RESEARCH DOSSIER

The Evidence File

College football's postseason, its power structure and the case for reform

November 11, 2026

1. Summary of findings

1. **The format.** On November 9, 2026 the College Football Playoff's Management Committee voted unanimously to expand to 24 teams from the 2027 season through 2031-32. The field is the four power-conference champions, the highest-ranked team from the other six conferences, and the 19 highest-ranked remaining teams. Seeds 1 to 8 receive a bye. Sixteen of 23 games are on campus.
2. **Selection grows, not shrinks.** At-large places go from 7 of 12 to 19 of 24. Twenty of 24 places depend on the selection committee's ranking, and that ranking also sets the bye line and the hosting line. The committee votes by secret ballot and publishes no ballots, totals or deliberations.
3. **Power was concentrated, and the larger field has spread access.** Four programs took 23 of the 40 berths in the four-team era. The first two 12-team fields spread 24 berths across 20 programs. Six programs have won all 34 SEC titles since 1992.
4. **National titles were a one-conference story until 2023.** From 2006 to 2022 the SEC won 13, the ACC 3 and the Big Ten 1. The Big Ten won the next three.
5. **Talent hoarding peaked in 2021 and has fallen, without ending.** The three most talented rosters held 49 five-star players in 2021 and 39 in 2026. The 2026 figure is still above every year from 2015 to 2019.
6. **Talent is concentrating by conference.** The Big Ten and SEC footprint supplied 47.5% of NFL draft picks in 2010 and 60.5% in 2026. Between 66% and 76% of the top 50 transfers each year since 2022 went to those two leagues.
7. **The best teams are not yet losing more.** On measures that do not select on the outcome, regular-season losses rose by a quarter to a third of a loss. The change is not statistically significant. Rosters still carry classes signed before direct pay and the larger field, and several measures lag by three to four years.
8. **At equal records, conference predicts rank.** SEC teams were ranked ahead in 122 of 149 cross-conference same-record pairs. No team from outside the power conferences has been ranked ahead of a power-conference team with the same record (0 of 59). A schedule control shrinks the SEC advantage and does not remove it for 2014 to 2025.
9. **"Most deserving" is measurable; the committee's own metrics are not auditable.** The committee follows the resume measure more often than the predictive one, while its protocol says "best". Its "record strength" metric (2025) and conference-strength adjustment (2026) have no published formula.
10. **Cross-conference evidence is thin.** Power-conference teams average 0.92 regular-season games a year against another power conference.
11. **Fan opposition is broad and even.** On the largest college football forum, 76.6% of users with a stated position oppose 24 teams. SEC fans (77.3%) are indistinguishable from the rest (76.4%).

12. **Officiating and replay are run by conferences.** Playing rules, the revenue-share cap, the transfer window and eligibility are already national. A uniform pay scale would need an act of Congress or a players' union.
13. **Big games are scarce, not badly placed.** A season has about 41 ranked matchups, spread across Saturdays no worse than chance. Overlap inside a Saturday is common for secondary games and rare for the two best.

2. What was decided on November 9, 2026

The College Football Playoff is a limited liability company owned by the ten Football Bowl Subdivision conferences and Notre Dame. Its Management Committee, the ten commissioners and Notre Dame's athletics director, approved the 24-team format unanimously.

TERM	DETAIL
Field	24 teams, from the 2027 season through 2031–32
Automatic places	Champions of the ACC, Big Ten, Big 12 and SEC "as determined by their respective conferences"; the highest-ranked team from the American, Conference USA, MAC, Mountain West, Pac-12 or Sun Belt
At-large	The 19 highest-ranked remaining teams
Byes	Seeds 1 to 8
Sites	Seeds 9 to 16 host the first round; seeds 1 to 8 host the second; quarterfinals and semifinals stay in the bowls. 16 of 23 games on campus
Wins required	Five for seeds 9 to 24; four for seeds 1 to 8
Maximum games	17, unchanged, because the power-conference title games end
Scheduling standard	Power-conference teams are expected to play ten games against power-conference opponents or Notre Dame; no penalty is stated
Money	Not disclosed by the playoff. ESPN reports $345 million a year for five years on top of the existing contract

Three points in common circulation are wrong or incomplete. The fifth automatic place goes to the highest-ranked team, champion or not. The playoff did not eliminate conference title games; each of the four power conferences dropped its own, and the other six had not decided as of November 10. Only the Big 12 has said how it will name a champion without one: its regular-season champion.

