

The Game of the Century...That Didn't Matter At All

"I guess it was the Game of the Century only if the right team won." [Lou Holtz]

Maybe if Florida St. had a decent kicker to beat Miami, it would have been different.

Back in the early 1990s, the college football world watched with pity as folksy head coach Bobby Bowden repeatedly lost to Miami to cost them multiple national championships. 1991 was a classic example. The Seminoles were the favorite that year to win it all, played dominantly all year long and came into the Miami game 9-0 and ranked #1. Yet their kicker missed a 34-yard field goal—Wide Right you may recall if you are reading this—as time expired and Miami won, 17-16.

The next year was the same, except a missed FG—Wide Right, of course—cost them a chance to tie Miami.

Then 1993 came along. Bobby Bowden had his best team yet it seemed and dispatched of Miami—finally!—early in the year. They were boat racing the ACC, winning against recent conference champions Clemson and Georgia Tech by scores of 57-0 and 51-0. With the curse of Miami behind them, nothing could stop the pollsters from finally voting Bobby Bowden, I mean FSU, #1.

Right?

As November approached, one more huge game loomed. Notre Dame, led by fiery, witty and extremely accomplished head coach Lou Holtz, stood undefeated as well. And when the week of the game approached, the teams stood 9-0 and 10-0 and were ranked #1

and #2 in the country. It was billed, as college football games periodically were back then, the "Game of the Century".



I don't think many people were giving Notre Dame much of a chance, however. Even at home. Not only was FSU winning games by 50 points but they were the sentimental favorite since Bowden had come so close before and still hadn't won it all. With an offense guided by Mark Richt and eventual Heisman winner Charlie Ward, it seemed that fate was on his side.

The environment for the game could not have been more picture perfect. Playing in Notre Dame Stadium, where the ghosts of Fighting Irish past stood to intimidate every visiting team, 59,000 raucous fans were primed. (Back then Notre Dame was the team with all the history: 11 National Championships and seven Heismans. At that point, Florida St had zero of both.) NBC had the telecast and Bob Costas and his golden voice gave a memorable introduction to the game as music from the Rudy soundtrack played behind. It was an immaculate Saturday afternoon for college football between the two top teams in the nation.

Notre Dame made it clear quickly that they would not be stampeded like the ACC and Miami were. FSU did indeed score first, and quickly, to go up 7-0. But then Notre Dame punched

back and started controlling the line of scrimmage on both sides. Lee Becton gashed the FSU defense over and over again for 122 yards that felt like 172. The Irish defense swarmed Ward and mounted up sacks and turnovers. And ND reeled off the next 24 points. By late in the fourth quarter they led 31-17 and invincible Florida St. was on the ropes.



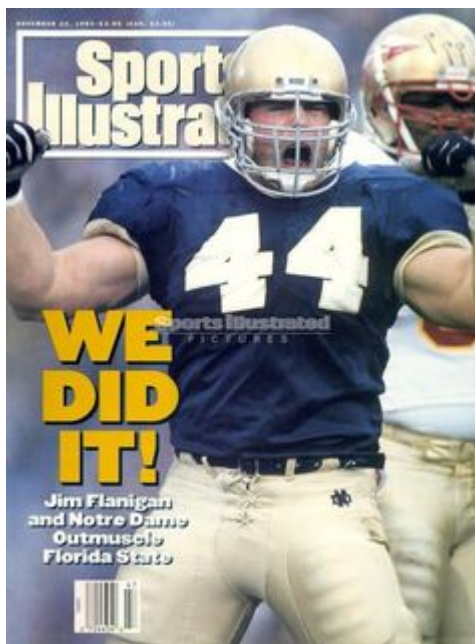
Florida State rallied, behind a lucky bounce on 4th and 20, to pull within a TD. Then after a quick Fighting Irish three and out, they had the ball for one last chance to tie the game. It was not to be, as one of the most familiar images etched in my mind to this day, Ward's last pass in end zone was batted down. Holtz, as he had so many times with N.C. St., Arkansas, Minnesota and Notre Dame, had engineered a massive upset.



