd's air attack.

Hypothetical Future Book Odds:

Miami-Fl	7-5
Oklahoma	4-1
USC	5-1
Kansas St.	7-1
Georgia	11-1
Ohio St.	15-1
Washington St.	20-1
Florida St.	20-1
Iowa	30-1
Michigan	50-1
Notre Dame	80-1
Colorado St.	100-1
Boise St.	150-1
Marshall	200-1
Cincinnati	500-1
North Texas	1000-1