

An Extensive Analysis of the



**COLLEGE FOOTBALL
PLAYOFF**

Daniel Sagerman
Northwestern University
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An Extensive Analysis of the College Football Playoff

College football thrives on controversy. In the months leading up to each season, television analysts, casual fans, and student-athletes all debate the answers to several hot topics. Who is the best team in their conference? What will each team's record be? Who will win the Heisman? Will Kansas win a football game? While each of these questions is intriguing, they all pale in comparison to the yearly discussion of which teams will make the College Football Playoff.

Every year, the thirteen-member selection committee decides which four teams will be selected for the Playoff while the nation looks on. The committee's decisions are based on a set of criteria designed to select the four 'best' teams of the season to compete for the national title. However, these decisions are not met without controversy year after year. It almost always seems that a deserving team is left out at the number five ranking while an arguably less-deserving team sneaks into the playoff. The lack of clarity regarding which criteria the committee use to justify their selections is just one of many flaws with the College Football Playoff system.

In this paper I will analyze the current state of the College Football Playoff system, address its faults, and recommend ways to improve the system. One of the system's main issues is that the committee's selection criteria are not only unclear, but are also inconsistently applied to each year's contenders. Additionally, the current system unfairly favors teams from the 'Power 5' conferences: The Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), Big Ten, Big-12, Pacific-12 (Pac-12), and Southeastern Conference (SEC).

I will explore the impact of two possible remedies to the College Football Playoff system: an expansion of the tournament and the revision of selection criteria. Based on my research, I will make a recommendation to the College Football Playoff committee.

In order to understand its controversies, it's important to analyze the College Football Playoff system as it exists today. First and foremost, the CFP is not an officially sanctioned championship event by the NCAA. In fact, the NCAA has never recognized an official national championship for FBS football. The CFP is an independent, for-profit organization that is able to enjoy certain benefits that officially sanctioned events can't, such as allowing the sale of alcohol¹. At the top sits the College Football Playoff Board of Managers, consisting of

¹ NCAA. (2017). *Division I Manual*. Indianapolis, IN. [ISSN 1093-3174]

University presidents and chancellors from all ten FBS conferences and Notre Dame. The Board’s responsibility is to govern the administrative operations, with commissioners (the management committee) managing the events. Just below them is the thirteen-member Selection Committee, comprised of “a talented group of high-integrity individuals with experience as coaches, student-athletes, college administrators and journalists, along with sitting athletics directors”². Committee members generally serve three-year terms to achieve a rotation of members.

According to the College Football Playoff’s official website, the Selection Committee has five main responsibilities. They are: 1) to rank the top 25 teams and assign the top four to semifinal sites, 2) assign teams to New Year’s bowls (Rose, Orange, Sugar, Fiesta, Cotton, Peach), 3) create competitive matchups, 4) attempt to avoid rematches of regular-season games and repeat appearances in specific bowls, and 5) consider geography. Figure 1 shows a list of the Selection Committee members below:

Figure 1. List of College Football Playoff Selection Committee Members

Name	Position
Rob Mullens	Chair; Director of Athletics, University of Oregon
Frank Beamer	Former Head Coach, Virginia Tech
Paola Boivin	Professor, Arizona State University
Jeff Bower	Former Head Coach, University of Southern Mississippi
Joe Castiglione	Director of Athletics, University of Oklahoma
Herb Deromedi	Former Head Coach, Central Michigan University
Ken Hatfield	Former Head Coach of Three FBS Institutions

Name	Position
Chris Howard	President, Robert Morris University
Bobby Johnson	Former Head Coach, Vanderbilt University
Ronnie Lott	Former All-American, University of South Carolina
Gene Smith	Director of Athletics, Ohio State University
Todd Stansbury	Director of Athletics, Georgia Institute of Technology
Scott Stricklin	Director of Athletics, University of Florida

Source: Author

The College Football Playoff website also states that the Committee is to select the four playoff teams “based on the members’ evaluation of the teams’ performance on the field, using conference championships won, strength of schedule, head-to-head results, and comparison of results against common opponents to decide among teams that are comparable”. Although the list of criteria is clear, it remains vague how the committee actually considers each criterion. Year after year, it seems as if certain criteria are valued more heavily than others. Because of this, certain schools are granted one of the final four playoff spots when they may be

² Overview. (n.d.). Retrieved June 7, 2018, from Collegefootballplayoff.com

undeserving. Thus, the yearly debate can be frustrating for college football fans around the country.

