

Five Plays That Launched Bama's Dominance and Destroyed the SEC

Take a trip back in time to Monday night, January 9, 2012. The BCS National Championship featured two teams from the same conference for the first time ever. Amid chaos and controversy and cries of injustice from millions of people from at least 39 states, undefeated LSU and only-defeated-by-LSU Alabama went head to head for Part II of the Battle of the FGs.

The issue of Bama playing in the game instead of Oklahoma St. or Stanford may have been worthy of debate but one thing was not: The SEC was King of College Football. There was even a commercial during the BCS Championship that year proclaiming, "You are watching #6," a reference to this matchup guaranteeing a sixth consecutive national championship for the conference. Alabama would defeat Notre Dame the following year for #7 before the streak ended.

And back then it was not just one team carrying the others:

- From 2006 to 2012, four different SEC schools won the national championship.
- From 2011 to 2013, the SEC had three of the Top 5 teams in a final poll every year and at least four of the Top 10 every year, with the conference claiming five of the Top 10 in 2012.
- In recent history the SEC has had the Top 2 final teams in the Final polls twice (2007, 2011) and two of the Top 3 on two other occasions (2006, 2009).
- Half the teams in the conference finished in the Top 5 from 2011 to 2013.

But then it all changed. One team stayed atop the college football world. But for the other 13, in the words of Newman,

it all came crashing down. Consider the following:

- SEC teams not named Alabama had ten Top 10 finishes from 2011 to 2013 but had only two from 2014 to 2016.
- Teams not named Alabama had six Top 5 finishes from 2011 to 2013. From 2014 to 2016 they had zero.
- No SEC team repeated as Conference Champ from 1998 to 2014. From 2014 to 2016, Alabama won three in a row, by an average of 28 points per game.
- After eight years of several teams winning the championship, zero teams other than Bama even made it to the playoffs from 2014 to 2016.

Georgia finally ended some of that this year but guess who is right there with them?

How did it happen? The reasons are legion, from recruiting failures to coaching hires. But today I want to laser focus on a handful of plays in actual games. Not just any plays. These plays were plays that were bad breaks for the other team or plays that could have and should have been made that were crucial to changing the result. Understand this is not an article to proclaim that Bama is lucky. Breaks and missed chances are a huge part of sports. New England in the NFL is one play in each of their seven Super Bowls away from being 1-6 or 7-0. This is an article about how fascinating that line is. Yet for each play where Bama was fortunate, there are surely some where they were not.

But here are 5 that facilitated their dominance and simultaneously killed the rest of the SEC:

The Game: 2011 #2 Oklahoma St. vs. Iowa St.

The Play: Oklahoma St. misses a 37 yard FG that would have given them the lead with a minute to go.

The Factual Aftermath: OSU lost in Overtime and didn't finish in the Top 2 in the BCS at the end of the regular season. Alabama played LSU instead in the National Championship and manhandled them, 21-0.

The Alternate Reality: LSU destroys the Cowboys, giving them two championships in five years. Bama is left with one National Championship in Saban's first five seasons. Recruiting changes. Les Miles doesn't get fired. LSU is much more competitive six years later instead of losing seven straight to Bama and at home to Troy in 2017.

The Game: 2012 Alabama vs. LSU

The Play: With 8:41 left in the 4th, Spencer Ware of LSU is stuffed on a 4th and 1 from Alabama's 24-yard line.

The Factual Aftermath: I could take any one of about five 50/50 risks by Les Miles in this game that backfired, and spin them on a wheel to pick the one for this article. The Mad Hatter had built a reputation for outrageous gambits and eating grass, but on this night he just ended up looking like a doofus. LSU won the yardage battle easily, the time of possession AND won the turnover battle. And still lost. Because of a slew of missed FGs and 4th downs. A conversion here could have scored a TD for LSU and put Bama in a hole that they may not have escaped. As it was, the Tide scored at the end and Death Valley was a place where LSU's dreams came to die. Alabama won the SEC and steamrolled Notre Dame for back-to-back championships and three in four years.

