Go Team, Rah, Rah, Rah! A Critical Examination of the Excitement of College Football Teams and Conferences

Richard E. Newman
Presbyterian College

Michael T. Miller
University of Arkansas

Completed August 18, 2011
Fayetteville, Arkansas
USA

Abstract

Intercollegiate athletics play a major and highly visible role in both higher education and the broader world of sports entertainment. A significant component of the entertainment derived from college athletic contests is related to the atmosphere promoted, both formally and informally, amid and around athletic events. The current study was designed to look specifically at the environment surrounding intercollegiate football games, and it attempted to gauge the 'excitement factors' of selected institutions participating at the National Collegiate Athletic Association's Division I level of football competition. Using criteria established on the perceived 'excitement factors' associated with college football games, the following schools were found to have the most desirable college football contest environments: Auburn, LSU, Iowa, Mississippi, Michigan, Oklahoma, Alabama, Texas, Arkansas, and Nebraska. The least exciting contest environments were found at institutions that included Vanderbilt, Washington State, Connecticut, Kansas, Minnesota, and Wake Forest.

Intercollegiate athletics are important to higher education institutions for a variety of reasons. Exposure, revenue production, both direct and indirect, student recruitment, alumni engagement, and reputation management represent some of the key rationale. Despite the justification any individual institution may offer for providing intercollegiate athletics, institutional leaders consistently find it desirable to have their contests and matches aired on the radio, on television, or even streamed online. Indeed, the results of athletic events appear in newspapers, on local television, and on internet sites, thus providing free advertising for the institution. Part of this exposure through media outlets relates to the simple publicity of having an institution showcased on regional or national media, but as has become an increasing norm, media exposure has been correlated with financial success. Hence, it becomes important for institutional leaders, beyond athletic department leaders, to showcase their school's contests through the media.

In order for institutions' teams to be featured on regional or national television, they must deliver a quality product to their media outlets. An ancillary in this delivery process would be appropriate fan support and marketing. This support would be characterized by individuals who desire to see or hear the contest, those who are willing to either pay or watch the contest (and subsequently consume advertising), highlighting marque players or teams that will draw the attention of spectators, and by creating an environment that is conducive to promoting the excitement of the sporting contest itself. This means, for both reputation management and financial success, higher education leaders have a vested interest in providing their consuming publics with exciting athletic contests.

This study explored the aspect of 'excitement' in relation to intercollegiate football teams. College football is currently the most expensive collegiate sport offering, and football

games attract a following and culture that can define an institution (Toma, 2006). Specifically, the purpose for conducting the study was to identify and then apply criteria used for judging whether a football game was exciting, that is, whether the game warranted spectators investing their resources to watch and be a part of the contest. There are obvious limitations to such research that can not be controlled for in this exploratory study, including the attraction of individual players or former coaches and the concept of historical rivalries. The exploratory methodology utilized here, however, does provide a strong initial description of how institutional leaders might conceptualize promoting exciting games, thus increasing revenue and publicity opportunities.

Sports and Higher Education

Volumes have been written about sports, especially football in higher education. These writings range from the self-congratulatory (Travis, 2007) to the analytic (Feldman, 2007), and the scientific (Glassman, Dodd, Sheu, Rienzo, & Wagenaar, 2010). They also cover almost every imaginable aspect of coaching, game strategy, fan behavior, and fiscal management. Much of the literature base is filled with naïve, commercial acclaims that congratulate a set of behaviors in football and crude culture, notably Travis' (2007) commercially-viable and self-promoting Dixie Delight (a virtual celebration of alcohol abuse), but other work has begun to address the inequities and problems in college sport. Gerdy (2006), for example, highlighted the mis-match of higher education's goals in teaching, research, and service, and the exploitation of non-paid student-athletes in generating large amounts of revenue for institutions. Additionally, authors such as Shulman (2007) and Eitzen (2006) have highlighted how college sports have become an accurate and unflattering reflection of much of society's behavior and expectation in regionalism and community cohesiveness. Shulman noted on his first page "how a society plays

its games is a reflection of its values, virtues, and problems. From any reasonable standpoint, sportsmanship, if not dead, is seriously ill" (p. 1).