In each of the four years of the College Football Playoff, seemingly deserving teams have been left out of the prestigious top-four rankings. However, it is not always clear why these teams were left out. Consider Figure 2, which displays the CFP’s top six-ranked teams and their records for each year since the Playoff’s inception in 2014.

Figure 2. College Football Playoff Final Rankings

Year	#1	#2	#3	#4	#5	#6
2014	 (12-1)	 (12-1)	 (13-0)	 (12-1)	 (11-1)	 (11-1)
2015	 (13-0)	 (12-1)	 (12-1)	 (11-1)	 (12-1)	 (11-2)
2016	 (13-0)	 (12-1)	 (11-1)	 (12-1)	 (11-2)	 (10-2)
2017	 (12-1)	 (12-1)	 (12-1)	 (11-1)	 (11-2)	 (12-1)

Source: Author

In 2014, Alabama, Oregon, Florida State, and Ohio State comprised the initial four College Football Playoff teams, but not without controversy. At the end of the regular season, No. 3 TCU, No. 5 Ohio State, and No. 6 Baylor all had an 11-1 record. Since the Big-12 Conference did not have a championship game at the time, TCU and Baylor’s regular seasons were over. Ohio State, however, won their division and competed in the Big Ten Championship game, which they completely dominated in a 59-0 drubbing of No. 18 Wisconsin. That win proved large enough for the CFP Selection Committee to propel the Buckeyes to the number-four ranking and final spot in the Playoff, while Baylor and TCU got left out.

The main rationale the Committee used in 2014 was strength-of-schedule. According to committee chairman Jeff Long, the athletic director at Arkansas, the Buckeyes’ impressive performance against Wisconsin was enough to offset their early-season home loss to Virginia Tech, who finished 6-6. Long also cited “the fact that Ohio State’s nonconference schedule was stronger than Baylor’s.” In nonconference play, the Buckeyes played Navy (6-5), Virginia Tech

(6-6), Kent State (2-9) and Cincinnati (9-3). Outside of the Big 12, Baylor played SMU (1-11), FCS' Northwestern State (6-6) and Buffalo (5-6), while TCU played FCS' Samford (7-4), Minnesota (8-4), and SMU (1-11). Of their nonconference opponents, Ohio State played and defeated three bowl-eligible teams, Baylor played none, and TCU played one. Even though TCU was ranked ahead of Ohio State at the end of the regular season, they lacked the overall strength-of-schedule to convince the Committee to maintain their ranking. Furthermore, Ohio State's ability to play in, and win, a conference championship was the cherry on top, an advantage the Big-12 conference simply did not have. Ranked teams could not maintain their position simply by winning, and instead the committee's evaluations could fluctuate from week to week based on a team's full body of work and strength of opponents³.

2015 proved no less controversial. That year's drama involved the Michigan State Spartans, Iowa Hawkeyes, and Oklahoma Sooners. The week thirteen rankings had Oklahoma (11-1 overall record) at number three, Iowa (12-0) at number four, and Michigan State (11-1) at number five. Oklahoma's season was over, as the Big-12 still did not have a championship game. Iowa took its undefeated season into the Big Ten Championship game against Michigan State, with the winner all but guaranteeing a playoff spot. Had the Hawkeyes won, the rankings would likely have remained the same. Alas, Michigan State defeated Iowa in a defensive battle, 16-13. The following week, Michigan State earned the third seed, Oklahoma dropped to the fourth seed and final playoff spot, and Iowa got left out at number five.

The controversy ensued when Oklahoma was ranked ahead of Iowa. The Hawkeyes, with a 12-1 record, had more wins than the 11-1 Sooners. Additionally, Oklahoma's loss was worse than Iowa's – the Sooners lost to Texas, which finished with a 5-7 record and ranked No. 69 in the S&P+ advanced statistical rankings⁴, while the Hawkeyes' lone loss was to the Big Ten-champions, Michigan State.

