

DETERMINING NATIONAL CHAMP - BOWLS OR PLAYOFF?

by Phil Steele

One of the hottest topics in college football in the 90's was how to determine the National Champ. There have been many times at the end of the year that one team emerges from the polls as the No. 1 team and National Champion, but many feel that another team or teams were deserving of the title and were not given the proper shot to prove it. I must admit that I am a traditionalist when it comes to college football. I love the rivalries and the tradition of the bowls. During the month of December I am a bowl junkie and I find each bowl to be interesting and feel that they provide teams with a reward for a successful season.

I know that in college basketball the March Madness tournament is a major success. TV ratings are high and everyone in the country participates in their office pools predicting who will be the National Champ. Many have said they would like to see such a tournament for NCAA football as well. They propose a tournament featuring perhaps the top sixteen teams for NCAA football, but I definitely disagree with that point. Here's the main reason why. If you take a look at the NCAA hoops tournament and who is crowned champion, I think you will find that the most dominating team of the basketball season does not always win the championship. How can you say that a team like the 1985 Villanova squad which finished the regular season 16-10 was the best team in the country simply because they won their last 6 games in the NCAA tournament? There were 10 teams during the regular season who were stronger than them. To say at the end of the year that a team that lost 10 games was the strongest team in the NCAA was a joke and meant that the entire regular season was meaningless.

The current BCS bowl method of determining the National Champion also has its flaws. The past two years really points this out. In 1998, my No. 1 team in the country in the preseason was Ohio St. There is no doubt in my mind that Ohio St was the strongest and most complete team in the country, but a late season upset to Michigan St cost them a shot in appearing in the National Championship Game. The BCS picked Florida St, a team with one loss and starting a backup QB, to take on Tennessee in the bowl game and the Volunteers eventually won the National Championship. Tennessee was far from a perfect team that year and caught many fortunate breaks to get into the title game and remain undefeated. Had Ohio St played either Florida St or Tennessee in that year's Fiesta Bowl, the Buckeyes would have been favored by no less than the ultimate authority, the Las Vegas sportsbooks (the ones that make a living by knowing who the stronger teams are). The Buckeyes had to settle for second place after they whipped Texas A&M in their bowl game.

Last year in my magazine, I called for Nebraska to finish No. 1 in the country. No one else had Nebraska listed in the Top 5. The Huskers had a dominating year, but once again, one bad game vs. Texas in which Nebraska had a 429-275 yard edge but could not overcome 6 turnovers did them in. They later avenged that loss to Texas big time in the Big 12 championship game with a 22-6 dominating win proving they were a stronger team than the Horns. They then dismantled Tennessee in the Fiesta Bowl even more impressively than the 31-21 final indicates.

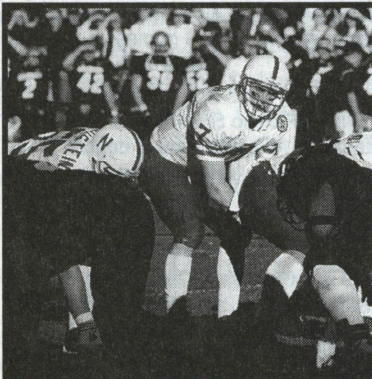
Florida St was a good team last year but played their usual soft ACC schedule and even then had some close calls vs Georgia Tech, Clemson and Florida during the season. Virginia Tech was a great story last year going undefeated and getting to the National Title Game. The Hokies benefitted from a soft schedule as well, playing no one near the caliber of Nebraska during the season. Once again had Nebraska played either Virginia Tech or Florida St in the National Title Game, I feel Las Vegas would have placed Nebraska in the favorite's role. The Huskers probably would have defeated either of those two foes as they were the most complete team with the best defense in the country.

As you can tell, I feel that the best team in the country did not win the National Title the last two years and I really think that a team that suffers just one tough loss, but is dominating in every other game, deserves a shot at the National Title Game. I see a lot of proposals for 8 and 16 team matchups but I feel that is going too far. As I previously pointed out, there is no reason to include teams with numerous losses as if they were true National Championship contenders. If they were, they would have taken care of business during the season. I also think that by including teams with 2 or 3 losses in the National Championship picture, you dilute the greatness of college football during the regular season. There ARE many games with National Championship implications during the regular season. As an example, when Florida and Florida St face off every year, normally one is eliminated from the championship race and the other is still alive. Why not let those games keep their "playoff-like" atmosphere thus preserving their importance. If you expand the field to 16, you allow teams to be able to lose games like that and still look forward to the postseason and a shot at the title. I do not want to dilute college football during the regular season and feel that only a select few who meet the challenges deserve to be in the final chase.