The Alternate Reality: LSU wins the West and plays Georgia for the SEC championship. One of those two teams goes on to curb stomp Notre Dame. The SEC streak extends with no team winning more than 2 championships during the run and Saban has two National Championships in 6 years, but only one SEC. Recruiting changes. Les Miles doesn't get fired and moves on

to trying to eat field marking paint.

The Game: 2012 Alabama vs. Georgia (SEC Championship Game)

The Play: With 9 seconds left and Georgia eight yards from scoring to win as the time ran out, Aaron Murray's end zone pass was deflected into Chris Conley's arms, who was tackled instead.

The Factual Aftermath: Alabama won the SEC, National Championship, etc. Georgia missed its best chance in 32 years to win the whole thing and continued to be mired as a good-but-not-great team until Mark Richt was fired in 2015.

The Alternate Reality: Georgia annihilates Notre Dame. The SEC championships are spread out over five teams in the run, Georgia takes a step up in recruiting, and keeps winning at a higher level than before 2012. Mark Richt is still employed by Georgia. The Gamecocks get Kirby Smart in 2015 and eventually win nine National Championships before I die.

The Game: 2014 Alabama vs. Mississippi State

The Play: Down 19-0 late in the first half with the ball first and goal at the Alabama half-yard line, #1 MSU suffers a false start to move it back to the 5.

The Factual Aftermath: They settled for a FG. The Bulldogs eventually lost 25-20 as Dak Prescott threw three interceptions, all inside Alabama's 25-yard line. Alabama won the SEC again, their 3rd in six years and Mississippi St missed the SEC Championship, the playoffs and lost their bowl game in embarrassing fashion to Georgia Tech.

The Alternate Reality: Mississippi State scores a TD on the play. They don't settle for a FG their next drive either and

pull the game out in the fourth. They go on to play for the SEC, defeat Missouri and become the first SEC team in the four-team playoff. They still lose to Ohio St but they build on this with better recruiting and do not fall immediately back to the middle of the SEC. Dan Mullen doesn't leave for Florida in 2017. Instead of dropping to the 4th round in the 2016 NFL Draft, Prescott is drafted by the Jets in the 2nd round and no one still has any idea how good he is because the Jets are a dumpster fire.

The Game: 2015 Arkansas vs. Ole Miss

The Play: In Overtime, on 4th and 25 from Ole Miss's 40-yard line, down 52-45, Arkansas receiver Hunter Henry catches a simple pass and while being tackled laterals it over his head 15 yards backward. Arkansas RB Alex Collins retrieves it and navigates substantial traffic 31 yards to miraculously get the first down and keep the game alive.

The Factual Aftermath: Arkansas scored, went for two and got it and won the game. Ole Miss lost its shot at the SEC West title, having owned the tie-breaker over Alabama from their head-to-head victory in September. Alabama won the SEC and yet another National Championship under Saban, their fourth in 7 years.

The Alternate Reality: Alabama doesn't win the West or SEC. The committee makes one of their most controversial decisions ever, taking Iowa as the fourth playoff team over Alabama. They cite a better loss (to playoff bound Michigan St instead of to Ole Miss who also lost to Memphis) and general strength of schedule (the SEC was terrible pre-bowls). Alabama still has zero national championships since 2012 and dynasty talk and "Saban as GOAT" talk are diminished. Ole Miss wins the SEC over Florida, but still gets manhandled by the NCAA for grotesque cheating that elicits comparisons to Sammy Sosa

before Congress. Shea Pattersons still leaves for Michigan. Mississippi State fans still laugh hysterically at them burning a redshirt to play him three games in 2016.

The success of Auburn and Georgia this year may mean things are beginning to change for the SEC and Alabama, but if Georgia is one-and-done and Alabama wins it all, then the conference actual reality continues and the fact Georgia won the SEC while Alabama didn't will matter about as much as it did for LSU in 2011. Which is very little.

Comment are welcomed below!