Based on this logic, Iowa should have been ranked ahead of Oklahoma. However, the committee once again cited strength-of-schedule as the deciding factor between Oklahoma and Iowa. According to TeamRankings, another advanced statistic database, the Sooners played the second-toughest schedule in the FBS in 2015, which included five wins over ranked opponents,

³ Culpepper, C. (2014, December 7). College Football Playoff Field Set but Controversy Lingers with Ohio State in, TCU Snubbed. Retrieved June 7, 2018, from The Washington Post

⁴ 2015 NCAA Football S&P Rankings. (n.d.). Retrieved June 7, 2018, from Football Outsiders

while the Hawkeyes played the 51st-toughest schedule and only defeated two ranked opponents⁵. Despite their worse loss, Oklahoma ultimately ranked ahead of Iowa due to their overall tougher schedule. The same rationale was used in 2014, so it appears the Committee had at least some consistency: strength-of-schedule is a more important criterion than overall record. However, we will see in the upcoming years that strength-of-schedule is not always the most important criterion cited by the Committee.

In 2016, the only schools that were assured their spots in the Playoff were Alabama and Clemson. The final two spots would come down to a three-way race in the Big Ten, between Ohio State, Penn State, and Michigan, and a two-way race in the Pac-12, between Washington and USC. At the end of it all, Ohio State and Washington were ranked third and fourth, respectively, Penn State and Michigan fell to numbers five and six, and USC finished ranked ninth.

Let's first look at the Big Ten race. Ohio State finished the regular season 11-1 overall and 8-1 in conference play, including a win over No. 3 Michigan in the final game. However, their one loss was to Penn State on October 22nd. The Nitanny Lions returned a blocked field goal 60 yards for a touchdown with 4:27 left in the fourth quarter to cap seventeen unanswered points and win, 24-21. Penn State finished the regular season 10-2 overall, but their victory over Ohio State placed them at 8-1 in conference play and ahead of the Buckeyes, securing a berth in the Big Ten Championship game. The No. 7 Lions went on to defeat No. 6 Wisconsin in the title game to finish 11-2 overall.

By winning the Big Ten championship, Penn State seemingly secured their spot in the College Football Playoff. Nonetheless, the Lions' two losses kept them out. They lost to No. 4 Michigan badly, 49-10, in week four of the season, but their loss to unranked Pittsburgh in week two proved worse. So, despite defeating Ohio State head-to-head and winning the Big Ten Conference, Penn State was left out of the Playoff in favor of the Buckeyes, who did not even play in the Big Ten Championship game.

In 2016, the Selection Committee cited an early-season nonconference loss as the detrimental blow to Penn State's season. The Lions' Big Ten title was not enough to put them in the Playoff. However, this directly contradicts the Committee's rationale in 2014. That year,

⁵ NCAA College Football Strength of Schedule Rankings & Ratings. (n.d.). Retrieved June 7, 2018, from TeamRankings

Ohio State suffered an early-season non conference loss to Virginia Tech, went on to win the Big Ten championship, and received a spot in the Playoff. The Committee used the strength-of-schedule argument as the main rationale for selecting the Buckeyes, who had the sixth-hardest schedule in the nation that year⁶. Despite this, Ohio State's loss to Virginia Tech was worse than Penn State's loss to Pittsburgh. The Hokies finished the year 49th in the 2014 S&P+ rankings, while the Panthers finished 20th in the 2016 S&P+ rankings. So, Ohio State lost to a worse-caliber team, won their conference, and made the Playoffs, while Penn State lost to a better-caliber team, won their conference, and did not make the Playoffs. The 2016 Nittany Lions' early-season loss proved detrimental to their season, while the 2014 Buckeyes' loss did not.