End of story, right?

Nope. It never is in college football, as champions used to be awarded based on beauty pageants and odd logic as much as on the for on-the-field results.

This year was no different. After the game, Notre Dame moved into the #1 spot in the polls. FSU dropped only to #2, ahead of undefeated teams like Nebraska, Ohio St., West Virginia and even Auburn, who was on probation and ineligible for the postseason. There was already talk of a ND-FSU rematch in the Fiesta Bowl. You could sense even at that point that the Seminoles were basically given a mulligan for the game. It was being spun, even by Florida State brass, that they played the #1 team tough on the road and so they must be the #2 team. If it played out like FSU was lobbying for, Notre Dame was going to have to beat them again.



Then something happened to spice up the pot even more. The very next week, Notre Dame was upset on a last-second field goal by #12 Boston College. The polls were a dumpster fire, as Florida St. resumed its spot at #1, ahead of all the undefeated teams still, and Notre Dame fell to 4th. Five different teams got first-place votes that week. (To be noted as well is that the following week Notre Dame didn't play and

still dropped to 5th in the polls.)

Bowl season loomed and it was apparent that Notre Dame was going to need a myriad of things to break right to win the National Championship. They more or less needed undefeated West Virginia to lose and for FSU to beat undefeated Nebraska in an ugly game in the Fiesta Bowl, while winning their bowl game vs. Texas A&M. And luck of the Irish, it all happened. Notre Dame beat A&M 24-21, Florida throttled WV 41-7, and Florida St. barely scraped by Nebraska 18-16 in a disjointed but thrilling contest, after the Cornhuskers missed a long FG on the last play that would have won it.

As a result it was clear that only two teams really could stake claim to the National Championship: Notre Dame and Florida State. (Auburn remained undefeated but was de facto excluded for being on probation.) Florida State took 48 of 60 first-place votes in the AP and 36 of 61 first-place votes in the Coaches poll, winning both championships. The argument that the coaches and media seemed to favor was that the two teams had the same record and that the Seminoles had the "better" loss, losing on the road to #2 instead of at home to #12. Holtz's rejoinder was one of searing logic that, in my opinion, put all of those FSU voters to shame: They had the same record and one team beat the other. Head-to-Head is the most fundamental tie-breaker there is. Most voters ignored it.



Adding to Holtz's ire was that in 1989 a similar scenario played out, except in reverse. Miami and ND both had one loss at the end, and the voters favored Miami because Miami won the game the two teams played. Holtz could not wrap his mind around why things all of a sudden changed four years later and was not shy about expressing it: "I really and truly felt we would win [the championship] when I went to bed," Holtz said the Sunday after the bowl games. "Even Bobby Bowden said he felt that Nebraska outplayed them. I just felt that based on 1989 and the logic given then, and the head-to-head competition, I felt in my heart there was no way we would not win it." As time passed he never wavered on this, later adding, "We played Florida State in the season and the game obviously didn't mean anything. Everybody said it was the game of the century. I guess it was the game of the century if the right team won." To this day, Holtz considers 1993 a "sort of" National Championship for Notre Dame.

Here's what gets me as a college football fan, even 25 years later: So often in that era of college football, the two best teams did not play each other and we were left wondering who would win if they did. And typically, they split the two polls and both were given recognition as National Champions. It happened in 1990 with Colorado and Georgia Tech. It happened in 1991 with Miami and Washington. It happened in 1997 with Nebraska and Michigan. It even happened in the BCS era in 2003 with LSU and Southern Cal.

Yet in all of those splits, neither team could say of the other, "We beat them on the field where it mattered." That is not true of 1993. Notre Dame won. And it didn't matter. In my humble opinion, the vote in both polls was greatly impacted by how much people loved Bobby Bowden. He had never won, so they gave it to him. A similar thing happened the very next year when Nebraska and Penn St. both were undefeated and both polls gave the championship to previously ringless Tom Osborne of Nebraska.

