

Why the Current CFP Format is Awesome
By: Connor Griffin
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We are currently in year five of the College Football Playoff (CFP). The vast majority of college football fans would agree that the current system is superior to that of the BCS, but this does not mean the Playoff has escaped all criticism. Many people in the media have pushed for an expansion of the Playoff (which currently consists of four teams), and some coaches, even, have expressed similar interests. Nebraska Head Coach Scott Frost came out publicly over the summer and stated an eight-team playoff may, in fact, be the way to go. Michigan Head Coach Jim Harbaugh suggested expanding the Playoff all the way to *sixteen* teams. In a recent response to these beliefs held by certain coaches, specific media personalities, and a not-so-silent portion of the college football fanbase, CFP executive director Bill Hancock assured everyone that expansion is not on the minds of university presidents and league commissioners, as they are quite happy with the current playoff format. And they should be, because it is the best possible format there is. Let's get one thing straight right off the bat, though.

Has the CFP committee done their best in these first four years? My answer to that would be no. I think the committee has goofed on numerous occasions, most notably by allowing Ohio State into the 2016 College Football Playoff over a team that had definitively won nine straight games, including a thrilling championship game in college football's best conference. I think the committee uses certain pieces of criteria when it fits their argument and they ignore that same criteria when it doesn't. I think the committee has set a number of bad precedents for the playoff system—precedents that may never be reversed. But at the end of the day, they're human. They're not a computer that uses some statistical algorithm to determine which teams are best. They are going to make mistakes, especially in this college football landscape with zero uniformity, whatsoever. Some teams have solid out-of-conference opponents, others schedule cupcakes. Some teams have to play nine conference games, others only have to play eight. Some teams don't play the best opponents in their conference due to uneven divisions. And the Big 12 just added a conference championship game last year, for Pete's sake. It is incredibly difficult to judge the best teams because they are not all being tested in the same way. Human errors are naturally going to occur, but the *impact* of these errors are minimized with the current four-team system. This brings me to my first point as to why the playoff cannot expand.

Point #1: The more teams allowed, the more room for error

With this current system, there's only going to be a maximum of two legitimate teams left out of the Playoff; this was evident in the first year of the CFP when both TCU and Baylor had more than reasonable claims for inclusion. But, of course, had the Big 12 Championship game been around in 2014 and had these teams duked it out in the final week of the season, only one of them would've been left on the fringe. And that's going to be true almost every single year—the concept that only one team on the bubble won't make it in. In 2016, it was Penn State. Nobody else. In 2017, it was Ohio State. Nobody else. Does it stink to be these excluded teams? Absolutely. But you'd see a lot more excluded teams if you expanded the Playoff. The reason why the amount of teams left out of the CFP is so little is because the standards to make it in are so high. After all, they better be, considering only four teams out of 128 can be chosen. The

minute you expand the Playoff, though, the standards are automatically lowered, leaving the door open for a number of teams who would've had no shot of making it in before. To help prove my point, here is the CFP Top 15 following Conference Championship Week of the 2017 season:

- 1. Clemson (12-1)**
- 2. Oklahoma (12-1)**
- 3. Georgia (12-1)**
- 4. Alabama (11-1)**
5. Ohio State (11-2)
6. Wisconsin (12-1)
7. Auburn (10-3)
8. USC (11-2)
9. Penn State (10-2)
10. Miami (10-2)
11. Washington (10-2)
12. UCF (12-0)
13. Stanford (9-4)
14. Notre Dame (9-3)
15. TCU (10-3)

As you can see, the four teams that made it into the playoff (in bold) only had one loss. That's a tough feat to achieve in this age of college football, as indicative, clearly, by the limited number of teams with a 1 or lower in the loss column. And, for the record, that's difficult to achieve regardless of which Power Five conference you're in. It's a relatively simple decision to make on behalf of the committee; there's just not a whole lot of options to choose from when you're picking the four best teams. However, when you expand the Playoff to eight teams, look how complicated things become. Two teams with two losses are allowed in, and even a three-loss team is thrown in there. Now that the Playoff has become a little bit less exclusive, more teams are naturally going to believe they have a case for inclusion. For example, take Penn State—the first team out. They only lost to Ohio State by a point in Columbus, and unlike the Buckeyes, they didn't lose to an unranked team by 31 points. They had a much better schedule than Wisconsin, who blew it in their only big game of the season. Auburn has more losses. And USC lost by five touchdowns to a team who got blown out by 33 just a few weeks later. Both of Penn State's losses were on the road against ranked opponents and the deficit in those games was 4 points combined. But do you see what I'm doing here? I'm making a legitimate argument as to why Penn State should've been in the Playoff over any of those teams ranked 5-8. I can't make an argument for Penn State against Clemson, though. Or Oklahoma. Or Georgia. Or Alabama. That's the case for almost all of those teams ranked 9-15. All can make somewhat reasonable claims as to why they should be in over teams 5-8 (particularly UCF, who went undefeated for crying out loud), but none of them can take a stab at any of those top four teams. They're a completely different standard, and we need to maintain that standard to ensure the committee doesn't royally screw up. If we expand the playoff, there's more options for the committee to choose from. And more options equals more error.