To reiterate for emphasis, the Big Ten champions Penn State were jumped by the conference's runner-up, Ohio State, whom Penn State defeated in the same season. In a statement, then-CFP Chairman Kirby Hocutt said, "Conference championships are hard to win. As a selection committee, we come down to our mission, our focus and that's to select the four very best teams in college football. Conference championships are only one piece, one metric of that conversation that we have".⁷ While conference championships were an important criterion to the Selection Committee, it ultimately was not enough for them to select Penn State. Strength-of-schedule once again seems like the deciding factor, as Ohio State played the second-hardest schedule in the nation while Penn State played the 12th-hardest schedule.⁶ Although the Committee continued to utilize the strength-of-schedule argument, they did not value the conference championship like they did two years prior. In the eyes of the public, the Selection Committee has shown to use their rationale inconsistently.

That same year, the Washington Huskies also finished the regular season with an 11-1 overall record and 8-1 conference record. They advanced to the Pac-12 title game, defeated No. 8 Colorado for their 12th win, and earned the prestigious number four ranking. The Huskies, with their conference title in hand, were ranked behind 11-win Ohio State and ahead of 11-win Big Ten champion Penn State. In another statement, Hocutt explained, "The strength of schedule of

⁶ NCAA College Football Strength of Schedule Rankings & Ratings. (n.d.). Retrieved June 7, 2018, from TeamRankings

⁷ Myerberg, P. (2016, December 5). Ranking Reaction: It Wouldn't Be College Football Without Controversy. Retrieved June 7, 2018, from USA Today

Washington has been a concern for this selection committee, but what we talked was the quality wins Washington has this year. They've played good teams and they've beaten good teams.”

The numbers back up Hocutt's claim. Washington played the 10th-hardest schedule that season, just ahead of Penn State's 12th-ranked schedule⁸. Additionally, their lone loss wasn't a bad one as USC finished the year 9th in the S&P+ rankings⁹. Therefore, it makes sense that the Selection Committee would select a one-loss conference champion for the top four. That champion, however, turned out to be from the Pac-12 and not the Big Ten. It was quite clear that strength-of-schedule played the biggest role in the Committee's daunting task of finding the four best teams in college football.

The strength-of-schedule argument reached its biggest test yet after the 2017 regular season. Once again, only two schools were assured spots in the College Football Playoff: No. 1 Clemson, which finished 12-1 as ACC champions, and No. 2 Oklahoma, which was also 12-1 and Big-12 champions (the conference finally added a title game in 2017, the Sooners dominated TCU, 41-17). After those two, there were essentially five teams fighting for two spots: Georgia, Alabama, Ohio State, Wisconsin, Auburn, and University of Central Florida (UCF).

First, there was the Georgia Bulldogs. The Bulldogs finished the regular season ranked sixth in the country with an 11-1 overall record and 7-1 conference record. Their lone loss was against then-No. 10 Auburn on November 11th. Nonetheless, Georgia won the SEC East division and advanced to the SEC Championship game, where they defeated then-No. 2 Auburn in a rematch. The Bulldogs, now SEC champions, secured the No. 3 ranking in the College Football Playoff. No controversy here.

Next, there was the perennial Playoff-contending Alabama Crimson Tide. The Tide were 11-0 and ranked No. 1 before losing to No. 6 Auburn in the Iron Bowl. Since both Alabama and Auburn finished with a 7-1 conference record, Auburn advanced to the SEC Championship game by virtue of head-to-head tiebreaker. The Tide, sitting pretty at 11-1 (7-1) and no SEC Championship birth, ultimately earned the fourth and final spot in the Playoff, shocking the nation.

⁸ Myerberg, P. (2016, December 5). Ranking Reaction: It Wouldn't Be College Football Without Controversy. Retrieved June 7, 2018, from USA Today

⁹ 2016 NCAA Football S&P Rankings. (n.d.). Retrieved June 7, 2018, from Football Outsiders

Auburn was understandably upset. After all, they had defeated both Georgia and Alabama, who were both ranked No. 1 when they faced the Tigers. However, their loss to Georgia in the SEC Championship dropped their overall record to 10-3, which the Selection Committee determined was too many losses. Auburn finished the season ranked No. 7.