The Big Ten proposed 24. The ACC and Big 12 joined in May 2026. The SEC, which had favored 16, was the last to agree, after asking for the scheduling standard. The ACC commissioner said ESPN wanted "12, maybe 14, but no higher than 16".

3. Where power has sat

National championships

WINDOW	SEC	BIG TEN	ACC	OTHER
2006 to 2022 (17 seasons)	13	1	3	0
2023 to 2025 (3 seasons)	0	3	0	0

For most of two decades the sport had one dominant conference, not two. The Big Ten's standing rests on three consecutive titles won by three different programs: Michigan, Ohio State and Indiana. Indiana is the first first-time national champion since Florida in 1996.

Conference titles

- **SEC.** Six programs have won every title since the championship game began in 1992. Seven of the 16 current members have never won the league. From 2014 to 2025 Alabama won seven, Georgia four and LSU one. Over the full 20 years from 2006 the two leading programs won 13 of 20; Georgia won once between 2006 and 2021.
- **Big Ten.** Ohio State won or shared ten titles from 2006 to 2025. Michigan won none from 2005 to 2020, then three in a row. Michigan State and Wisconsin each won or shared three.
- **Big 12.** Oklahoma won or shared 14 of 28 titles from 1996 to 2023. Texas won four (1996, 2005, 2009, 2023) and none from 2010 to 2022.

Concentration at the top of the SEC is a feature of the playoff era. In 2004 to 2013 the league had five different champions and none won more than three.

Playoff access

ERA	BERTHS	DISTINCT PROGRAMS	SHARE HELD BY THE LEADING FOUR
Four-team, 2014 to 2023	40	Alabama, Clemson, Ohio State and Oklahoma took 23	57.5%
Twelve-team, 2024 and 2025	24	20	not comparable

No team with two losses reached a four-team field. Two teams with three losses have reached a 12-team field: Clemson in 2024 as ACC champion, and Alabama in 2025 as an at-large selection whose third loss came in the SEC title game. No team with three regular-season losses has received an at-large place.

Since realignment

Five of the eight power-conference titles decided in 2024 and 2025 went to a program that had not won that league since at least 1992: Oregon, Indiana, Arizona State, Texas Tech and Duke. The SEC champion was Georgia both years. Texas reached the SEC title game in its first season; Oklahoma finished 2-6 in the league in 2024 and reached the playoff in 2025.

4. Talent: what changed and what did not

What changed

MEASURE	EARLIER	PEAK	2026
Five-star players on the three most talented rosters	33 (2017)	49 (2021)	39
Their share of five-stars on top-25 rosters		42.6% (2021)	30.2%
Roster talent gap, No. 1 minus No. 25 (composite points)	299.57 (2017)		229.22
Mean closing spread, power against power	10.46 (2012 to 2020)		8.86
Spreads of 14 or more	29%		about 20%

The talent gap narrowed because the 25th roster improved, not because the first declined. Every national finalist from 2015 to 2021 ranked in the top 13 by roster talent. Since then finalists have ranked 14th, 15th, 26th, 32nd and 72nd.

What did not change

- The 2026 talent top five is Georgia, Texas, Oregon, Alabama and Ohio State.
- Ohio State's 2024 champion had the highest blue-chip ratio on record, 90%.
- The ten leading programs still sign about 65% of top-100 recruits.
- Favorites won 68.1% of power-conference games in 2024 and 2025, against 72.8% in 2012 to 2020. That is inside the historical range.
- Champions finished unbeaten in 8 of 16 seasons from 2010 to 2025, and in 3 of the last 5.

