

Playoff system disputed

Two teams rarely claim bragging rights

The argument has raged for years. Supremacy among the nation's Division IA college football teams is an important — maybe the most important — issue among fans. And through the years, the desire for a playoff system to decide the nation's No. 1 team on the field has increased among America's Monday-morning quarterbacks.

Last Thursday, a proposal by a special NCAA subcommittee created a plan for a one-game playoff system at the end of the year that would match the No. 1- and No. 2-ranked teams at the end of the regular season.

The idea obviously spawned from last season, in which fans of the playoff

raised: Were Penn State and Miami truly the best college teams in the nation?

Granted, both teams were 11-0 going into the game, which is all anyone could have asked from them. Their schedules, however, left much to be desired.

Penn State squeaked past teams like Temple and Rutgers, while Miami blasted the likes of Cincinnati, West Virginia and East Carolina. The Hurricanes defeated Florida State easily when the Seminoles were without their starting quarterback. Oklahoma also fell to the Orange Bowl turf under a strong Hurricane passing attack, but Sooners have a notorious recent history of sluggish Septembers. How badly would Nebraska have routed Oklahoma in the season's fourth game?

The point is, there are very few seasons in which only two teams can claim No. 1 bragging rights. In my mind, Oklahoma was the best college team in the country last Jan. 1, with Nebraska and Arizona State only a step or two behind. Penn State and Miami were not top-five material.

A one-game playoff would raise more questions than it would answer. But the subcommittee's proposal was a step in the right direction — just not far enough.

Division IA football is the only college sport in which a national champion isn't decided on the playing field. A playoff is needed from the start, and a look at recent seasons supports this

idea.

In 1969, Penn State was undefeated but finished No. 2 behind Texas because Longhorns had what many considered to be a tougher schedule. In 1975, Arizona State finished 12-0, including a 17-14 win against Nebraska in the Fiesta Bowl. The Sun Devils also finished as the "best of the rest" behind Oklahoma, which was also undefeated. Which team was better?

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More recently, Clemson won the crown in 1981. The Tigers went 12-0, but Penn State — which had one loss — was likely the nation's best team at the end. In 1984, Brigham Young was undefeated and No. 1, but the Cougars played no top-20 teams. And last season, had Nebraska defeated Oklahoma, the Cornhuskers likely would have faced Miami in the Orange Bowl for the national title. If Miami had won, the Hurricanes would have been national champs, but Penn State, also undefeated, never would have had a chance to prove its field value.

Why has it gone on so long? The main reason is money. Ask any bowl representative. A playoff system would mean doom for the bowls, the argument goes. It would also extend the season and disrupt the athletes' academic lives — that's the favorite among coaches. Finally, some people say, a playoff just wouldn't be as much fun as arguing the matter all year.

In 1981, Sport Magazine proposed an idea that would quickly dismiss all the debates.

The Sport plan, along with a few modifications, would go like this:

Step 1: A computer ranking, like that of the New York Times poll, would be organized. The nation's top 16 teams would be established, taking into account the individual teams' win-loss record, schedule difficulty, offensive output, defensive input and individual players' statistics.

Step 2: The 16 teams would be paired according to their computer rankings. Number one would play No. 16, No. 2 would face No. 15, No. 3 would be paired with No. 14, and so on. These first-round games would be played in the lesser bowls, such as the Peach, Sun, Gator, Bluebonnet, Florida-Citrus, etc., and would be played one week after final exams ended, on Friday and Saturday, Dec. 18 and 19 of this year.

All eight games would be nationally televised, earning the "minor bowls" more money than ever before — dismissing the "loss of money" argument. The minor bowls not included in the playoff, such as the California and Holiday Bowls, could merge with the bowls that were involved, enhancing media coverage, advertising, and overall financing and popularity of the playoff system.

Step 3: After reducing the original field to eight teams, the quarter-final games would be played. The four games would pit the remaining teams in order of their rankings (as before) in the Cotton, Orange, Sugar and Sunkist-Fiesta Bowls on Saturday, Dec. 26.

Step 4: The four remaining teams would face each other in back-to-back semifinal games on Saturday, Jan. 2, in the Rose Bowl. The two winners would play for the national championship in a prime-time game one week later at the same site.

The idea has the potential for the biggest sporting event the country has ever known, possibly even bigger in popularity than the Super Bowl. The best thing about the system is that everybody would win — the bowls, the schools involved, the advertisers and the players.

And especially the fans.

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system got a quick fix when top-ranked Miami faced No. 2 Penn State in the Sunkist-Fiesta Bowl on Jan. 2. Both teams were undefeated and the game lived up to all its billings, as a Penn State interception at the goal line in the game's final seconds ended Miami's come-from-behind title dream.

When playoff advocates failed to see through all the media hype, pageantry and last-second heroics, they missed one of the most obvious questions

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