So the Game of the Century? More like as meaningless a loss as any in the history of Florida State football. College Football has a history of injustice in determining its champions. To me, this was one of the worst. In my mind, Notre Dame won the biggest game and deserved the championship.

Then the game actually would have meant something.

Dear Central Florida, Your National Championship is Phony

Being from the Deep South, I have often heard it said that there are three sports seasons: College Football, Recruiting and Spring Football. The fact that many schools put 90,000 in the seats for their spring games, which are broadcast on ESPN, is proof that College Football is a year-round spectacle.

Despite this, I cannot think of many things that would cause me to write about College Football in May. But this is something that should have died in January and it hasn't.

Central Florida beat Auburn and pretended they were National Champions, having a parade, rings, the whole nine yards. It was cute and similar to what other non-National Championship teams have done in the past (i.e., Auburn 2004). Usually, this sort of thing goes by the wayside in a few days. But to paraphrase a controversial slogan of the times, they persisted.

In part, I blame social media. Somehow Twitter gives the illusion that we have access to celebrities and Facebook gives

us a platform to sound off on everything to an ambiguous audience of hundreds of people. And via these extremely popular sites, Central Florida has clearly taken advantage of how no one seems to be able to ignore anything they disagree with. Similar to the “I’m not dignifying that with a response” being a response that dignifies, every time someone argued against Central Florida’s real claim to a fake national championship, they gave more and more momentum to their argument.

Of course, that is what I’m doing. But only because Nick Saban of all people has now joined the fray. Nick Saban is the best college football coach, maybe ever. But he’s also a bit of a whiner. And as such he could not hold back last week on commenting on Central Florida’s National Championship claim, deriding it as only he should have. And I cannot deny that once he joined in, people like me can no longer ignore it. It’s time to weigh in.

Central Florida’s national championship is no more real than the Tooth Fairy. The arguments posited to try to disprove that simply cannot be sustained. Here are a few:

Central Florida beat Auburn, who beat Alabama and Georgia

The A beats B beats C argument is lame. There now exists on the internet a website that will tell you (if it is possible) how to get from Team A to where they beat Team Z through a series of “they beat B who beat C, etc.” The craziest one I’ve seen? Welch College (my alma mater) beats Villanova in 2018 Men’s Basketball. That’s right, an NCCAA school with a few hundred students beats the NCAA team that dominated the Men’s tournament. Here is the proof:

Welch College Flames: 2018 National Champs. Print the banner

myteamisbetterthanyourteam.com				
On 1/15/2018	Welch	beat	Crowley's Ridge	75- 62
On 1/6/2018	Crowley's Ridge	beat	Rust	79- 72
On 11/30/2017	Rust	beat	Texas Col	97- 86
On 12/7/2017	Texas Col	beat	Huston-Tillot	92- 89
On 12/9/2017	Huston-Tillot	beat	St Thomas TX	85- 77
On 2/17/2018	St Thomas TX	beat	LSU Shreveport	101- 98
On 12/16/2017	LSU Shreveport	beat	Northwestern LA	85- 84
On 11/21/2017	Northwestern LA	beat	ULM	76- 61
On 2/10/2018	ULM	beat	Georgia St	90- 82
On 12/20/2017	Georgia St	beat	Massachusetts	71- 63
On 12/9/2017	Massachusetts	beat	Providence	72- 63
On 2/14/2018	Providence	beat	Villanova	76- 71

Here's the dirty little secret about Auburn 2018: They were a fantastic team, but they lost four times away from home, including to LSU (who lost to Troy at home, if you are a big fan of A beats B beats C). They beat Georgia at home but got romped at a neutral site. Central Florida needs to let this paltry argument go[1. Some UCF proponents, like SEC-hating Twitter clown Danny Kannel, try as well to point to an injury to Auburn's prime running back as to why the results were different in the two Georgia-Auburn games last year. Blaming injuries is one step above blaming refs.]