Despite fundamental problems with how higher education institutions use and rely on athletic programs, there is a sociological value in offering athletic programs for community consumption. Gerdy (2002) explained the rewards of watching sports as:

> There is, however, value in watching sports, the most obvious of which is that it is fun, an escape from the ordinary. Watching sports can also be spiritually exhilarating, drawing us together and making us feel that we are a part of a larger force --- a team (p. 116).

Additionally, Putnam (1999) reflected on the need for individuals to step outside of themselves and find joy in the world around them. As some turn to music or art, others turn to sports. He wrote:

> In a world overflowing with self-doubt and broken dreams, the ongoing parade of athletic triumph is a source of optimism. But sports offers more than aggression, violence and the change for those who lead ordinary lives to experience joy at the achievements of others. In the course of a single contest, a full season, and a lifetime, sports fans can encounter comedy, tragedy, glamour, and high drama. They can also develop a kinship with people who share their devotion, a deep and durable bond that many of them can not achieve readily in any other aspect of their lives. (p. 166)

The offering of collegiate sports, however, comes at a cost to both individuals and to higher education institutions. The cost to individuals who participate in sports have been well documented, and include misplaced priorities devaluing education, missed opportunities for self and identity development, missed opportunities for a well-rounded education, physical damage to a person's body, repressed identity exploration, and even the costs associated with making and forgoing choices in terms of career exploration, major choice, and student-life immersion (there is a well developed listing of student-related costs in Kissinger & Miller, 2009 and Benford, 2007).

Institutional costs associated with supporting major college athletic programs have come under increasing scrutiny and controversy in recent years. Much of the debate is centered on how much of an athletic budget is derived from self-generating revenue sources (ticket sales, sponsorships, broadcasting rights, etc.), and how much comes from student or state funding. Debates at institutions such as Tulane, Wake Forest, and San Jose State have led each institution to strongly consider eliminating their men's football programs. Many smaller non-NCAA Division I institutions have followed suit in the conversation about attempting to fund football and high-cost programs, and many have succumbed and shut down programs (the recent, highly publicized elimination of St. Paul's total athletic program is one example of this trend, see Kolenich, 2011).

The challenge for colleges and universities is to try and find a balance between providing the large-scale entertainment of sports with the academic integrity that is the cornerstone of higher education's existence. Despite such debate, colleges have excelled in providing entertainment through sports, and numerous programs and their affiliated conferences have become profitable and self-sustaining. The current study was designed to explore and describe some of the programs that are successful in offering athletic entertainment to the general public. By focusing on the largest and most prominent collegiate athletic conferences, the study provided a road map for identifying the criteria and outcomes of college football gaming excitement, suggesting that a level of excitement can be quantified and even utilized in determining consumer demand for the product of collegiate sport.

Methods

As an exploratory study, the question of determining the excitement-level of a college football team was operationally defined. The definition, a resulting culmination of the variables

described here, requires two good teams competing in a close game where there is an element of rivalry. The excitement-level of a team would be high, therefore, if it is a close game that inspires at the very least not leaving the game early and at the most, cheering until hoarse with tears of joy or agony based on the outcome determined only in the final minutes of the game.

The variables selected for inclusion to determine an excitement level include the following:

Game attendance: The reported attendance for each game was provided 2 points for a crowd of over 50,000, and no points for attendance under 50,000. All reports were extracted from official game summaries, and the rationale was that the more people in a stadium cheering, chanting, and wearing school colors makes a difference in how exciting a game is perceived to be. The variable is certainly limited in that a crowd of 48,000 viewers may not be appreciably different from one with 50,000 fans, and this limitation was accepted.

Rival location: The distance of the competing team's campus from the host institution. If the two institutions were 250 miles or less from each other (just over a three hour drive), 2 points were awarded. If the institutions were over 250 miles apart, no points were awarded.

Competitiveness: This related to how close the game was by point differential. If it was a "close game," being that at the end of the game the contest's outcome was undecided or could be swayed by a late play or two (a field goal and touchdown), thus exciting fans, 3 points were awarded (a 10 point final score or less). If the contest was decided by more than 10 points, no points in the analysis format were awarded.