Point #2: Blowouts, blowouts, and more blowouts

Let's face it. In this age of college football, does anybody seriously believe that a #1 seed like Alabama or Clemson would lose to an 8th seed, let alone a 16th seed on a neutral field? Sure, maybe there would be a colossal upset once every few years, but I, personally, don't want to watch Goliath beat David to a pulp several other times before we get to the occasional little man victory. I want to watch competitive playoff football and, unfortunately, you simply can't have that with eight or more teams in the CFP (in the early rounds, at least). The fact of the matter is that there are only a handful of elite programs across the country right now and only a handful of teams that can legitimately compete at the highest level. Besides, we're still seeing blowouts when these programs face off in the four-team system we have today. #2 Oregon beat #3 Florida State 59-20 in the first year of the College Football Playoff. #1 Clemson beat #4 Oklahoma by 20, and #2 Alabama shut out #3 Michigan State 38-0 back in 2016. Clemson (a 2-seed) then went on to shut out #3 Ohio State 31-0 the following season. Point being, even among the four best teams in the country, we're still witnessing blowouts. Can you imagine what it would be like if we decided to expand the playoff? There would be blowouts out the wazoo. As a college football fan and as a fan of sports, in general, I can't seem to wrap my head around why people would willingly sign up to watch more beatdowns. We get so disappointed when a marquee game ends up being nowhere near as competitive as we anticipated, yet some people apparently want to go through that cycle even more with each year that passes. It makes no sense to me, whatsoever.

Point #3: MAJOR health concerns

Anybody who wants to expand the playoff is asking for 18-22 year-old kids to take on the beating of a full NFL season. Think about this for a second: In the '90s, just two decades ago, teams would only be guaranteed eleven regular season games. If they performed well enough, they'd get to play in one bowl game. And this was true whether you were a 6-5 team or if you were competing for a National Championship; you'd play a *maximum* of twelve games. Then it was decided that teams should tack on another game to their regular season schedule. Now we're up to a max of thirteen. Then conferences instituted championship games. Fourteen. With the Playoff, we've made it so the national champion and the runner-up play in two bowl games. Tack on another game—fifteen. If the Playoff were to expand to eight teams, the national champion and runner-up would have to play in three bowl games. That's sixteen total games. The sheer amount of football isn't the only thing daunting about this scenario; it's the level at which this football is played in the tail end of the season. The players have already been through months of immense stress on their bodies, and now you're asking them to potentially compete for another 180 minutes against the most elite teams in the country? Let's go back to the Top 15 rankings listed above and focus on Auburn. They were ranked #7 last year, and they would be included in this hypothetical eight-team playoff. Before we even get into the postseason, though, we first have to look at their twelfth game of the year: Alabama, the #1 team in the country at the time and the eventual national champion. Auburn, of course, beat Alabama and went on to play in the SEC Championship Game. They faced off against Georgia, who went on to play for a National Championship. Had the Playoff consisted of eight teams, Auburn would've then played Oklahoma, the nation's second best team, in the first round. And had they won that game, who knows what powerhouse they would've played in the following week. It's simply absurd to demand this of college athletes. Leonard Fournette was criticized for missing the Citrus Bowl against Louisville. Christian McCaffery was criticized for missing the Sun Bowl against North

Carolina. These offensive talents refused to play against scrub defenses because they knew a career-jeopardizing play could occur against any opponent. A significant portion of the players in an eight-team playoff would be putting their health on the line much more frequently, and they'd be putting it on the line against the strongest and fastest players in the country. These are not athletes from Louisville or North Carolina. These are five-star recruits. These are state MVP's. These are first round prospects. These are people who can end someone's career in an instant. There's no need to expose these athletes to any more contact against elite competition. It's unnecessary and, quite frankly, cruel.