The next step in the controversy involves the Big Ten Conference. Ohio State finished the regular season ranked No. 8 with a 10-2 overall record and 8-1 in conference play. One loss was to then-No. 5 and future Playoff selection Oklahoma. The other loss was a 55-24 shellacking at the hands of unranked Iowa, who were 49th in the S&P+ rankings. Still, the Buckeyes' 8-1 conference record advanced them to the Big Ten Championship game, where they defeated No. 4 Wisconsin, 27-21. The Badgers had finished the regular season undefeated (12-0, 9-0) before falling to the Buckeyes. Both the 11-2 Big Ten champions Ohio State and 12-1 Big Ten runner-up Wisconsin missed the Playoff.

And then there's Central Florida. The Knights finished the season 12-0 and champions of the American Athletic Conference. They were the only undefeated FBS team in the country. They finished ranked No. 12.

After the release of the rankings, the CFP Selection Committee clearly had several questions to answer. The biggest, by far, was why Alabama was chosen over Ohio State. Based on the previous three seasons, strength-of-schedule seemed to be the answer. However, this time the numbers did not add up. Figure 3 shows the 2017 Strength of Schedule Rankings & Ratings.

Figure 3. 2017 College Football Strength of Schedule Rankings & Ratings, Top 15

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Season: 2017-2018 Date: 01/08/2018

Rank	Team	Rating	Hi	Low	Last
1	Auburn (10-4)	13.0	1	73	1
2	Oklahoma (12-2)	12.7	1	69	4
3	Ohio State (12-2)	12.3	2	53	3
4	Clemson (12-2)	12.0	2	68	6
5	Penn State (11-2)	11.8	1	90	2
6	Alabama (12-1)	11.7	1	42	7
7	Georgia (13-1)	11.5	4	51	11
8	TX Christian (11-3)	10.1	3	82	10
9	Notre Dame (10-3)	9.8	7	62	8
10	Iowa (8-5)	9.3	7	71	9
11	Florida St (7-6)	8.3	1	12	5
12	Oklahoma St (10-3)	8.2	7	86	12
13	Stanford (9-5)	8.1	5	101	16
14	Wisconsin (13-1)	7.9	13	99	45
15	USC (11-3)	7.8	5	46	22

Source: TeamRankings

According to the ranking, Ohio State played the third-toughest schedule in the nation while Alabama played the sixth-toughest. Additionally, Auburn played the toughest schedule, Oklahoma played the second-toughest, Clemson played the fourth-toughest, Wisconsin played the 14th-toughest, and UCF played the 54th-toughest schedule.

The Selection Committee was therefore unable to claim Alabama played a tougher schedule than Ohio State. The Crimson Tide's nonconference games were against Florida State (6-6), Fresno State (9-4), Colorado State (7-5), and FCS' Mercer. The Buckeyes' nonconference slate included Oklahoma (12-1), Army (10-3), and UNLV (5-7). Ohio State did not schedule a 'cupcake' game against an FCS school. Regardless, Alabama got in. The Committee also could not cite conference championships as the deciding factor, since the Buckeyes made, and won, the Big Ten Championship while the Tide did not even make the SEC Championship. Total wins weren't the deciding factor either. Both Alabama and Ohio State had 11 wins, and two teams – Wisconsin and UCF – both finished with 12.

This marked the first time that neither strength-of-schedule or total wins allowed for a logical explanation for the Committee's selections. In 2017, only one factor set Ohio State below Alabama: they had two losses. The Selection Committee has decidedly indicated that one-loss teams can make the Playoff, even if they aren't a conference champion, but a two-loss team simply could not get in. Even though the Buckeyes had a tougher schedule and better resume, they still lost, badly, to an unranked Iowa team. The magnitude of that loss was so detrimental, that the Committee would rather have a second SEC team than a two-loss Big Ten Champion.