Won-Loss Record: This refers to whether or not the teams playing were winning or losing in their overall season, and driven by the notion that fans want to see winning teams more than losing teams. If the host team had a winning record, then 1 point was awarded, and if the competition had a winning record, another 1 point was awarded. Thus, two teams with winning records resulted in 2 points be awarded to the game. Records that were neither winning or losing (eg, balanced records of wins and loses) resulted in no points being awarded.

Conference Games: Two teams that consistently play each other as part of a conference schedule were awarded one point each, using the rationale that regularity breeds familiarity, and that the familiarity has a sense of history which adds to a contest’s excitement. Teams that have played over time develop and hold a sense of excitement and memory among their fans.

National Rating: Teams that were being recognized nationally by being ranked in one of the standard national polls were awarded one point, thus two "top 25" teams would be awarded 2 points, if one of the two teams was ranked, the game would receive one point, and if neither team was ranked, no points were awarded. The ranking was for the team at the time of the game, and did not include subsequent or past rankings, and teams from different NCAA divisions that might have been ranked were not included in the rankings.

The highest possible score for a game was 12, a "perfect" game in which two ranked teams in the same conference, who were in close proximity to each other, played before a large crowd in a close contest. The range of scores for games could span a "0" game, one in which there was little excitement before a small crowd in a non-competitive contest, to the possible perfect 12 point game (see Table 1).

The study was limited to the 2010 college football season, and all data were extracted from verified or NCAA official game summaries.

Findings

Data were collected throughout the spring and summer of 2010 using official game summaries of competing institutions. These data reports were available through either each institution's media center, its media guide, or when necessary, independent third party media outlets (such as CBS Sports, the institution's local newspaper, etc.). Ratings for teams ranged from a low of 2.58 (Vanderbilt) to a high of 7.91 (Auburn), and conference ratings ranged from a low of 4.28 (Big East) to a high of 6.02 (Southeastern). The top quartile of exciting teams, as shown in Table 3, included five schools from the Southeastern conference, four from the Big 10 and Big 12 conferences, and one from the Atlantic Coast conference.

As shown in Table 2, the Atlantic Coast conference had excitement mean ratings that ranged from 3.66 to 6.75 (a range of 3.09), which was the smallest of the ranges for any conference. The Southeastern conference had the widest range of exciting to non-exciting

football games, with a range of 5.33 (7.91 for a high to a 2.58 for a low). An analysis of variance (shown in Table 4) indicated a significant difference between the conferences, specifically between the Southeastern conference and the Atlantic Coast, Big East, and Pac 10 conferences.

As shown in Table 3, 14 college football teams had excitement levels that fell within the first quartile of all teams. Those teams and their mean scores included Auburn (7.91), LSU (7.66), Iowa (7.58), Mississippi (7.16), Michigan (7.08), Oklahoma (7.08), Alabama (7.00), Texas (6.83) Arkansas (6.80), Nebraska (6.80), North Carolina (6.75), Michigan State (6.68), Ohio State (6.68), and Missouri (6.66). The bottom quartile of exciting football contest teams and their respective mean scores included Boston College (3.66), Pittsburgh (3.66), Syracuse (3.66), Wake Forest (3.50), Minnesota (3.31), Kansas (3.08), Connecticut (2.83), Washington State (2.66), and Vanderbilt (2.58).

Discussion

The costs associated with spectators attending college football games continues to escalate. The increases in costs are associated not only with the real costs of offering sport programming, but they are also based on the ability of the consumer market to willingly pay a higher price to participate in the event as a fan or consumer. Based on the data reviewed for the current study, the driving perception of those handling sports scheduling is that winning teams are a necessity. In light of this view and in order to gain wins, teams will frequently play poorly matched opponents from anywhere in the country to win by large margins. Such victories suggest that winning is more important than level of competition, yet such victories are rarely exciting for fans and rarely yield the suspense, anticipation, and pageantry of competing against equally manned opponents or rivals.

Winning does, however, have an impact on the excitement factor of a team and its season. Auburn University's highest mean score of 7.91 was a reflection of not only winning, but winning close games and having rivals from near-by locales. Similarly, some teams with low excitement ratings, such as Washington State University and Syracuse University, are victims of geographic remoteness. Both school's teams frequently traveled far distances to compete, challenging their fans to travel, support, and root them on to victory because of the distance and associated costs of travel. Geographical location can also be a factor in teams not gaining a great deal of local support. Vanderbilt, Boston College, Pittsburgh, and Minnesota, for example, are all urban institutions with competing professional sport franchises. Perhaps this circumstance ends up dividing local sport fans in terms where they will choose to invest their resources. In the upper quartile of exciting teams, only two of the 14 had direct competition by professional sports (Michigan as a suburb of Detroit and Austin's proximity to Dallas).

