

College Football: More Than Just the Top 25

By Randy Snow

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When Division I-AA Appalachian State shocked the college football world by beating the #5 ranked Michigan Wolverines earlier this season, it brought to light something that I have been saying for many years; There is a lot more to college football than just the teams in the Top 25.

But whenever you pick up a newspaper, or turn on the TV, you would think that there are only 25 teams playing this time of year. But there is so much more to college football. There are 120 football teams in Division I-A, and even more in the lower divisions.

Even within Division I-A, media attention is grossly slanted towards a select few conferences and schools. There are 11 Division I-A conferences but only six of them are favored by the Bowl Championship Series (BCS) as well as one Independent school, Notre Dame. The BCS conferences consist of the Big 10, Big 12, Big East, ACC, SEC and PAC 10. That accounts for just 66 teams out of the 120 Division I-A schools. That leaves the Western Athletic Conference (WAC), the Mid-American Conference (MAC), the Sun Belt Conference, the Mountain West Conference and Conference USA on the outside looking in within their own division.

The BCS controls the five big money bowl games, the Rose Bowl, the Fiesta Bowl, the Sugar Bowl and the Orange Bowl, as well as the BCS National Championship game. It even has its own BCS Poll to determine the Top 10 teams that will participate in its five bowl games. Eight of the 10 BCS bowl bids are reserved for teams in the six BCS conferences while the other two spots are potentially open to the 51 teams in the five non-BCS conferences and the three remaining Division I-A Independent teams. That is, if they can manage to make it into the Top 10 in the BCS Poll. One team that did it last year was Boise State from the WAC. They went on to beat Oklahoma 43-42 in overtime in the Fiesta Bowl.

There are a total of 786 college football teams in the United States. Below the 120 teams in Division I-A there are another 122 teams in Division I-AA. There are also 148 teams in Division II and 238 teams in Division III. Another 90 teams make up the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA), which is separate from the NCAA, and 68 teams are in the National Junior

College Athletic Association (NJCAA). All of these teams take to the field each fall, many of them playing for little more than school pride and a chance to compete.

Who's Who in the Other Divisions

In Division I-AA, the afore mentioned Appalachian State Mountaineers have won the national championship the last two years in a row.

In Division II, the Grand Valley State Lakers from Allendale, Michigan are the defending champions and have won four national titles in the last five years. The powerhouse team in Division III is the Mount Union Purple Raiders from Alliance, Ohio. Since 1993, Mount Union has won nine national titles, including the last two years in a row.

The Carroll College Fighting Saints in Helena, Montana won the national title in the NAIA four straight years from 2002-2005. The University of Sioux Falls Cougars won the 2006 title.

Last year's national champion in the NJCAA, which is determined by a Top 20 poll, was the 12-0 Blinn College Buccaneers from Brenham, Texas.

Oldest College Football Rivalries

Do you think that Division I-A has the market cornered on college football history and tradition? Think again. Some of the oldest and greatest rivalries in all of college football involve teams that might surprise you.

When you think of the greatest college football rivalry of all time, you have to be talking about "The Game," otherwise known as Harvard vs. Yale. Those two schools belong to the Ivy League in Division I-AA and first met on the gridiron in 1875. This year's game will be their 124th meeting.

When you talk about the longest ongoing rivalry in all of college football, you're talking about Lehigh vs. Lafayette, two Division I-AA schools in Pennsylvania who play in the Patriot League conference. That rivalry dates back to 1884 and this year's game will be the 143rd meeting between the two schools.

By contrast, this year's game between Big 10 rivals Michigan and Ohio State will be the 104th in that series, which began back in 1897.

Next month, all three of these historic games will be played on the very same day, November 17.

Another historic game in college football is the Army-Navy game. That rivalry began in 1890 and this year's game, which will be played on December 1, will be the 108th meeting for the two military service academies. Incidentally, the first official college football game was played between Princeton and Rutgers. That game took place on November 6, 1869.

What's in a Name?

Now, before you start composing an e-mail to me to point out that Division I-A and Division I-AA are not technically known by those names anymore, let me just say that I am aware of the name change. I simply haven't bought into them yet, and neither has most of the general public. The NCAA decided last year to change the names in an attempt to better explain the difference between the two Division I subdivisions.

Division I-A is now known as the Football Bowl Subdivision because its teams participate in bowl games at the end of the season like the Sun Bowl, Cotton Bowl and the Gator Bowl.

Division I-AA is now known as the Football Championship Subdivision because its teams have a playoff system to determine a national champion, as does Division II and Division III and the NAIA.

Get Involved

How many small college football teams are there near you? Have you ever been to one of their games? Chances are you might know someone whose kid goes to one of those small schools, or you might remember some of the players from their years playing high school football in your area.

Take the time to attend a small college football game some Saturday afternoon and support the kids playing in your own backyard. You just might be impressed with the level of talent you'll see on the field. They may never make it to the NFL, but you might see some of these players in the Arena Football League, the Canadian Football League or even the new All American Football League that begins play next April. There are also several other indoor football leagues around the country, like the Continental Indoor Football League, that are popular destinations for small college players who want to continue playing football after college.

The Internet is a great way to get information on all the various college football divisions, no matter where you live. Some schools even air radio broadcasts of their games live over the Internet.

One place where you can actually see games from some of the lower division in your own home is College Sports Television (CSTV) and they should be applauded for it. Check your local cable or satellite listings to see if you get CSTV.

There are hundreds of teams playing in divisions other than I-A and the Top 25. You only have to take the time to search them out. Who knows, you might just find that a whole new world of college football will open up for you. This is college football in its purest form, kids who, for the most part, are playing without the benefit of an athletic scholarship. They are in school to get an education first and also to play some football.

The best thing about attending a small college football game is the fact that you won't have to spend an arm and a leg to enjoy the experience. Admission prices are lower, parking fees are nominal, you won't have to travel very far and the popcorn and hot dogs at the stadium taste just as good.