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Overtime in College Football: the Latest Idiocy in Sport

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Would someone please, please, stop the dismal spectacle of overtime in college football!

Over the first few weeks of the college football season the practice of forcing the outcome of a game has been on display for all to see on national television. If winning is the only thing, as Vince Lombardi, so eloquently did or didn't say, then go at it. Have an overtime. Or two. Or even three. It is a phony outcome producing a faux win of an empty quality.

For the professionals, overtime has at least some marginal rationale. For the college game, where student athletes compete for honor and glory on a cool September afternoon-or Tuesday night, or Thursday night, or Friday night, or Saturday night, or Sunday afternoon, or Sunday night, or Monday-what is the point? Why is it abhorrent to have two teams play to a tie? Whether the result of poor play by both, by one, or excellence by both, why not accept a tie? Why is a win or loss a necessity? If the performances are equal, live with it.

When a lesser team takes their opponent to the wire and the game ends in a tie, why should the lesser opponent not leave the stadium knowing they matched the better team? There is considerable pride to be taken in such an accomplishment. To force a decision with overtime which is played under different rules and different circumstances in order to get a "W" and an "L" in the record books can in fact steal the glory from those who earned a tie. They should not have to go home a loser when in fact they did not lose the game, only the overtime.

Likewise, a team that plays to a tie, when it should have won the game by all the pre-game analysis and the differences in talent level, should not be allowed to leave the field a winner. A tie is a tie and no amount of manipulation should obscure that fact.

When two teams go to overtime in college football the game itself changes. Offenses start from the twenty-five yard line and are given a chance to score. If they both score equally they go to a second overtime. In the third overtime the rules change again. If a team scores a touchdown in the third overtime or beyond they can not kick the extra point but must go for the two-point conversion. Why is that change made? To force a decision. It is not to determine which team is better on that

particular day. That has already been determined in regulation time.

Overtime is dangerous. Playing beyond the normal expenditure of energy and to the point of exhaustion or near-exhaustion increases the chance of serious injury. In addition those with minor injuries sustained earlier in the game could compound these injuries further by playing into the exhaustion zone.

Overtime is also ugly to watch. The game itself has changed to something other than football. This artificial staging is tedious unless you are a fan of one of the participants. Then it is nerve racking. Time-outs and over-coaching of the kind seen in the final two minutes of a college basketball game further remove the elements of football from the contest.

Is there an alternative?

Yes, and it already exists within the rules. If in fact coaches want to avoid a tie they can do so by the simple act of seeking a two-point conversion after a touchdown. The fact is coaches do not want this responsibility. If they go for two and fail to make it they lose rather than win. Taking the tie and going to overtime is the easy way out for the coach. With all that is at risk in big time football a coach who goes for the win, when a tie is an alternative, is thought a fool. It is easier and less risky for the coach to put the player's bodies on the line. You can replace the right-tackle, but getting a million-dollar job at another big time program is not easy.

And indeed this is the crux of the situation. Big money is at stake and taking the tie out of the football equation takes this particular onus off the coach.

The fact that it cheapens the outcome of college football doesn't seem to matter. Who can claim that an overtime win is of the same quality as a win in regulation time? And what a devastating loss it is for those who extend a better team to the limit and tie them, only to become a loser in the artificial and forced outcome of overtime.

To compete at ones best and live with the outcome and the consequences is the meaning of sport. To win and to lose are important, and one always plays to win. To perform at ones highest abilities, to extend oneself to the limit, is at the heart of sport. It transcends winning and losing unless something more than sport and athletic performance is at stake.

And in college football much more is at stake. Careers of coaches, athletic directors, and university presidents along with money, ego, and "the program," take college football beyond the realm of sport and into the nether land of big business and human excess.

In end this is just one more symptom of the corruption of the college game, the exploitation of the athlete, and distorted values. It is a world of sport without sport.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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