The evolving early season “blow-out” game(s) in college football would in all probability yield a lower ‘excitement factor’ score for a variety of reasons, chief being the competitiveness and affiliation variables. These games usually represent easy, wide margin victories for the home team and lucrative “pay days” for visiting teams. When mid-levels and/or NCAA Division Football Champion Subdivision (formerly I-AA) opt to step up and “play for pay,” financial gain is the driving force. However, the unexpected can and does happen, such as Appalachian State University’s late game victory over the University of Michigan, Jacksonville State’s defeat of Mississippi, and Southern Illinois beating Indiana University. These monumental accomplishments are probably still paying dividends for the victorious schools.

You can also see the negative effects of mid to late season “blow-out” games. Large score margins can prompt the losing team’s fan base to seek an early exit from the contest

because it is not enjoyable to get humiliated by an opponent. The University of Nebraska experienced these massive and rare third quarter exits by loyal fans during the final years of coach Bill Callahan, and the same was true at Alabama under Mike DuBose.

The primary lesson to be learned by athletic administrators and higher education officials is that they are indeed in the entertainment business. In essence, they are offering a product little different than a musical concert, and if they plan on having long term success with fan support and financial stability, they must start paying attention to the quality and "character" of their product. This means that competition needs to be quality competition and that players and coaches need to possess the integrity to represent their academic communities in a forthright manner. Any deterioration of the character of coaches and players will only lead to the eventual marginalization of their entertainment product and negative consequences will soon ensue. Such repercussions will more than likely be seen at the University of North Carolina and Ohio State University in the very near future.

References

Benford, R. D. (2007). The college sports reform movement: Reframing the "edutainment" industry. *The Sociological Quarterly, 48*, 1-28.

Donahue, T., & Wann, D. L. (2009). Perceptions of the appropriateness of sport fan physical and verbal aggression: Potential influences of team identification and fan dysfunction. *North American Journal of Psychology, 11*(3), 419-428.

Feldman, B. (2007). Meat market: Inside the smash-mouth world of college football recruiting. New York, NY: ESPN Books.

Gerdy, J. R. (2002). Sports: The all-American addiction. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.

Gerdy, J. R. (2006). Air ball: American education's failed experiment with elite athletics. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi.

Glassman, T. J., Dodd, V. J., Sheu, J. J.,Rienzo, B. A., & Wagenaar, A. C. (2010). Extreme ritualistic alcohol consumption among college students on gameday. *Journal of American College Health, 58*(5), 413-423.

Kissinger, D. B., & Miller, M. T. (Eds.). (2009). *College student athletes, challenges, opportunities, and policy implications.* Charlotte, NC: Information Age Publishing.

Kolenich, E. (200, May 10). Saint Paul's to end athletics program. *Richmond Times-Dispatch* retrieved online May 11, 2011 at timesdispatch.com/member-center/

Putman, D. T. (1999). *Controversies of the sports world*. Westport, CN: Greenwood.

Shulman, B. (2007). The death of sportsmanship and how to revive it. Birmingham, AL: Learning Through Sports.

Toma, J. D. (2006). Football u: Spectator sports in the life of the American university. Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press.

Travis, C. (2007). Dixieland delight: A football season on the road in the southeastern conference. New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers.

Table 1.

Scoring Rubric for Determining Excitement

Variable	Points Possible
Teams ranked	1 for each team, total of 2 points possible
Team winning record	1 point
Opposing team winning record	1 point
Conference game	1 point
Rival location	2 points if 250 miles or less
Attendance over 50,000	2 points
Margin of victory/loss 10 or less	3 points
Total possible points	12

Table 2.