Central Florida was the only undefeated team

So was Utah in 2008. So was Boise in 2006. And they didn't get National Championships either. Why? Because their schedules were not difficult enough. It's great that UCF could knock off Auburn in the Peach Bowl, but when you play in the SEC and similar conferences, you get teams like Auburn several times a

year.

I conceded it's not fair that Central Florida's players and coaches cannot control their schedule. But that's part of sports. It's not fair that Auburn in 2004 and Penn St. in 1994 got no championship despite running the table against a legit strength of schedule. It's not fair that the players for Auburn in 1993 had nothing to do with the reason they were on probation and were the only undefeated team in the nation and got nothing.

Sports aren't fair.

Alabama claims titles from years past that are questionable

There is no doubt College Football has historically had the most convoluted method to naming a champion since the NCAA had never recognized one. If you look back through College Football annals, it is very hairy trying to figure out who gets credit for championships in what year because some schools claim them from non-AP poll and Coaches Poll sources (the two standard championships every year until the BCS). Additionally, teams used to be awarded championships before bowls were played. And is there anything more absurd to sports logic than having two (or more) national champions?

But now we do not have to deal with that. 2014 changed everything. We have a fairer system, and even more precisely, we have a playoff. Even if Alabama's 1973 Championship is shady (and I'm not arguing for or against it), you cannot apply standards or laws or any similar criteria to modern circumstances. It devalues advancements we have made.

Now, to balance some of this out, here are two things I do acknowledge that are not anti-UCF:

1. We need more teams in the playoff. Even if there were eight, I do not think Central Florida would have gotten in, but I have zero doubt the 8th best team in the nation most years can run through three other Top 8 teams in three weeks. I personally prefer 16. The NCAA tournament in basketball is not devalued at all despite the fact the bottom 32 teams or so have little to no chance to win it, so even if #16 has no chance to run the table, it still makes for more potentially great football.
2. UCF is likely doing this in part to help with recruiting. I do not mind it in that sense. The problem is I have zero doubt reams of people are truly arguing that they deserve their rings, parade, etc. because they deserved a championship last year. Those people exist mostly because they are UCF fans or hate Alabama or the SEC or just love controversy, which our current political climate proves people are addicted to. The belief that UCF actually deserves a national championship is what I am arguing against.

Agree? Disagree? Let us know below!

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!

It's Past Time to Pay College Athletes

No intro today. Let's get right to this. Here are five reasons why it is ludicrous that we are not paying college athletes in 2017.

1. Three Words: Fair Market Value

This idea was presented to me by friend and professional financial advisor, Chris Wright, when I used to argue against college athletes being paid. The concept is simple: Fair market value says a seller and a buyer come to an agreement on price based on what is reasonable in an open market. There is

a reason that the NBA will always bring in tons of more money than soccer or the WNBA in the US: People are willing to pay more to watch it.

The NCAA has a \$10 billion TV contract for the basketball tournament and \$500 million for the football playoffs. Many athletic departments in the NCAA bring in nine digits a year. People are getting rich off of this. Very rich. But not the players. In 2013, when my dad bought tickets to take my three brothers and me to Florida for the Outback Bowl, we paid a lot of money to watch Jadeveon Clowney knock a guy's helmet off and Steve Spurrier go for the TD bomb with 30 seconds left. Yet one man got a big check for that game while the other got no compensation from our expenses.

2. Scholarships are not the same thing as salary

The obvious retort is that they get scholarships: an average of \$100,000 over four years at a D1 school, I have read. Yet this rejoinder is faulty for at least two reasons. First, because fair market value says some players in the big money sports deserve much more than that. [At least one source](#) says that the projected fair market value of the average college football player was \$178,000 per year from 2011 to 2015, while the average college basketball player for the same time was \$375,000. That is the average. A quarterback like Johnny Manziel would have been worth much more, with Texas A&M being a huge revenue school.