What is concentrating

MEASURE	EARLIER	RECENT
Draft picks from the ten leading programs	25% to 28% (2010 to 2016)	34.8% to 36.1% (2024 to 2026)
Colleges with at least one draft pick	106	74
Draft picks from the Big Ten and SEC footprint	47.5% (2010)	60.5% (2026)
Top-50 transfers moving to the Big Ten or SEC	37% to 52% (2019 to 2021)	66% to 76% (2022 to 2026)

The evidence supports a narrower statement than "the days of stacking talent are over". Hoarding by three or four programs is down from its 2021 peak. The talent they no longer hold has mostly moved to other programs inside the same two conferences.

Losses

A test using the final poll's top 12 shows no change, but that test selects teams after their results are known. Two tests that do not:

GROUP	2010 TO 2020	2021 TO 2025
Preseason top 12, regular-season losses	2.58	2.83
The 20 legacy programs named in the article	3.70	4.06

Neither change is statistically significant. Between 10 and 16 of those 20 programs finished with three or more losses in every season since 2010. The SEC's ninth conference game, played for the first time in 2026, adds eight losses to the league each year, and the ten-game standard starts in 2027. The effect of schedule on loss counts begins with data that does not yet exist.

The 2026 season to date

Sixteen of the 20 programs have three or more losses through November 8. In the committee's ranking of November 10, six three-loss teams are ranked between 16th and 22nd, all from the SEC or Big Ten, and two of them sit above 7-2 USC. Two unbeaten teams remain, Utah and UCLA.

A transition in progress

The 12-team playoff has been played twice and a third is under way. Direct pay to players began in 2025, and the 24-team field begins in 2027. A signing class stays on a roster for about four years, so the rosters of 2026

still carry classes signed in 2023 and 2024 under the earlier incentives. Several measures in this section therefore describe decisions made before the changes took hold.

INDICATOR	TYPE	READING SO FAR	WHEN IT BECOMES READABLE
Talent rank of national finalists	Current	14th, 15th, 26th, 32nd and 72nd since 2022; every finalist from 2015 to 2021 was in the top 13	Each January
Five-star players on the three most talented rosters	Current, carries four classes	49 (2021) to 39 (2026)	2027 and 2028, as the 2023 and 2024 classes leave
Share of top-100 recruits signed by the ten leading programs	Leading	About 65%, not yet lower	Each signing period
Top-50 transfers moving to the Big Ten or SEC	Leading	66% to 76%; the open question is how widely they spread among programs inside those leagues	Each January window
NFL draft picks from the ten leading programs	Lagging by three to four years	34.8% to 36.1% (2024 to 2026), reflecting classes signed from 2020 to 2023	Drafts of 2028 to 2030
Regular-season losses of the preseason top 12	Current, small samples	2.58 to 2.83	2027 to 2029, after the SEC's ninth game and the ten-game standard
Three-loss teams receiving at-large places	Current	None through 2025; six ranked 16th to 22nd on November 10, 2026	Selection day 2026, then the first 24-team field in 2027

The mechanism proposed is that a larger field and direct pay remove the two reasons a top recruit accepted a backup role at a leading program: playoff exposure and a route to the NFL. If that holds, the leading indicators move first (where top-100 recruits sign, where transfers go), roster composition follows over four years, and the draft follows last. The readings to date are mixed: finalists and roster counts have moved, signing shares have not, and the draft cannot yet show an effect in either direction.

5. How teams are selected

The record of the system

Through 1964 the Associated Press named its champion before the bowls; the coaches' poll did so through 1973. The two polls named different champions in 11 seasons, most recently 1997 and 2003. The Bowl Championship Series, from 1998 to 2013, chose two teams by a formula of polls and computer ratings that was rewritten after disputed results in 2000, 2001, 2003, 2004 and 2011. A committee has chosen the field since 2014.

The committee

Thirteen members, six of them sitting athletics directors, are appointed by the commissioners and Notre Dame's athletics director. The protocol states: "There will not be one single metric." Votes are by secret ballot. The protocol, the roster, recusals and the weekly rankings are public. Ballots, vote totals and deliberations are not.