Throughout the history of the College Football Playoff, it has become clear that the Selection Committee applies rationale inconsistently. Figure 4 displays a recap of some of the Committee's notable selections. Some years, winning the conference championship game is the deciding factor in being selected for the Playoff, such as in 2014 for Ohio State, 2015 for Michigan State, 2016 for Washington, and 2017 for Georgia. However, there are also occasions when a team can make the Playoff despite not even appearing in their conference's championship game, such as 2015 Oklahoma, 2016 Ohio State, and 2017 Alabama. Notice how in 2015, 2016, and 2017, the CFP had both a conference champion and another team that did not make their conference's championship game. Only 2014, the first year of the CFP, included four conference champions.

Figure 4. Notable College Football Playoff Selections

Team	Conference Championship?	Strength of Schedule Ranking	Wins	Losses	S&P+ Rank of Team Lost To	In Playoff?
2014 Ohio State	Yes	6th	12	1	49th	Yes
2015 Oklahoma	No	2nd	11	1	69th	Yes
2015 Iowa	No	51st	12	1	14th	No
2015 Stanford	Yes	10th	11	2	57th, 22nd	No
2016 Ohio State	No	2nd	11	1	8th	Yes
2016 Washington	Yes	10th	12	1	9th	Yes
2016 Penn State	Yes	12th	11	2	3rd, 20th	No
2017 Georgia	Yes	7th	12	1	10th	Yes
2017 Alabama	No	6th	11	1	10th	Yes
2017 Ohio State	Yes	3rd	11	2	9th, 49th	No
2017 Auburn	No	1st	10	3	8th, 19th, 3rd	No
2017 Wisconsin	No	14th	12	1	1st	No
2017 UCF	Yes	54th	12	0	N/A	No

Source: Author

The College Football Playoff Selection Committee has also cited strength-of-schedule as an important criterion for their decision-making. That explains why in 2016 Washington was selected over Penn State, despite both schools winning their conferences. However, strength-of-schedule does not explain why in 2017 Alabama was selected over Ohio State, who both won their conference and played a tougher schedule.

It remains unclear if conference championships are included as part of the strength-of-schedule argument. In 2014, the Committee cited Ohio State’s ability to play in, and win, a conference championship as what ultimately moved them ahead of the Big 12’s Baylor and TCU¹⁰. However, in 2015 Oklahoma was selected over Stanford, who had a conference championship and the same number of wins. Additionally, in 2017 Alabama was selected over Ohio State, who had a conference championship and the same number of wins.

The only factor that remains abundantly clear is that a school can not advance to the Playoff if they have two losses. Even if the school won their conference, played a tougher schedule, and had more wins, two losses is too detrimental to their season. In 2015, it was Stanford, in 2016, it was Penn State, and in 2017, it was Ohio State.

¹⁰ Culpepper, C. (2014, December 7). College Football Playoff Field Set but Controversy Lingers with Ohio State in, TCU Snubbed. Retrieved June 7, 2018, from The Washington Post

As we can see, there are many inherent problems with the College Football Playoff system. Every year, there are too many teams fighting for too few spots. The Selection Committee's rationale is inconsistently applied, and despite what they say, there is not a level playing field. Fortunately, there are ways to remedy the system.

The first possible route to fixing the College Football Playoff system is expansion. This topic is debated every year on all the major sports networks. While these debates usually suggest expanding the Playoff to eight teams, I propose an expansion to six teams. The No. 1 and No. 2 seeds will each get first-round byes while the No. 3 seed plays the No. 6 seed and the No. 4 seed plays the No. 5 seed. No. 1 will play the winner of the 3-vs.-6 matchup, and No. 2 will play the winner of the 4-vs.-5 matchup.

The Selection Committee can choose the six teams in one of two ways. One possibility is to utilize the same selection process as they already do, while adding two more teams. The other way is to award five of the six spots to each of the Power 5 champions, and the sixth spot would be a wild card. The Committee can then decide how to seed the teams. Further research would indicate which of these two methods would be more successful.

There are many advantages that an expansion would bring. First, there are financial benefits to both the television networks and the schools. In 2014, ESPN signed the rights to the College Football Playoff broadcasts in a 12-year, \$7.3 billion contract. In that first year, commercials were sold at \$1 million for a 30-second airtime. Additionally, the Power 5 conferences receive a \$50 million base payment for CFP appearances, and the 'Group of 5' conferences receive a still-significant \$13 million base payment¹¹. Expanding the Playoff would only increase the financial benefits awarded to these schools.