Point #4: It would ruin the best regular season in sports

What makes college football so special is the fact that every regular season game matters. You can't say this about the NBA, where starters will often sit out a game in the middle of the season just because they're tired. You definitely can't say this about the MLB; one game makes up only 0.62% of their season. You can't even say this about the NFL, where teams that lose half of their games still have a shot at the playoffs. Teams can't take a week off in college football. Yes, some games require more effort than others, but they all carry the same significance in the sense that if you lose, your season and your chances at a championship may be toast. This was true back when the BCS system was in full effect and in the decades prior, but the College Football Playoff system has managed to add an interesting wrinkle into the mix. Before, it wasn't as if your season *may* be toast if you lost a game; your season most likely *was* toast if you lost a game. Between 1980 and 2013 (the last season of the BCS), 22 national champions were undefeated (this includes co-champions). Those champions who did, in fact, have a one in the loss column were nationally-known football brands such as USC, Miami, LSU, Alabama, Florida, Florida State, etc. In other words, if you weren't undefeated AND you weren't a traditional powerhouse, you could kiss your hopes of a championship goodbye. You needed to be perfect. As a result of this truth, teams commonly scheduled creampuffs to ensure a perfect record heading into the bowl season. This was certainly the case back when teams didn't all belong to conferences and there were no regulations as to who you could put on your schedule. What the College Football Playoff has done to counter this problem is reward programs for scheduling tough opponents. The committee has made it evidently clear that the eye test is, and will continue to be, one of the biggest factors in determining who makes the Playoff. They're not just going to look at the scores; they're going to watch and evaluate the best teams in order to create the most competitive playoff possible. But the only way they can properly evaluate the best teams is if these teams are *competing* against the best. Therefore, they're more lenient towards teams who are willing to battle against college football's upper echelon. For instance, let's assume Stanford wants to play Alabama on opening weekend. They hypothetically face off and it's an incredibly close game, but Stanford ends up falling a little short and loses. This does not, by any means, exclude Stanford from the Playoff discussion. If anything, it can actually be used to Stanford's benefit in the long run; they were willing to play one of the better teams in college football, they stood their ground, and they were a few points away from knocking off a powerhouse. At the end of the day, the committee will look beyond the scoreboard and see that they can compete at an elite level. Essentially, the CFP is incentivizing teams to amp up the quality of their schedules. They're telling the country's best that you no longer need to be perfect; you can lose games and still make it into the playoff. Now, of course, if you play twelve scrubs and happen to lose in your only big game of the year (I'm back to criticizing you,

Wisconsin), then you're probably not making it in. This is tremendously refreshing for the average college football fan. We're no longer seeing 40-point blowouts every single week. Teams are playing better opponents, because if they don't, they're going to be penalized for it. The competition has never been higher, which is why we're seeing so few teams with one loss or less; it's a rigorous and trying season. This is ideal for the committee, and it's created arguably the most intense college football atmosphere from week to week. However, once you expand the playoff, the stakes that are so synonymous with each regular season game are instantly lessened. This is somewhat related to our first point; the more teams you allow into the Playoff, the lower the standards. We've made it so you don't have to be untouchable, but you still need to take every week seriously and get the job done if you want to have a chance at inclusion. That's the way it *should* be. But by lowering the standards of the Playoff, you're implicitly telling teams that each week no longer matters as much as they did before. Teams can lose two games. Teams can even lose three and still have a shot at the playoff. So that embarrassing loss to Pitt at home is no longer that embarrassing. That 39-point loss to Michigan or that 31-point loss to Iowa--they're both acceptable now. It perpetuates a notion that you don't need to show up every Saturday--that you can comfortably afford to lose a game or two because all will be forgiven. The common reasoning as to why we should expand the Playoff is that with more teams, there's a higher chance of including the best one. But we shouldn't be admitting a 9-3 team to increase our likelihood. If a 9-3 team is really the best team throughout the entire college football season, then they shouldn't be 9-3. Let's quit trying to lower our standards, and let's quit trying to diminish the value that each game of college football currently holds.

There are a number of other reasons that explain why the Playoff cannot expand, but these are, by far, the most important ones. I urge those who favor expansion to let these points resonate--to recognize how amazing the current state of college football is and how awesome it can be with a little bit more development. Are there problems with the sport? Of course; there are problems with every sport. But I guarantee you these issues are a result of the lack of regulation within the sport, itself. In the near future, we will see each conference undergo a massive devolution of powers. We will see a more level playing field. We will see uniformity across the college football landscape. And we will see just how awesome this playoff format really is. I see it now, but I am obviously not representative of everyone in America. I just ask those on the other side to refrain from proposing something rash. Let time progress, and I promise you will find that the problem was never the Playoff. The Playoff is the most ideal in this age of chaos, and it will be perfect in the age of order. Just give it time. Until then, enjoy college football. It's the best it's ever been, and that is solely due to the four-team playoff currently in place. Nothing else.