



# News

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## Football Needs a Bit of Madness

**Tournament Like NCAA Basketball's Would Create Mass-Reach Opportunity**

By Mark Dominiak, Special to TelevisionWeek

The volatile conclusion of this year's college football season prompted a lot of discussion over the past few weeks. There were no clear-cut, dominant teams at the end of the regular season, leading to much contention in the final BCS selection process.

Georgia and USC finished the season as two of the hottest teams in the country. Hawaii had yet to suffer a loss. Oklahoma had a solid season. In the end, LSU and Ohio State were chosen to participate in the national championship game. But the season's conclusion had many fans and pundits alike calling more loudly for a tournament scenario to determine college football's national champion.

Media planners also may have good reason to jump on that bandwagon.

### Few Big-Event Opportunities

Big, mass-reach media properties are hard to come by nowadays. It used to be that media planners could count on a variety of venues if they wanted to leverage the power of a big audience: The Super Bowl, the Academy Awards, the Miss America pageant, scads of miniseries, the weekly power of "60 Minutes" and many high-powered prime-time programs pulling a 20 rating every week.

Those times are long gone.

Planners still have the Super Bowl, but there aren't many other remaining properties that pack a mass-reach wallop. The Academy Awards still have some oomph in them. "American Idol" reaches a good deal of the country over the course of its season. And arguably the NCAA basketball tournament captures the attention of a big audience for a few weekends in March. But beyond those few vehicles, mass-reach opportunities are thin.

That's why a potential NCAA bowl game playoff event is important. With so few real mass-reach opportunities available, the creation of an NCAA football tournament using the bowl game platform can become another big mass-reach ad venue.

It's not easy for media companies to create properties that can appeal to masses of consumers. Especially with new properties, it usually takes some time and magic to develop a large following.

## **NCAA Football an Opportunity**

But with college football, many pieces are already in place. Each bowl game on its own merits reaches a sizable audience, primarily men. While somewhat imperfect, MRI data demonstrates the magnitude of interest the games currently have among a male audience.

For example, 2007 MRI Doublebase notes that among men, all of the major bowl games reach sizable audiences even without a true tournament format. The Capital One Bowl reached 14.8 million men. The Sun Bowl reached 10.5 million. The Gator and Cotton bowls each reached more than 15 million.

The marquee bowl games performed even better. The Sugar Bowl netted 20.3 million male viewers, the Fiesta Bowl 21.8 million, the Orange Bowl 23.3 million and the Rose Bowl 28.3 million. Considering that the national championship game has rotated among those major bowls, it's likely the biggest audience also shifts between each bowl from year to year.

Even so, that's still an average of 23.4 million male viewers for each of the major bowl games without a true tournament in place, roughly half of the 48.9 million male viewers reported by MRI for the Super Bowl. What might happen to those audiences if all of the major bowl games were linked to a multiweek tournament? Would there be enough strength to boost male audiences and possibly bring in the casual viewer?

## **Potential Impact**

A tournament system would significantly change the context of year-end bowl games. No longer would each game be essentially the broadcast of a single matchup with each team fighting for the pride of that contest. In a tournament scenario, each team would be fighting for its survival. Games would take on much more of the "madness" feel of the spring NCAA basketball tournament.

Sports purists might argue that a tournament would finally help to legitimately decide on a national collegiate football champion. That's true, but from a media perspective, a tournament would become a property that transcends a group of single broadcasts evolving to an event linking the disparate pieces together into a more meaningful whole.

Much more consumer interest likely would follow. Rather than the casual interest of feet up on a sleepy New Year's Day, the games would become a sequence of story installments played out over a few weeks' time. People love stories. Individual games are a diversion. Games linked by a common thread are a serial. Not to say that a tournament would be irresistible, but it would be far more compelling than the current structure.

Drawing in viewers beyond the casual vacationer also seems likely. Individual games are set up more to attract the interest of the die-hard alumnus fan or the viewer who happens to be unencumbered in the time period. A tournament would appeal to the broader audience interested in the whole, regardless of alma mater or timing. People might be more likely to make a tournament appointment viewing rather than just viewing the game that happens to be convenient.

That's a phenomenon with a proven track record, as March Madness so aptly demonstrates. What makes a football tournament perhaps even more compelling from a media perspective is that it would happen in the cold-weather months of December and January, when HUT levels are far higher and audience potential far greater.

It's not hard to imagine the bracket mania and office pools that could result. Nor is it inconceivable that a tournament could spawn viewing parties and the like, similar to March Madness. A tournament could become a substantive reason for people to connect at a time of year when people are inclined to do just that.

### Media Ramifications

And think of how the media would embrace a tournament scenario. From broadcast to print to the Web, bowl games would cease to be covered as simply a one-game story, but would be covered as the piece they represent in the larger whole. The whole "road to" phenomenon would result for football.

Network teams would be assigned. Prognosticators would discuss what-if scenarios. Cinderella stories would develop and generate copy. Theme music and jingles would probably be birthed. It's not hard to imagine all of the many and diverse components of media coverage that would result.

And for every component that was created, there would of course be opportunity for media planners to marry their brand's message to that contact point. While a tournament might suggest the Brand X Bowl might be a thing of the past, it's not inconceivable that Brand X might be the half-time show sponsor of every bowl, or the kickoff sponsor, or the overtime sponsor, or the bowl MVP sponsor. The possibilities are fertile and endless—and for brands, perhaps in a more compelling way than sponsorship of a sole game that may or may not have a good matchup.

With a true tournament scenario, whatever and wherever the final matchup might take place could create new opportunities as well. Pre- and post-game shows would be a natural. Opportunities to award scholarships and the like also seem like a no-brainer. A half-time show with big-name entertainment makes sense as well.

Whatever form a tournament might take, the point is that possibilities seem exciting and the ability to generate energy and mass viewership seems realistic. Mass-reach media platforms of this magnitude are few and far between. It seems the NCAA has a golden opportunity to create a new one without a great deal of risk.

It could be argued that one of the hurdles standing in the way of something like a tournament are the parades and associated events that make each bowl its own individual entity. But why can't those idiosyncrasies be leveraged to make something like a tournament even more special? Why couldn't the Tournament of Roses parade be woven into the context of the overall tournament? Why couldn't the heritage of the Cotton, Sugar, Orange and Fiesta Bowls become key components of what makes the tournament special?

Sure, the sports purists have lamented the lack of a cut-and-dried platform to crown a college football champion, but they're not the only ones with a lament. Media planners should be upset as well—upset that the current college bowl configuration is cheating them out of a compelling and rare mass-reach message platform for their brands.

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