Furthermore, the record-high ratings and viewership of CFP games demonstrates a demand for the games, and adding two more matchups would be well-received. According to Sports Media Watch, the initial CFP semifinal games, the Sugar Bowl and Rose Bowl, averaged 28 million viewers and a 15.0 rating. The 2014 National Championship Game attracted 34 million viewers and scored an incredible 18.6 rating¹². Although the ratings of subsequent CFP games don't quite reach the record 2014 numbers, the games consistently attract over 20 million

¹¹ Undisputed Champs in a Disputed Sport. (2015, January 14). Retrieved May 6, 2018, from The Economist

¹² College Football TV Ratings. (n.d.). Retrieved June 7, 2018, from Sports Media Watch

viewers. Two more Playoff games would not only bring more schools unprecedented exposure, but would also present lucrative opportunities for sponsorships to drive revenue for the schools as well as the television networks.

Moreover, playoff expansion has proven to be beneficial to college sports before. In 2004, the NCAA expanded from a 16-team to a 24-team playoff format in Division II football. In 2016, the format was expanded again to 28 teams. According to Fran Reidy, athletic director of Saint Leo University and chair of the D2 Championships Committee, one of the main reasons behind the expansion was the opportunity to give more kids the chance to play in a championship¹³. More teams competing means more revenue and exposure to more schools. It works in Division II, and the College Football Playoff Board of Managers should be able to make it work too.

Playoff expansion has worked in professional sports as well. In 2012, Major League Baseball (MLB) expanded their playoff format from eight teams to ten. According to data obtained by Sports Media Watch, MLB playoff ratings and viewership has increased every year since then¹⁴. Once again, the higher ratings indicate an increase in the value of media exposure for the teams, which brings them more revenue.

Figure 5. MLB Playoff Ratings Since 2009

MLB WORLD SERIES GAME	1-7 AVERAGE	P2+	P18-49	M18-49	M18-34	M50+	Median
SINCE 2006	Live+Same Day, Ranked by P18-49 # gms	(000s)	Rating	Rating	Rating	Rating	(Years)
Chicago Cubs at Cleveland	2016 thru 7	22,847	6.5	7.9	6.1	14.5	53.6
Philadelphia at NY Yankees	2009 thru 6	19,334	6.2	7.8	6.4	13.2	50.1
Colorado at Boston	2007 thru 4	17,212	5.6	7.0	5.8	12.3	49.9
St Louis at Detroit	2006 thru 5	15,795	4.9	6.4	5.2	12.6	51.6
Texas at St Louis	2011 thru 7	16,521	4.8	6.1	5.1	12.2	52.6
Game 1-7 Average 2006-2015		15,317	4.5	5.8	4.8	11.2	52.7
St Louis at Boston	2013 thru 6	14,984	4.3	5.4	4.7	10.7	54.2
Philadelphia at Tampa Bay	2008 thru 5	13,193	4.2	5.5	4.6	9.8	50.7
NY Mets at Kansas City	2015 thru 5	14,533	4.1	5.1	3.6	10.5	54.6
Texas at San Francisco	2010 thru 5	14,217	4.0	5.1	4.2	10.5	52.8
San Francisco at Kansas City	2014 thru 7	13,930	3.7	4.8	3.9	10.4	55.7
Detroit at San Francisco	2012 thru 4	12,636	3.6	4.7	4.0	9.5	53.6

Source: Showbuzz Daily

¹³ Rabs, C. (2015, May 18). D2 Football Playoffs Expanded, Super Region Changes Proposed. Retrieved June 7, 2018, from Hero Sports

¹⁴ Metcalf, M. (2016, November 3). SKEDBALL: World Series Ratings Through Game 7. Retrieved June 7, 2018, from Showbuzz Daily

Having more playoff games brings in more revenue to the teams and MLB as a result of television broadcasting, ticket sales, merchandise sales, concession sales, and many more points of sale. Furthermore, having an additional wild card spot incentivizes more teams to compete for the last playoff spot. Teams that previously would have missed the playoffs will now get an opportunity to do so, thus increasing the competitive nature of the sport.

