

Orange Bowl, tourism officials wary of college football playoff

South Florida officials worry a playoff would reduce annual tourism, cash influx

By Sarah Talalay, Sun Sentinel
6:17 p.m. EST, January 4, 2010

Some Georgia Tech and Iowa fans have been reveling in South Florida for days in advance of Tuesday's FedEx Orange Bowl game, but local tourism officials worry that tradition will be lost if efforts to create a college football playoff are successful.

The Orange Bowl, after all, was created in 1935 to promote tourism, showcase the region's balmy winter weather and provide a backdrop for a post-college football season party.

As the drumbeat for a college playoff system, however, grows ever louder and captures the attention of Congress and the White House, Orange Bowl officials fear their stature as annual host of one of four Bowl Championship Series games — and the national championship game every four years — could be in jeopardy.

The Orange Bowl and national championship game last year pumped an estimated \$135 million into South Florida businesses, according to a study by the Sport Management Research Institute of West Palm Beach.

A playoff system — although far from a certainty — could involve on-campus games, costly last-minute cross-country travel and, if fans were lucky, more than one trip to watch their team get a shot at a championship, playoff opponents say. That could mean fewer visitors and shorter trips to South Florida in January.

"A playoff is not going to solve all the controversy," Orange Bowl Committee CEO Eric Poms said, referring to arguments about the fairness of the BCS in determining championship game contenders. "We truly believe the benefit South Florida receives every year, we feel the bowl system is the best answer."

As it is now, teams typically have a month to six weeks to sell the 17,500 tickets they get for playing in the Orange Bowl. With a playoff, there might be only a few days, Poms said.

A playoff system isn't likely anytime soon. The BCS has been renewed through 2014; the Orange Bowl dual-hosts again in 2013.

But with President Barack Obama expressing support for a playoff and Congress having hearings on whether the BCS violates antitrust laws, criticism of the 12-year-old system has been fervid — so much that the BCS hired former President George W. Bush press secretary Ari Fleischer to improve its image.

College playoff proponents say they think tourism officials' concerns are overstated. The BCS bowls could be included in a playoff scenario with each game having more importance than it does now. While a playoff has been debated for years, precisely how it might work and how many games it would include have not been determined.

"Even if it were only one game in an eight-team playoff, the importance of the game is increased so much, I think more fans are going to travel there, more sponsors are going to be interested, more people are going to watch on TV," said Bryson Morgan, treasurer and board member of Playoff PAC, a political action committee formed in October. "I just think it's a win-win."

Local officials worry about fans' ability to follow their teams through a championship run.

"From a fan standpoint, if you win this week, your team is playing somewhere next week, but you're not sure where," said Fort Lauderdale Mayor Jack Seiler, an Orange Bowl Committee member whose grandfather, Earnie Seiler, helped found the Orange Bowl.

Others say a playoff would make the games every year more attractive.

"Three out of four years, the Orange Bowl gets a crappy bowl game," said Samuel Chi, who runs the website BCSGuru.com.

Chi's idea is to add two on-campus semifinal games pitting the top four teams after the regular season. The winners advance to a championship game. He says an eight- or 16-team playoff is unrealistic.

"It's impossible ... for college football teams; you're moving small cities," Chi said. "In my scenario, nothing changes. Instead of five weeks, maybe you have four weeks [to sell tickets]; you still know who's coming in."

But with significant opposition from conferences and university presidents, among others, it could be some time — if ever — before a playoff system is implemented.

"All of this media focus on bowl games helps in term of ratings and newspaper and magazine attention; the colleges survive very nicely under the current system," said former CBS Sports President Neal Pilson, a sports television consultant who represented the Rose Bowl in its most recent TV contract negotiations.

Pilson said a playoff system would increase TV ratings, if not attendance.

"The Orange Bowl is one of the most important bowl games in college football," Pilson said. "It would most probably continue within the framework of a playoff system, and the winner of an Orange Bowl game would probably advance."

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