Secondly, the scholarships cover things like tuition, books and fees. They are not truly paid to play. And at times, the scholarships aren't enough to live reasonably. At the end of the 2014 NCAA Men's Basketball Championship game, UConn's Shabazz Napier took advantage of being in front of a microphone on CBS to tell the world, "We go to bed hungry at night." I was so unaware of what he really meant that at first

I thought he was speaking figuratively, as in, "We go to bed hungry *for a championship* every night." No, he was being literal. How fair is it that a player who brings in far more money for his school than an average student on academic scholarship, should ever have too little money to eat because of NCAA rules?

Like it or not, capitalism rules the US. It's time to pay these athletes what they are worth.

3. The NCAA is a complete and utter dumpster fire

You may remember a few years ago when six Ohio St. football players were caught selling athletic equipment, rings and similar things for cash and tattoos (which was illegal but were *things they owned*...think about that for a second), and the NCAA banned them for five games the next year. But they let them play in the bowl game vs. Arkansas. The reason they were allowed to play the bowl was because they didn't fully understand what they were doing was wrong. What?

Then you have the incredible story of Charleston Southern having to suspend 32 players for a game vs. Florida State in 2016 because they used extra money from their book allowance to buy school supplies.

Or how about the story of how [Lane Kiffen at Tennessee allegedly sent attractive hostesses to high school games in South Carolina to get recruits to come?](#) Marcus Lattimore, one of the finest young men of Christian integrity to ever play football in the state of SC said, "I haven't seen (any) other schools do that. It's crazy." And did the NCAA ever find anything of substance to pin on UT? Nope.

Welcome to the NCAA, the worst run, most corrupt and hypocritical sports organization in America.

The NCAA once made Todd Gurley do community service for selling his autograph in addition to suspending him, as though he were some kind of criminal in need of rehabilitation. The NCAA suspended Enes Kanter for life for money he made as a professional overseas that he never touched and was willing to give back. The NCAA sometimes suspends people 5 games for selling things and sometimes 0.5. There is no rhyme, reason or consistency to most of it.

There really is a simple way to stop the madness. Pay the players. Let the people give them however much money they want to.

4. Even if the NCAA were virtuous, they could never fairly monitor recruiting.

Did you hear former Texas Longhorns QB Chris Simms mention recently that [he used to get "\\$100 handshakes" from boosters?](#) Who out there doesn't think this happens all the time? Who out there doesn't think every major program is cheating in ways that will always be ahead of the NCAA?

If you pay the players there is no need for any tables to hand money under.

5. It's time to abandon the pretense of the ideal student-athlete

Some sports will never have a minor leagues and that is essentially what college becomes. That could be a good thing. Pay them to play and if they want to get an education because they cannot go to the next level, they still can. The "one and done" culture of college basketball is a travesty and an overreach by the NBA. Many freshmen know they don't have to go to class in the spring if they are leaving. Paying them gives

them purpose and could even convince some athletes to stay in school longer and make college sports even better.

I don't buy that it is a bad idea to give new adults money because they cannot handle it. We do it in so many sports anyway: Tennis, minor league baseball, one and done basketball, etc. Money could mess up some 18 and 19-year olds, but it stands to do far more good than harm.

I don't have a great plan for how to make paying athletes work as far as specifics, but some people do. I do not think it will ever happen because the NCAA is so powerful. But it should happen. Otherwise the NCAA will continue to deal with injustice and corruption on a massive scale. As long as they hold the power and wealth, I do not think they care. And that is a shame. The players and the fans deserve better.

Championship Game Preview:

Can '16 Alabama be the Greatest Team of The Modern Era?

In a mirror image of last year's epic championship game, undefeated and #1 Alabama takes on #2 and one-loss Clemson tonight. Several people, among them REO Contributor Mike Lytle, have confessed to me they are pulling for Clemson because Alabama has won far too much. This has been my reaction (minus the commandment breaking):



It's Like Goliath vs. Jezebel

I confess I have Bama fatigue due to their success and they are among the last teams I'd like to see win it. But if Alabama induces weariness in my sports fandom, Clemson winning would induce war crime-level torture.

