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The BCS, Fairness, and the Money

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Everyone now knows what the "BS" in the "BCS" stands for but there seems to be some doubt remaining about the "C." Some suggest "computer," some say "compound," some say it is a redundant statement of the "S." Whatever it is, several other things are now clear.

First, the idea that anything can substitute for a playoff in college football is ludicrous. Division IA football, where all the big money resides, is the only NCAA sport, men's or women's, that does not have a national championship playoff format.

Second, Kansas State must feel that they have offended someone quite powerful. In a matter of less than twenty-four hours they managed to drop from number one in several polls to number irrelevant in the only place that counts, the bottom line. Although the Wildcats dropped to only third in the BCS rating system, they were excluded from all of the big payout BCS bowl games. That means by their one overtime loss, they lost a cool \$10M. Talk about your, "agony of defeat."

This points out just how much money is at stake in college football, how this pure activity of the student-athlete has become such highstakes poker. That point was driven home to me again the other night when I heard an interview with the President of the SEC talking at halftime of the SEC championship game and the great success of that event in Atlanta. The Georgia Dome was filled and the money was rolling in from there and from television. This game was added by the SEC to generate extra revenue, and it is producing it at a level beyond all expectations.

What has been the benefit to the players? If they are lucky it will cut into their final exams for the fall term, or just take them away from more classes.

As for the students and fans of the two schools playing in the SEC championship has given them an opportunity to go to Atlanta, spend a lot of money, and have as wild a time as they can manage. It is a welcome distraction from the end of the semester pain of classes, paper deadlines, and final exams. Ah, the joys of being a student-fan.

But I digress.

The ramifications of Saturday's college football results went well beyond the confines of Kansas. UCLA was another of the undefeated teams to lose. Miami's stunning victory over UCLA meant that the Bruins would go to the Rose Bowl and make less money than they would in the National Championship game. Arizona loses out on the Rose Bowl and will go to the Holiday Bowl with its smaller payout. The big winners other than Tennessee, the only undefeated team not to lose on Saturday (well maybe not the only one, but the only one that counted) were Ohio State and Florida State. The Buckeyes suddenly moved up into a BCS bowl thus increasing their take by \$8M or \$9M. Florida State moved into the National Championship Game without their starting quarterback and despite the fact that like a bunch of other teams they have lost one game.

Further down the food chain the University of Central Florida was pushed out of their chance for a bowl appearance by UCLA's loss to Miami. Ironically this will save UCF money while costing them exposure, that elusive quality valued by flashers and college football coaches. A trip to the Christmas night Oahu Bowl would have put UCF on national television with no other sports competing for ratings that night. At the same time the payout for this bowl was less than the cost of taking UCF to the game.

Across America, Athletic Directors were punching their calculators to determine the changing levels of their athletic budget deficit.

Meanwhile on Sunday while the BCS people were throwing around the money to the deserving and taking it from the undeserving, the National Football League continued to embarrass itself through the officials. The coin toss crew from Thanksgiving Day was in New York to see if they could botch up the Jets-Seattle game. Indeed they could. At the end of the game the Jets were literally given the victory when Vinny Testaverde was ruled to have scored on a fourth down play when clearly he did not arrive in the end zone. After a conference, and it is interesting that there is time for conferences on the field but not for instant replay, the referees decided by some borderline mystical process that Testaverde had indeed reached the end zone. Jets win.

This is the second week in a row that a game in the AFC East with playoff implications was decided in error after a conference among the officials. Anyone at home, who has instant replay and serial replay, saw over and over again this totally conclusive evidence. The referees once again got it wrong, and they got it wrong after a committee meeting.

Stop. Stop. Stop. The technology is available to reverse obvious errors that decide the outcome of games, and conference standings, and ultimate playoff positions.

The only other solution to this problem is to ban all replays in the NFL. That way no one will ever be sure if there was a mistake. Destroy all the videotape immediately. Ban the mini-cams from stadiums.

This of course will not happen. Without replay the NFL and nearly all televised football would produce an epidemic of sleeping sickness across the nation. The amount of actual football action, when plays are actually in progress in a three-hour plus football game, is somewhere in the thirty-minute range. What are the fans supposed to watch the remainder of the time, commercials?

Perhaps the BCS could provide some help. The NFL could solve the Zebra problem by turning over all the important playoff decisions to a computer programmed in such a way that no one understands and therefore no one can question. This would mean that the outcome of actual games would have only minimal impact on playoff positions and wild card placement. Referee error then would have no significant impact on the games.

This would keep the focus on the real concern, making money for the league and providing for the comfort of league executives be they NFL or NCAA types. This would be the best of all possible athletic worlds.

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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