

A Relegation System for College Football

WHY DO WE NEED A CHANGE?

College football has changed dramatically in the last decade. Players are now paid legally and transfer to the highest bidder each offseason. Twelve teams have a chance at the title each postseason, but that doesn't stop coaches and players from jumping ship before the conclusion of the season. Rivalry games disappear, and in their place, teams travel thousands of miles to play conference games. Contenders complain that they have been snubbed by the rankings committee, while Cinderellas have no realistic shot at glory.

Out of this mess, I identify college football's five problems and present a solution. First, the constant uncertainty surrounding potential conference realignment leads to rash, temporary solutions for universities and conferences alike. Second, the lack of regulations on player salaries affords wealthy universities an undesirable advantage, all while creating an environment where players and teams are easily deceived and exploited. Third, coaches and players are incentivized to abandon their team, transferring to more desirable locations, before the conclusion of the season. Fourth, all rivalry games, once the apex of team's season, are now firmly at risk of abandonment at the prospect of more money. Fifth, and perhaps most important, most of the games do not matter. Once teams are eliminated from the playoffs, they have little to play for, especially since most of the players and coaches will not return for the next season.

It is clearer than ever that college football needs a transformed vision and a central authority to execute. I cannot give college football a central authority, so this is my proposition for a transformed vision. This proposal provides a stable system while still permitting freedom of movement to ambitious programs. The proposal regulates player salaries and adjusts the calendar to give players and coaches the time to transfer after the conclusion of the season. It restores rivalry games and motivates teams to play until the conclusion of the season.

CONFERENCE STRUCTURE:

Divide college football into three regions (West, Central, East). Each region contains six conferences of eight teams each (for a total of 144 teams). Each conference plays a round-robin each year without a conference championship game.

Each region is a self-contained relegation system, allowing teams to flexibly and organically rise and fall as their programs deserve. The postseason will determine promotions and demotions on the field. The 1st place through 4th place teams in a tier will challenge the corresponding 5th place through 8th place teams in the conference one tier above for their spot in the higher conference. This gives value to postseason games and provides a tangible measuring stick for aspiring coaches and programs.

The conferences will be initially determined by aggregating the SP+ rankings of the past five years. The top 24 teams will be included in the first tier and divided into regions as their geography

dictates, and so on. Among other things, this will dramatically increase the parity within each conference, improving the quality of conference games.

In the offseason, teams may file a motion to transfer regions, switching places with another team. In this motion, they must prove that the total distance between the two teams and their regions will be decreased. This, among other intangible factors, will be considered before confirming the switch.

The 18 conferences are free to sign TV deals and promote their conference on the condition that all earnings for a particular tier are pooled and distributed to the 24 members. This ensures parity between regions.

POSTSEASON:

We will have 12 team playoffs to determine the college football champion. The top three teams from each tier one conference are automatically admitted, with the remaining three spots left to wild cards. Wild cards and seeding of the 12-team playoff may be determined by computer ratings, human rankings, or some combination. The first two rounds will be played on the college campus of the higher seeded team, with the semifinals and finals played at traditional neutral sites. The location of the semifinals and finals will rotate among the six “New Year’s Six Bowls” (Rose, Sugar, Orange, Cotton, Peach, and Fiesta), so that each site will host a semifinal or final every two years.

These three wild cards could, occasionally, disrupt the natural relegation process in two ways. First, a lower tier team could receive a wild card, preventing it from playing its relegation game. In this case, any team receiving a wild card is automatically promoted to tier one at the expense of that tier one’s worst performing team. Second, a tier one team finishing in the bottom half of the standings could receive a wild card, disrupting a tier two team’s chance of promoting. In this case, as many relegation games will be played as possible, successively pairing the worst tier one team against the best tier two team within each region.

The remaining postseason games will be a mix of relegation and consolation games. The relegation games will be played at the college campus of the higher tier team. These games will have high stakes; a victory results in promotion and loss results in demotion. Due to wild cards, there may be a few teams without a postseason playing partner. These teams will be paired in consolation games. These games may be played on a college campus or neutral site, typically pairing prestigious tier one or tier two teams. If desired, all these postseason games may fall under the umbrella of “Bowl Games.” While not played at neutral sites, bowls may purchase rights to sponsor a specific region’s relegation games and award the game with the typical bowl festivities. For example, the Holiday and Alamo bowls could purchase rights to sponsor the tier one relegation games of their choice.