Yet I cannot deny that Clemson likely stands a better chance this year than last, in which they were a play or two away.

They have everything Alabama does: 3-deep roster talent, exceptional coordinator coaching, unshakeable confidence. If quarterback is the most important position in football, and it is, then they have a decided advantage over the Tide. If D-

line is the second most important position in *college* football, and it is, then Clemson isn't losing ground there either ([as I wrote last year](#), and it's still true). They won't get intimidated or pushed around and the Tiger offense likely will not get rattled into a turnover that leads to a TD the other way, as other teams have 11 times this year vs. Bama[1. Someone may point out that Watson threw 15 picks this year but they were not really the kind Bama is used to getting. Only 1 was returned for a TD and there was no pressure on that play. The vast majority of his ints were bad reads or tipped balls, not throws made because he was pressured.]].

As a Gamecock, I'm terrified.

I wasn't too worried before the Ohio St. game. Clemson blew out several teams this year, including mine, but had so many close calls that I figured they were just a step behind last year. They gave up 43 to Pitt, 36 to Louisville, 34 to FSU, 35 to Va Tech and needed N.C. St to miss a short FG to pull that one out in overtime.

The Opposite of a Late Season Collapse

How did this team not only dismantle Ohio St. but also shut them out? I could discuss Xs and Os all day (Ohio St. could not throw it downfield as well as the teams that put 34+ on Clemson, which is also not what Bama does well) but sometimes sports that involve 18 to 21 year olds are more complex than typical analysis.

Personally, I believe Clemson is better than last year and suffered a tad from last year's hangover and did just well enough to get back to the playoff and now they are turning it on. They beat us about as badly as you can beat a team, they raced out to a huge lead the following week vs. VT and swatted them away when they needed to at the end (just as they did with Louisville and Florida St.) And most impressive of all

they then rolled one of the most consistent teams in college football in the semifinal.

It's scary.

Clemson has a lot to play for...their first championship since 1981 and second ever, a chance to truly join college football royalty, and a chance for their end of year result to match the swagger that Dabo has modeled and instilled over 8 years now. And for everyone else...a chance to at least put a dent in the Bama dominance. They have the tools for sure.

If Bama wins, can we complain about UConn Women's Basketball?

On the other side, Bama has nearly as much to play for: 5 undisputed championships in 8 years which hasn't been done in the poll era, and (in my humble opinion) a chance for the 2016 version to enter the argument for greatest college team of my lifetime, the modern era[1. I do not think it's fair for me to try to compare modern teams to teams I never saw play. Facts and stats are great, but the eye test is something. So I'm talking about since I began watching college football and the first championship I remember is Oklahoma winning in 1985.].

They had two close games this year: one vs. Ole Miss which was not as close as the final indicated. They got down 24-3 and then destroyed the Rebels for the next two and a half quarters 45-6 before Ole Miss tagged on a couple of meaningless TDs. They also beat LSU in Baton Rouge by "only" 10 points. And I watched that game start to finish and doubt LSU could have scored if they played 8 quarters so that game never really felt like Alabama was going to lose.

Other than that, they really weren't even threatened slightly.

They are as imposing a defense, I think, since their 1992 version which may be the greatest ever. I don't trust Hurts, Scarborough and Harris like I trusted Coker and Derrick Henry.

Hurts is not a substandard passer by any means (22 TDs and

2600+ yards), though, and considering how Coker got batted around like a pin ball last year it may be better to have a better running QB vs. a team that gets pressure like Clemson's. Plus, Bama always seems to just find a way to score, to win. It's an intangible for sure and it goes team wide. Some Bama fans were sweating when they got down three TDs to Ole Miss. I turned to my wife and said, "I bet they win by 14".