Whenever expansion of the College Football Playoff is discussed, the same conclusion is reached: doing so would diminish the value of the regular season. When prompted with the possibility of expansion in November 2017, CFP Executive Director Bill Hancock simply replied, “Scarcity breeds passion”¹⁵. The CFP system has no intention to expand any time soon, because they don’t want to mess with success. However, it’s a risk that the CFP should take, and benefits can outweigh the costs in the long run.

The second and more important way to improve the CFP system is to revise the selection criteria. Despite what the committee suggests, Division I football programs are not equally situated. Theoretically, each school has the same chance to make the playoff at the beginning of the season. Under the title “Universal Access” on their official website, the CFP states “Every FBS team has equal access to the College Football Playoff based on its performance. No team automatically qualifies”¹⁶. In reality, however, not every school is on the same level playing field, and thus the opportunity to qualify for the playoffs is not the same for each program.

In its four years, the College Football Playoff has always emphasized strength of schedule to some extent. It’s the reason Ohio State made the Playoff in 2014 and 2016. While important, this criterion unfairly favors the Power 5 schools. As we saw in 2017, UCF ran the table to an undefeated 12-0 season. However, as a member of the American Athletic Conference, their schedule ranked 54th in the country. According to the Selection Committee, they didn’t play enough ‘good’ teams, and therefore they weren’t one of the top four teams in the country. The Knights proved they were capable of competing against Power 5 teams, however, as they defeated Auburn, 34-27, in the Peach Bowl.

The reality is, UCF and other ‘Group of 5’ conferences (American Athletic, Conference-USA, MAC, Mountain West, Sun Belt) have a slim-to-none chance of making the College

¹⁵ Knapp, C. (2017, November 15). College Football Playoff Executive Director Comments on Possible Playoff Expansion. Retrieved June 7, 2018, from SEC Country

¹⁶ Overview. (n.d.). Retrieved June 7, 2018, from [Collegefootballplayoff.com](http://collegefootballplayoff.com)

Football Playoff each year. These schools simply do not have the same resources, facilities, and recruiting philosophies of their Power 5 counterparts. An undefeated FBS football team should be rewarded. Nevertheless, the Selection Committee spent 2017 deciding between one-loss Alabama, two-loss Ohio State, one-loss Wisconsin, or even three-loss Auburn, rather than even considering the Knights.

Right now, the only way a Group of 5 team makes the Playoff is if they finish their season undefeated, conference champions, and having defeated four Power 5 opponents in non-conference play. The fact that Power 5 schools do not need to achieve each of these accolades demonstrates how unbalanced the system is.

The issue is that most Power 5 teams do not want to schedule their nonconference games against upstart Group of 5 teams like UCF. They fear a loss to those teams would tarnish their resume. However, the Selection Committee has indicated that a team can still make the Playoff even if they lose a nonconference game to a high-caliber opponent. Therefore, strength of schedule should be more important to those teams.

The way to solve this dilemma is for the Selection Committee to definitively say if strength of schedule is more important than total wins, conference championships, and other criteria. If strength of schedule is indeed the most important criterion, then Power 5 schools should be incentivized to play more high-caliber Group of 5 teams. A loss to a team like UCF would not be detrimental to a team like Ohio State. At the same time, a win over the Buckeyes would do wonders for UCF's strength of schedule and S&P+ rankings. Additionally, the Committee can not ignore obvious indicators of success, such as conference championships and total wins. Furthermore, if a school has two losses, but a conference championship in addition, they should not be excused from Playoff contention. The most important thing the Committee can do is publicize what criteria are the most important in their decision making process.

All things considered, it's clear that the College Football Playoff has its flaws. Certain criteria are seemingly more important in some years than others. The Selection Committee has not consistently applied the same criteria in their rationale and has unfairly favored Power 5 teams. Expansion and a revision of criteria are just two ways to revise the system, and it still won't be perfect. If the College Football Playoff truly wants to be universally accessible, they must be an advocate for each and every team.

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