TEAM SCHEDULE:

Each team will play three rivalry games, two inter-region games, and seven conference games. First, the two inter-region games are particularly important for the playoff wild-card and general valuation

of the conferences. The previous season's standings will determine these matchups. For example, the Central tier one champion will play the East tier one champion and the West tier one champion, and so on.

The three rivalry games preserve important historical matchups despite the ever-changing college football landscape. Each team is required to submit, at minimum, their top ten rivalry game preferences, ranked. To prevent impulsive scheduling, this preference list may only be updated every five years. Each year, conference and inter-region opponents are temporarily eliminated from this list. Proceeding from tier one to tier six, the top rivalry game is iteratively selected for each team until each team has three games. Rarely, this may result in undesired matchups, but I anticipate teams will coordinate these rankings preemptively.

The seven conference games, filling the bulk of the regular season, ensure a round-robin and fair standings for promotion or relegation. Head-to-head results provide straightforward tiebreakers for computing the ever-important final standings.

Scheduling the three rivalry games may provide some complications. The competing team need to find a common open week for their game. However, college football regularly inserts two or three bye weeks into their regular season. These bye weeks can be inserted to reconcile the schedules. I anticipate weeks 3 through 7 being reserved for bye weeks and rivalry games.

POSTSEASON AND OFFSEASON SCHEDULE:

The last week of the regular season is typically held on the last Saturday of November. The first round of playoffs are held on the first Saturday of December. This affords a marked advantage for bye teams, as they receive one week off. The quarterfinals will take place on the second Saturday of December, and the semifinals will be held on the third Saturday of December. Finally, the championship game will be played on New Years Day, restoring its previous placement during the BCS era. The relegation and consolation games will be held throughout December and early January, mimicking the bowl season.

For the duration of the regular and postseason, teams are forbidden from contacting opposing players or coaches and are restricted from signing contracts with recruits and opposing players and coaches. All players and coaches are held under contract through the championship game unless directly dismissed by the team. On the day after the championship game, players are allowed to enter their name into the transfer portal, and all coaches and teams are permitted to discuss their employment status.

A week after the championship game, on January 8th, teams are authorized to sign coaches to contracts. Two weeks later, teams may sign transfers and high school recruits. All contracts are binding from the moment they are signed. This period of free agency lasts until the end of February. Finally, spring practice begins on the third Monday of March.

RECRUITING:

Each team will have a salary cap (say \$20 million). Players may sign contracts of any length with teams when they are recruited but will receive financial penalties for transferring before finishing their contract. These contracts may have guarantees and incentives, as well as clauses that enable schools to void contracts with players who fail to fulfill certain obligations. These obligations include but are not limited to academic performance, showing up to mandatory team meetings and practices, and maintaining physical shape.

To incentivize loyalty, the following rules apply:

- 1) A player who does not complete the length of their contract will lose any guarantees in future years.
- 2) Barring injury, players are required to play to the termination of each season.
- 3) Players brought in via the transfer portal will count as 1.5x against the salary cap.
- 4) Teams must honor the duration of the contract, and players will count towards the active roster until their contract expires.

INITIAL CONFERENCES:

Below are the 18 initial conferences. The teams are first separated into tiers by an aggregation of SP+ rankings over the past five years, weighted more heavily towards recent years. They are then separated into regions by geographical constraints. The top eight performing FCS teams are promoted to achieve even tiers.

Position	West	Central	East
	Tier One	Tier One	Tier One
1	Oregon	Ohio St	Georgia
2	Texas	Penn St	Alabama
3	Texas A&M	Notre Dame	Ole Miss
4	Oklahoma	Michigan	Tennessee
5	Utah	Missouri	Clemson
6	USC	Iowa	LSU
7	Kansas St	Louisville	Miami
8	Texas Tech	Indiana	Auburn
	Tier Two	Tier Two	Tier Two
1	SMU	Iowa St	James Madison
2	Washington	Illinois	South Carolina
3	TCU	Arkansas	Florida
4	BYU	Memphis	Florida St
5	Boise St	Kentucky	Tulane
6	Arizona	Minnesota	Duke
7	Kansas	Pittsburgh	North Carolina St
8	Washington St	Nebraska	Mississippi St