And in my opinion, should they win tonight becoming the first ever 15-0 team at this level of football and winning every game but one by 10+ (tonight's result pending), they would be one of the ten best teams ever.

I will wait to see if they win before ranking them but as of right now I would say the following ten teams are the best of this era, in no particular order:

1995 Nebraska

2001 Miami

2004 Southern Cal

1992 Alabama

2010 Auburn

2005 Texas

1996 Florida

1991 Washington

2013 Florida St.

1988 Notre Dame

So if Alabama wins I will add them where I think they belong

on the list, and produce a new article later this week with the Top 10 ranked in order (including 2016 Bama) and comments about each one.

If Clemson wins, I will jerk my TV from the wall, throw it out the window, rend my garments, pull out my beard, fast and weep violently into my wife's arms and probably disappear for 6 months.

So this is how it's going to go...

So how will it go tonight? I will give some random predictions for the game and a prediction for the final score:

- Alabama will NOT score on special teams or defense tonight.
- If Clemson turns it over once or less, they win; twice or more and they lose
- Watson runs for more yards than Hurts
- Hurts throws for more yards than his season average because they are behind in the second half.
- Watson has less total yards but less turnovers than last year, plays an overall better game and wins MVP
- Dabo wears a K-Mart sweatshirt.

I'm guessing it won't be as fun as last year, it will be more low scoring but it will be a cleaner, more professional looking game. Clemson will be by far the most explosive team Bama has faced this year. The SEC is down. Taking out defense and special teams TDs, Bama only averaged 28 PPG game this year, which feels low. So I'll go out on a limb and say Clemson doesn't turn it over and pulls the (sort of) upset:

CLEMSON 27, ALABAMA 17

See y'all in six months.

College Football is Back! And Even Gamecocks Are Excited...

I do love the NFL. I really do. It's the 1B to College Football's 1A in my favorite sports.

But I bleed college football. It's part of growing up in a state where all you have are two extremely large universities with abnormally rabid fan bases. In South Carolina, you are USC or CU. You're a Tiger or you're a Gamecock. You're Carolina or Clemson and if you claim to be both, you're irrelevant. In 1998, the teams were 1-9 and 2-8 going into the game against each other. And 82,000 people packed a sold out stadium. I'm pretty sure both schools were in the Top 5 that year in revenue generated also. It's larger than life.

My Gamecocks went 3-9 last year and lost to the Citadel. Yet, hope springs eternal. It's because college football is special from an eternal hope standpoint. Here's why:

1. In college football, you can turn it around super quickly.

In 2012, Auburn went 3-9 and didn't win an SEC game. In 2013, they won the SEC and came within 30 seconds of winning it all. In 2013, Florida lost to Georgia Southern. Two years later, they won the SEC East.

Look, I get it that USC isn't Auburn or Florida. But these turnarounds give me hope that I don't have to settle for another 3 or 4-win season (which was our first losing season since 2003). In very recent SEC history, Vanderbilt-Vanderbilt!!!!-won 9 games in back-to-back seasons. And we are way above them. Even my own program less than 20 years ago went from 0-11 to 8-4 in one season. I believe this year will be special until the results prove otherwise.

2. Because College football is outrageously wild and unpredictable.

Last year in week 7, this happened:

The following week, this happened[1. "What a time to be alive!"]:

The very next week, in Week 9, this happened (which the ACC says should not have counted):

And then, the very next week, as if they knew they had to top them all to be the mother of all crazy finishes, Arkansas pulled a lateral on a 4th and 25 to keep the game vs. Ole Miss alive, a play you have to see to believe:[2. Unseen on this video is that Arkansas also got a break when Ole Miss seemingly ended the threat and the game but did so by pulling the Arkansas QB's face mask, giving Arkansas another chance.

And with apologies to my Razorback fan friends, I hate it that a win that really didn't help their season in any meaningful way helped Bama win back to back SEC Championships.

