

## GUEST ESSAY

# The Big Ten Is Growing, But All I See Is Decline

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By Matthew Walther

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Philip Larkin once wrote that all historians of jazz are either H.G. Wells or Edward Gibbon — “onwards and upwards, or decline and fall.” It’s the relentless progress of Wells’s “Outline of History” or the inexorable doom of Gibbon’s Roman Empire.

The same is true, one suspects, of college football fans. There are millions who no doubt welcome the recent news that the University of Southern California and the University of California, Los Angeles, will be joining the Big Ten collegiate athletic conference in 2024, in defiance of more than a century of proud regional tradition and in spite of the logistical issues that will confront two West Coast teams entering a league geographically concentrated in the upper Midwest. (Among other adjustments, U.S.C. supporters will have to substitute coffee for Coors Light if they want to see their team lose to Wisconsin at 9 a.m. Pacific time.)

For these fans, college football has been on an upward trajectory for the past two decades. Games are faster paced and higher scoring. Student-athletes — free to profit from their names, images and likenesses and to transfer to other football programs without having to sit out for a year — are treated better.

The computer algorithm that from 1998 through 2013 determined the participants in the annual national championship game, the Bowl Championship Series, was, from this sanguine perspective, an improvement over the disorderly system of sportswriter polls that chose the country’s best teams before. Likewise, the College Football Playoff series, which started in 2014, is, when seen through these rose-colored glasses, better than the B.C.S., and it will be better still when it features eight or 10 or 16 teams instead of the current four, as it almost certainly will once ESPN’s contract for broadcasting the games expires after the 2025 season.

So much for the Wellses. The rest of us see a sport that is not only in decline but also increasingly unrecognizable. The established identities of the Big Ten and other conferences — once organic groupings based on geography — are disappearing like regional accents, and well-meaning but ultimately misguided rule changes are turning college football into a de facto minor league for the National Football League, complete with N.F.L.-style free agency.

Like so many of history’s great tragedies — the dissolution of the monasteries under Henry VIII, the French Revolution, the end of ashtrays in cars — the decline of college football began with reasonable calls for reform. There really was something odd about the fact that Michigan and Nebraska, two undefeated football teams that had never played each other, were both able to call themselves the 1997 national champions. Surely, fans thought, it should be possible to come up with a system that determines who the real champion is.

But it was precisely this uncertainty that once gave college football something of its idiosyncratic charm. To this day, in any dive bar in Michigan or Nebraska you can meet fans who will offer lovingly detailed arguments for why their team would have won 25 years ago if the two schools had faced off. (In 1998, a group of dedicated Nebraska fans went so far as to script and record a mock radio broadcast featuring the hypothetical matchup.)

These conversations were part of the sport’s appeal. They also belonged to a world in which college football was, in ways that are scarcely imaginable today, a regional and somewhat parochial affair. Who cared if a bunch of newspapermen decided (as they did in 1985) that Oklahoma was No. 1 and that a Michigan team with an identical record and its own victory in a major bowl game was No. 2? What mattered was winning rivalry games and conference championships.

Rivalries often involved implicit, class-based rooting interests: urban versus rural, research versus land grant, upper-middle-class professionals and the exurban working classes versus middle-class suburbia. These games were played for ancient, often absurd trophies such as the Old Brass Spitoon, which goes to the winner of the annual Indiana-Michigan State game.

Even as the conferences slowly evolved and occasionally welcomed additional members, they retained distinct personalities that seemed to have the force of terroir-based European Union food designations — the cornfed Big Ten, where all the quarterbacks are named Brian; the aristocratic SEC; the rootin’ tootin’ Big 12; the Pac-12 and its Hollywood mystique. Postseason bowl games between top schools from rival conferences were not attempts to determine a consensus national champion but a kind of loving cup into which all of these distinct varietals could be poured.

Fans who clamored for reform were not asking for a world in which these features of the game would fade or disappear. But the two would go hand in hand, as demands for a rationalized college football postseason coincided with the rise of cable television.

Cable television was not all bad. It meant that more games could be broadcast, including games that would never have reached interested audiences on broadcast television. Suddenly it was possible for a graduate of the University of Illinois living in Arizona to watch his alma mater.

But the not-so-small fortunes that schools received from cable deals, especially those involving dedicated channels such as the Big Ten Network, should have been the source of more ambivalence. Larger TV revenue meant more resources for recruiting, facilities and training. (The oldest members of the Big Ten conference received an average of \$54 million apiece from the Big Ten Network in 2020.) Schools that belonged to conferences that had been less savvy in their dealings with broadcasters, such as the Big 12, the only major conference with no dedicated cable channel, were at a distinct disadvantage.

Which brings us back to the decision by U.S.C. and U.C.L.A. to enter the Big Ten, which followed a similar move by Oklahoma and Texas, which will be leaving the Big 12 and joining the SEC by 2025. In each case the motive is clear: Adding schools with large fan bases in remote parts of the country means more television money. This is a familiar gambit. The Big Ten welcomed Maryland and Rutgers as its 13th and 14th members a decade ago in the hope of bringing its cable network to television packages in the Washington and New York metropolitan areas.

There is no reason to think that this subsuming trend can be forestalled. It is likely to end with the elimination of traditional bowl games and the creation of two regionally subdivided superconferences — not unlike the N.F.C. and A.F.C. in professional football — whose respective champions, after a two- or three-round playoff, will be featured in the college equivalent of the Super Bowl.

Many fans, as I say, will welcome such a system. I am not one of them. Indiana University, which has the most losses in the history of college football, is as much a part of the history of the Big Ten as, say, the powerhouse Ohio State. A world in which Indiana does not lose to Ohio State each year strikes me as absurd and even somehow illogical. These teams in their ancient configurations, which emerged through years of slow, organic development, should be the objects of harmlessly fideistic devotion by fans, not subject to the ruthless pseudo-efficient corporate logic of endless acquisition.

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