Here is my plan to determine the National Champ and actually it

is very close to what we have now. It should be feasible in the foreseeable future and I feel it would also establish the true National Champs. To determine the National Champ, I feel they should continue with the BCS rankings but include the top FOUR teams in the BCS chase. The two semifinal games would be played on January 1 (games have been on Jan. 1, 2 & 4 L/2 yrs) and rotate as the bowls do now between the Rose, Orange, Sugar or Fiesta. The top 4 teams in the country according to the BCS would be invited, which if you look at the last two years, this would have included No. 3 Ohio St and No. 3 Nebraska. In this scenario the teams decide who is the National Champ on the field. No. 1 would face No. 4 and No. 2 would face No. 3 in the Jan 1 bowls and after these matchups, the Championship Game would be played during the bye week before the Super Bowl. This would allow the teams plenty of time to prepare and for fans to make travel arrangements given the three to four week span. It also gives football fans something to look forward to during the week that the NFL is not in playoff action.

There would be absolutely no question that it would be a true National Title Game as the top teams would be involved. Now let's take a look at how this would have affected the 1998 and 1999 races. In 1998, Ohio St



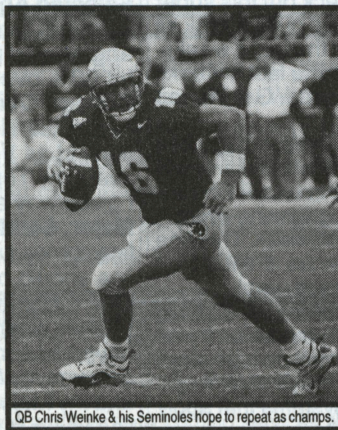
QB Eric Crouch & the Huskers are aiming for another National Title.

would have faced Florida St in one of the semifinal matchups. Florida St with a backup QB would have been no match for the Buckeye's top rated defense and Ohio St would have advanced. Tennessee would have matched up with Kansas St, a team that was unbeaten until the Big 12 Championship Game. In that particular game, I would have rated it a toss-up as both would have had a chance to advance. I still feel Ohio St would have polished off whomever emerged from that game but as you can see, I do not feel the best two teams participated in the "National Title" game the BCS presented. Team No. 5 was Arizona and No. 6 was UCLA and I do not feel that either of those teams were National Title caliber. They simply achieved their records by playing in the inferior PAC 10 and really did not have defenses comparable to the top 4 teams. Teams #5 and #6 and so on really do not have the caliber to compete in a title game and these teams do not deserve an expanded field.

Last year Nebraska would have faced Virginia Tech in one of the semifinal games. The Huskers' defense would have contained Michael Vick and in a tight, low scoring game the Huskers would have advanced as their tougher schedule would have had them better prepared. Florida St would have faced whomever the BCS poll had rated in the #4 slot. Wisconsin was #4 in both polls even though they had two losses and 'Bama and Tennessee were #'s 5 and 6 even though both had 2 losses. Kansas St was #8 but with only one loss. A strong case could be made AGAINST all 4 from having a shot at the National Title Game but since you have to pick one, let's say Kansas St was chosen because of their superior record. As you can see, last year there would not have been any complaints of teams left out as it was tough to find one that was at the level of the top 3. Florida St would have dispatched whomever made it and that would have forced a true National Title Game between Nebraska and Florida St, who were in reality the top two teams.

In 1997 the "final four" would have been Michigan, Nebraska, Florida St and North Carolina. This is one year where there would have been little question as to who the top 2 teams were as Michigan and Nebraska should have met in the title game with both teams going unbeaten. If the two had played there would have been no split of the National Title, and a true champion could have been crowned. The #5 team was twice beaten (UCLA) and the #6 team was twice beaten (Florida) and they once again did not deserve a role in the title game chase. The current BCS system which was devised after the 1997 season would also have provided the same outcome as it would have matched the two unbeaten teams but I find fault with a system that would have given us a true title game in just 1 out of 3 years.

For those that complain about adding extra games, only 2 out of 115 teams would be "forced" to play in this big game and I'm sure those student athletes would find a way to complete their studies. The 3 week layoff would probably give enough time for any minor injuries from the Jan 1st bowl game to heal, yet not be as big a layoff as the teams have now during the bowls and may lead to a more crisply played title game. There would be plenty of interest in not just bowl games each year but there would now be THREE games that would capture major ratings as the two preliminary games would be higher rated than any current regular bowl. The other bowls would remain intact, and would be a reward for teams after a solid season and we would have a true National Champion every year. We would also make sure that all of the major regular season games were played with the same importance that they have today, and the polls would be of major interest all year just as they are today.



QB Chris Weinke & his Seminoles hope to repeat as champs.