The world needed Ole Miss to win. Yet, the play is everything great about College Football.]

And that result ended up being crucial, since it knocked Ole Miss out of the SEC Championship and let Alabama go instead. Would Alabama have made the playoff without an SEC Championship? I don't know.

Of course, maybe that isn't the mother of all crazy finishes, since Auburn had two in 2013 that topped it, at least for significance, the first one being this...[3. The best part of this video is the reaction of Georgia QB Aaron Murray. I hated that guy.]:

...one week before beating Alabama on this play (in case you have not see it a a gajillion times)[4. The Auburn radio edit is the best version of this, but please forgive the multiple uses of God's name in vain.]:

But beyond the crazy plays, you never know what will happen in college football week to week. This is the sport that gave us Appalachian St over Michigan in 2007. And James Madison over ACC Champ Virginia Tech in 2010. The sport that gave us #2 Southern Cal losing the last weekend in 2006 to UCLA (a team it beat 50-0 the year prior) to knock them from the National title chase and give Florida a chance, kicking off the SEC reign of terror. This sport gave us the #1 and #2 teams both losing the last weekend in 2007, shaking up the title picture so badly we got a 2-loss champion. That sport that gave us #2 Oklahoma St., #4 Oregon and #5 Oklahoma all losing in Week 12 in 2011, opening the door for an all-SEC Championship game[4. This is why we have a playoff now. There is zero doubt in my mind.]. It gave us #1 Kansas St. and #2 Oregon both losing in Week 12 in 2012, opening the door for Alabama to sneak into the National Championship, violate Notre Dame and give the SEC 7 in a row. Keep in mind this is all from the last ten seasons of College Football and going back further in history

would give us even more chill bumps.

We needed a playoff for justice, but not for excitement.

3. Because the rivalries make it fun just about every week.

Even though we were terrible last year, our season was nearly saved by upsetting eventual championship contender and undefeated hated rival Clemson in the last game. And even without a National Championship in the last 10 years, beating Clemson 5 times in a row from 09-13 brought all Gamecocks joy that may not even be matched by a championship.

But even beyond our fiercest rival, college football regularly gives rivalries and moments that live on in infamy. Most sports fans know that Jadaveon Clowney knocked this guy's head off three years ago...

...but true Gamecocks will remember with more fondness Clowney doing this as a freshman in his second game...[5. Aaron Murray!
HA HA HA HA!!!!!! You see Clowney in your nightmares to this day!! You and Tajh Boyd!!! YOU KNOW IT! ADMIT IT!!!!]:

...because it clinched a huge road win vs. the Bulldogs in 2011. And make no mistake, after Clemson, we HATE Georgia. Older Gamecocks like me will remember beating Georgia on the road in 1993 when legend Steve Taneyhill called "Same play! Same play!" after Brandon Bennett got stuffed at the goal line with 20 seconds left and no time outs, leading to this:

Another classic 23-21 road victory over our SEC East rival. These games matter because beating Georgia matters. Every year. No matter how the rest of the year goes.

If you want to know who will contend for the National Championship (outside of the obvious repeat picks of Clemson and Alabama), there are reams of internet sites and magazines. If you want a Top 10 list, you'll have to look elsewhere. I stink at predicting and no one really knows. I am sure tons had Bama pegged as Champion last year, but who foresaw a loss to Ole Miss, then Ole Miss losing to Arkansas on a fluke for it to happen?[7. Alabama fans may want me to point out that, while not the end of the game, Ole Miss had a huge luck play work out for them on a ricocheted pass in their win vs. Alabama. And that mattered in a 43-37 final. That play wasn't nearly as lucky as Arkansas' 4th and 25 though.] I can't tell you what's going to happen. But I can tell you why it matters. And why it's fun. And why people like me get super giddy for college football. It's the perfect storm of craziness, hype, rivalry hatred and unpredictability. And in places like South Carolina, it's all they have for most of the sports calendar. On Saturdays in the Fall, nothing else is needed.