	Tier Three	Tier Three	Tier Three
1	Baylor	Cincinnati	Maryland
2	UTSA	Wisconsin	UCF
3	UNLV	Vanderbilt	Georgia Tech
4	Arizona St	Toledo	North Carolina
5	North Texas	Rutgers	Army
6	UCLA	West Virginia	South Florida
7	Fresno St	Western Kentucky	East Carolina
8	Houston	Virginia Tech	Wake Forest
	Tier Four	Tier Four	Tier Four
1	California	Liberty	Louisiana
2	Texas St	Virginia	Troy
3	Oregon St	Marshall	South Alabama
4	Oklahoma St	Ohio	Navy
5	Air Force	Miami (OH)	Uconn
6	Colorado	Michigan St	Syracuse
7	San Diego St	Northwestern	Old Dominion
8	Utah St	Purdue	Appalachian St
	Tier Five	Tier Five	Tier Five
1	San Jose St	Western Michigan	Coastal Carolina
2	Hawaii	Buffalo	Boston College
3	Wyoming	Bowling Green	Jacksonville St
4	New Mexico	Arkansas St	Georgia Southern
5	Stanford	Northern Illinois	Louisiana Tech
6	Colorado St	Central Michigan	Florida Atlantic
7	Tulsa	Eastern Michigan	UAB
8	New Mexico St	Temple	Southern Miss
	Tier Six	Tier Six	Tier Six
1	Nevada	Rice	Georgia St
2	UTEP	Middle Tennessee	Florida International
3	Montana St	Sam Houston	Kennesaw St
4	North Dakota St	Akron	Charlotte
5	South Dakota St	Ball St	Louisiana Monroe
6	South Dakota	Missouri St	Delaware
7	Montana	Kent St	Massachusetts
8	UC Davis	Villanova	Mercer

For the most part, this initialization evenly separates teams into geographical and performance groups. After a few years of relegations and motions filed to switch regions, the regions should solidify. Certainly, this interrupts several longstanding matchups and conference affiliations. However, many of these historical matchups have already been disrupted or diluted by conference realignment and bloating. This structure reestablishes several historical rivalries in conferences organically (Washington-Washington St, TCU-SMU, Florida-Florida St, West Virginia-Virginia Tech, etc.), while facilitating the commitment to and revival of many others.

EXAMPLE SCHEDULE (Baylor University):

Before the schedule is released, Baylor will be required to submit their 10 rivalry game preferences for the next five years. They are incentivized to select local games that will draw fan interest in each of the next five seasons. Here is a potential example of their rivalry preferences:

Baylor University Rivalry Preferences:

1. TCU
2. Texas Tech
3. Texas
4. Texas A&M
5. SMU
6. ~~Houston~~
7. Rice
8. Texas St
9. ~~North Texas~~
10. Oklahoma St

With the initialized conferences, Baylor University's season will begin with two inter-conference matchups against Cincinnati (Central) and Maryland (East). They will then play three rivalry matchups. Houston and North Texas are already scheduled, and are, therefore, removed from their rivalry preferences. Tier One picks first, and it is conceivable that Texas, Texas A&M, and Texas Tech could select Baylor for one of their three games. If spots remain, two of the teams in Tier Two, TCU and SMU, may schedule Baylor. If for some reason any spots remain, Baylor will proceed down their rivalry preference list, potentially scheduling Rice, Texas St, and Oklahoma St. They will finish the season with seven conference games against the West Tier 3: UTSA, UNLV, Arizona St, North Texas, UCLA, Fresno St, and Houston. Thus, a potential schedule for Baylor would be:

Week 1: vs Cincinnati

Week 2: @ Maryland

Week 3: @ UT

BYE

Week 5: vs Texas Tech

Week 6: @ TCU

BYE

Week 8: vs UTSA

Week 9: @ UNLV

Week 10: vs Arizona St

Week 11: @ North Texas

Week 12: vs UCLA

Week 13: @ Fresno St

Week 14: vs Houston

Suppose Baylor finishes 2nd in their conference. They will then play a high-stakes promotion game at the 7th place team in West Tier Two, say Kansas. These postseason games will shake up the conferences, and the scheduling procedure resets.