

The National Champion

1-9-2018

Richard C. Crepeau

University of Central Florida, richard.crepeau@ucf.edu

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Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "The National Champion" (2018). *On Sport and Society*. 820.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/820>

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE - THE NATIONAL CHAMPION
JANUARY 9, 2018

Here in Orlando the National College Football Champions received their trophy about one hour before the kickoff of the FBS National Championship Game in Atlanta. They also had a National Championship parade at Disney World on Sunday.

As most football fans know Alabama won in overtime last night to claim the FBS National Championship. To prove it they were given a trophy, there was blanket coverage on television, social media was heavily engaged, and many tears were shed by Nick Saban and the Alabama cheerleaders. How could anyone question this championship?

The problem is that the FBS Championship system is flawed and leaves the door open for others to claim the crown. The final four, so familiar a term from March Madness, are chosen by a committee in a system that itself is flawed.

Seeing the door open, the University of Central Florida Knights mounted their horses and came riding in and shouting that they are the national champions of college football. (Full disclosure: I spent close to a half-century on the UCF Faculty). They do have a case, as weak as it may seem to some.

UCF played thirteen games and won them all. They beat all comers and had to endure schedule shifts because of hurricanes. All through this run the FBS Selection Committee kept them ranked no better than fifteenth. This would guarantee that UCF would not qualify to make the final four even if they won 25 games, or even 26.

Because they were undefeated the FBS powers tossed them a bone in the form of a New Year's Day Bowl. Here they were put up against Auburn who everyone knew would crush UCF and end their

pretensions. Unfortunately UCF won the Peach Bowl thus upending the plans of the Committee and loyal sportswriters everywhere.

Worst of all UCF beat the team that beat two of the teams that the Committee chose for the final four. There were those in Orlando, and a few other places around the country where someone had heard of the American Conference, who thought that UCF had a case. Of course it didn't matter because the Committee had spoken.

So rather than claiming the FBS National Football Championship, UCF simply claimed to be National Champions and then accepted a trophy that had National Champions written on it. Is this any worse than arriving at a Championship by a committee vote when in fact the committee is run by the FBS and represents what is clearly a cartel? The Committee's job was to get four teams together from the Power Conferences and *no one* else. Alabama won one of the many versions of the national championship, the FBS one.

Who then is the real national champion? How about North Dakota State? They won the Football Championship Subdivision championship on Saturday with a 17-13 win over James Madison in Frisco, Texas. It is the fifth title in the last six years for the men from Frackerland. North Dakota won the championship by playing in a 24 team tournament. No committee gave them a pass to the semifinals. So is North Dakota the true champion? It is difficult to make the case when their group is called a subdivision, which sounds like some neighbored league, but they clearly are a National Champion.

What about the National Champions of Division II where Texas A&M-Commerce beat West Florida in Kansas City, Kansas. A&M won an eight team tournament to claim the trophy? In Division III the National Champions are Mount Union winning its 13th title in the Stagg Bowl in Salem, Virginia. Mount Union could claim the

national championship just on the basis that the final game was named for the legend, Amos Alonzo Stagg. It appears that Mount Union, if you can sort through the NCAA website, had to work its way through a 32 team tournament to their National Championship.

Mount Union had a 15-0 record. So on that basis they were two games better than UCF and so Mount Union must be the true National Champion. Wait, we all know Mount Union could not beat UCF. How do we know that? The same way Alabama knows that UCF could not beat Alabama. They just know it.

So if UCF is claiming their National Championship on the basis of being undefeated at 13-0, then UCF must acknowledge that Mount Union at 15-0 is more deserving. It all makes you wonder if UCF and Alabama deliberately avoided playing Mount Union.

All of this argument could also be avoided by going back to the old system when no team won a National Championship by winning something called a National Championship game. In 1960 the University of Minnesota was declared National Champion by two polls, the AP wire service poll of sportswriters and the UPI poll of college football coaches. That year the Golden Gophers won the Big Ten title and were voted in both polls as Number One. They were National Champions.

Then the Gophers went off to the Rose Bowl where they played the University of Washington and got hammered. Several of the Gophers' stars were seen the night before the game out on the town and feeling very little pain. Their performance in the Rose Bowl reflected their late night activities and subsequent hangovers.

Well, that Rose Bowl changed things. The voting from then on came after the bowl games. This did not solve such problems as a split vote and so over the years the system evolved into what we now have. In every other NCAA sport in every division a national

tournament is held to determine the champion, only the FBS is different. That might suggest another way to deal with the national championship.

In the end does all this matter? Probably not. But to the football fan and loyal graduates it remains a matter of life and death, or at least life.

So let's have a bunch of national champions. No one will be happy but fewer will be unhappy.

I hope that clears things up.

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau wishing you a very late Merry Christmas and Happy New Year and reminding you that you don't have to a good sport to be a bad loser.

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