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BCS, coach buyouts, and overtimes

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE
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As the college football season comes to its close, there are any number of absurdities and idiocies to contemplate. As usual they will be remarked upon by the fawning press and then passed over in favor of the more serious issues such as, who is number one?

The obsession over number one is based on the assumption that the BCS system is working and that all it really needs is a little tweak here and there and it will be just fine. In fact it is working so well that there seems little or no need to actually play the games, because the outcomes of actual games seem to disrupt this otherwise near flawless system for determining the best team in college football.

The BCS system is working so well this year that the best strategy to move up in the rankings is to end your season early and wait for all the other teams to lose. For many teams this is not possible because in pursuit of more and more revenue their conferences have created an extra game to drain money from the public in the form of the conference championship game. This offers a form of poetic justice, as greed seems to have trumped greed.

The big football schools and conferences continue to dominate the BCS rankings and continue to be guaranteed the bulk of the revenue that flows freely through college football. This is because we know these conferences and their teams are much better footballers than those not in BCS conferences. We know this because BCS members tell us that it is so and the media repeats the same mantra.

One of the absurdities much in evidence these days is the firing of coaches that involve large buyouts of contracts. This in turn necessitates an ever increasing flow of revenue into these football programs to pay for the buyouts, which themselves are the result of excessive contracts given to coaches who seem to have some vague promise of future success, which itself is based on some earlier ability to rise above mediocrity for a few successive seasons.

In the process, the coaching world has come to resemble an absurd reverse universe in which millions are spent annually to pay coaches to leave the university or to simply not coach the

football team. Over the past few weeks, five coaching changes and one athletic director change have led to buyouts totaling at least \$16M dollars. This does not include the University of Michigan where Lloyd Carr's resignation as head coach and move to the athletic department will undoubtedly cost the university a few million dollars as well. In one of the best of these cases the departing coach, Houston Nutt (his real name) left Arkansas with \$3.5M in deferred compensation, and before he was barely out the door signed a \$7.4M four-year contract with the University of Mississippi, thus giving new meaning to the phrase, "Thank God for Mississippi." Ole Miss, by the way, had just bought out the contract of its departing coach for nearly a million dollars.

Another of the idiocies of the coaching carrousel is that of the changes made thus far, there has been nary a whiff of a suggestion that any African-American candidates were considered for any of these jobs. Oddly enough the powers that run college football seem to have no difficulty finding African-American players for their teams, as approximately 55% of the players in Division I football are African-Americans, but African-American coaches seem as hard to find as African-Americans at a Klan meeting.

On the list of absurdities the use of the overtime system in college football has to be right up there near the top. LSU lost two games this year but they are not real losses, as they were ties turned into losses in overtime. Does anyone believe that the two losses by LSU in triple-overtime games are the equivalent to two losses in a regulation game?

Any resemblance between a football game and an overtime is based only on the fact that the players have not changed their uniforms. The notion that starting at the twenty-five yard line and getting the normal sequence of downs determines which is the better team is nonsense. The only thing overtime proves is that one team is deeper than another, one team is less tired than the other, or one team is luckier than another. If there must be an overtime, and there is no reason there should be, then let it be a regulation quarter of play. If there is not winner at the end of that quarter then let a tie be put in the books.

The notion that there is something wrong with a tie is part of the flawed thinking in American sport that winning is the only thing. It is not. Competing to win is the only thing. If two unequal teams compete to win, and the underdog ends in a tie with the favorite, then let the tie stand. A tie in these

circumstances is a victory for the underdog and a loss for the favorite. If the concern is that some teams will play for a tie, then shame on them for not competing to win, and shame on the coach who would play not to lose, and expose him to public ridicule.

In addition, these extended double and triple and quadruple overtimes that prolong games for another hour run a very real danger of serious injury to overly tired players, and of course run the danger of players suffering exhaustion. This is not sport. It is something akin to a marathon dance. Universities that claim to be teaching sportsmanship ought to put a stop to this before there are serious injuries.

But then again we know that college athletics is only about sportsmanship as a secondary concern, especially in the high revenue sports. At that level, college athletics is about entertainment, generating revenue, and satisfying the egos of university presidents, coaches, alumni, and boosters. If it is necessary to sacrifice a few good men in the process, so be it. In addition these overtimes are really exciting.

So is a train wreck.

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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