Mean Ratings of Football Game Excitement by Athletic Conference Affiliation

Conference Team	Mean Excitement Rating
Atlantic Coast Conference	
Boston College	3.66
Clemson	6.16
Duke	4.33
Florida State	6.00
Georgia Tech	4.91
Maryland	4.83
Miami (FL)	4.75
North Carolina	6.75
North Carolina State	6.00
Virginia	4.16
Virginia Tech	5.91
Wake Forest	3.50
Conference mean	5.08
Big 12 Conference	
Baylor	4.91
Colorado	4.16
Iowa State	4.00
Kansas	3.08
Kansas State	6.00
Missouri	6.66
Nebraska	6.80
Oklahoma	7.08
Oklahoma State	5.83
Texas	6.83
Texas A & M	6.08
Texas Tech	4.83
Conference mean	5.52

(table continues)

Table 2, continued

Conference Team	Mean Excitement Rating
Big East Conference	
Cincinnati	4.58
Connecticut	2.83
Louisville	4.41
Pittsburgh	3.66
Rutgers	4.08
South Florida	4.66
Syracuse	3.66
West Virginia	6.41
Conference mean	4.28
Big Ten Conference	
Illinois	5.75
Indiana	5.16
Iowa	7.58
Michigan	7.08
Michigan State	6.68
Minnesota	3.31
Northwestern	5.75
Ohio State	6.68
Penn State	5.31
Purdue	5.56
Wisconsin	6.08
Conference mean	5.30
Pacific 10 Conference	
Arizona	6.25
Arizona State	5.40
California	4.74
Oregon	5.66
Oregon State	4.16
Stanford	4.91

(table continues)

Table 2, continued

Conference Team	Mean Excitement Rating
UCLA	4.41
USC	5.66
Washington	4.83
Washington State	2.66
Conference mean	4.86
Southeastern Conference	
Alabama	7.00
Arkansas	6.80
Auburn	7.91
Florida	6.08
Georgia	5.25
Kentucky	6.08
LSU	7.66
Mississippi	7.16
South Carolina	6.25
Tennessee	4.50
Vanderbilt	2.58
Conference mean	6.02
All conference average: 5.364 (standard deviation 1.318)	

Table 3.

Inter-quartile Range Presentation of Teams

Team	Rating	Range
		First quartile 7.91-6.58
Auburn	7.91	
LSU	7.66	
Iowa	7.58	
Mississippi	7.16	
Michigan	7.08	
Oklahoma	7.08	
Alabama	7.00	
Texas	6.83	
Arkansas	6.80	
Nebraska	6.80	
North Carolina	6.75	
Michigan State	6.68	
Ohio State	6.68	
Missouri	6.66	
		Second quartile 6.57-5.25
West Virginia	6.41	
Arizona	6.25	
South Carolina	6.25	
Clemson	6.16	
Florida	6.08	
Kentucky	6.08	
Texas A & M	6.08	
Wisconsin	6.08	
Florida State	6.00	
Kansas State	6.00	
North Carolina State	6.00	
Virginia Tech	5.91	
Oklahoma State	5.83	
Illinois	5.75	
Northwestern	5.75	
Oregon	5.66	
USC	5.66	
Purdue	5.56	

(table continues)

Table 3, continued

Team	Rating	Range
Arizona State	5.40	
Penn State	5.31	
Georgia	5.25	
		Third quartile 5.24-3.92
Indiana	5.16	
Baylor	4.91	
Georgia Tech	4.91	
Stanford	4.91	
Maryland	4.83	
Texas Tech	4.83	
Washington	4.83	
Miami (FL)	4.75	
California	4.74	
South Florida	4.66	
Cincinnati	4.58	
Tennessee	4.50	
Louisville	4.41	
UCLA	4.41	
Duke	4.33	
Colorado	4.16	
Oregon State	4.16	
Virginia	4.16	
Rutgers	4.08	
Iowa State	4.00	
		Fourth quartile, 3.92-2.59
Boston College	3.66	
Pittsburgh	3.66	
Syracuse	3.66	
Wake Forest	3.50	
Minnesota	3.31	
Kansas	3.08	
Connecticut	2.83	
Washington State	2.66	
Vanderbilt	2.58	

Table 4.

ANOVA Results for Conference Comparison

	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Sq	F	Sig
Between Groups	23.478	5	4.696	3.166	.014
Within Groups	86.010	58	1.483		
Total	109.489	63			

$p<.05$, 2.37