What the rankings show, 2014 to 2025

TEST	RESULT
Committee's first ranking against that week's AP poll	Rank correlation 0.951
Same record, final ranking: team with the better AP preseason rank is higher	250 of 377 pairs, 66.3% (interval 59.9% to 73.5%); 52.2% for adjacent teams
Same test using strength of record	73.0%
Where preseason rank and strength of record disagree	Committee followed the rating, 71 to 47
SEC team ranked ahead in cross-conference same-record pairs	122 of 149, 81.9%
Team outside the power conferences ranked ahead of a power-conference team with the same record	0 of 59

Teams with exactly three losses on selection day, 2014 to 2025, leaving out the shortened 2020 season:

CONFERENCE	THREE-LOSS TEAMS	RANKED	SHARE RANKED	IN THE TOP 12	MEDIAN RANK WHEN RANKED
SEC	21	20	95.2%	8	13
Pac-12	17	17	100.0%	6	14
Big 12	11	11	100.0%	3	17
ACC	20	17	85.0%	2	18
Big Ten	17	14	82.4%	3	16
Independents	6	2	33.3%	0	15
Outside the power conferences	59	7	11.9%	0	24

Nearly every power-conference team with three losses is ranked; the divide in being ranked at all is between the power conferences and everyone else. Conferences differ in how high such teams are placed: 8 SEC teams reached the top 12, against 3 from the Big 12, 3 from the Big Ten and 2 from the ACC.

Controls matter here. The gap between SEC and Big Ten three-loss teams in being ranked disappears once strength of record is accounted for. The SEC's advantage in same-record pairs shrinks by about a third with a schedule control and persists for 2014 to 2025; on selection-day ratings since 2020 it is no longer statistically significant. Preseason rank is the weakest predictor tested.

Evidence against a brand effect

The committee chose SMU over Alabama in 2024. A controlled test of AP voting finds that established programs fall 0.77 places further after a loss than predicted, not less. No individual program's preseason ranking is inflated to a statistically significant degree. No peer-reviewed study of the committee exists.

Other sports

CHAMPIONSHIP	PLACES CHOSEN BY COMMITTEE
NFL, NBA, MLB, NHL, MLS, European soccer	None; standings and published tiebreakers
College hockey; Division II and III football	None at-large; a published formula
Division I men's basketball	37 of 68
Division I baseball	35 of 64

CHAMPIONSHIP	PLACES CHOSEN BY COMMITTEE
FCS football	13 of 24
FBS football from 2027	19 of 24 at-large; 20 of 24 dependent on the ranking

College football is not alone in using a committee. It is alone among football's top levels in how much of its field one ranking decides, and it is moving in the opposite direction from the college championships that have adopted formulas.

6. Metrics: "best", "most deserving", and what cannot be audited

"Best" asks who would win tomorrow. It is forward-looking and rests on efficiency, margin and talent. **"Most deserving"** asks whose record was hardest to earn. It rests only on wins, losses and opponents.

ESPN introduced Strength of Record and Game Control on October 7, 2014, in its words "to help determine the 'most deserving' teams for the College Football Playoff". Strength of Record is the probability that an average top-25 team would have the same record or better against the same schedule.

- **The committee follows the resume measure.** Where it and the predictive rating disagreed on a pair of teams from 2020 to 2025, the committee sided with the resume measure in 62.9% of 431 pairs. Its protocol says "best", and its executive director said in 2023: "Most deserving is not anything in the committee's lexicon."
- **The reason given at the cut line changes.** The thirteenth game (2014), "four very best" (2017), resume (2021, 2022), a predictive judgment and an injury (2023), loss count (2024), schedule strength and head-to-head (2025).
- **No tilt by brand in which standard is used.** The committee followed the resume measure 66.7% of the time when that went against an SEC or Big Ten team and 62.5% when it favored one.

Which metrics hold up

METRIC	STANDING
Predictive ratings (FPI, Sagarin, Massey; the betting line)	Tested. Straight-up accuracy 71.4% to 73.3% from 2014 to 2025; none beats the market
Strength of Record	Defined and published; its schedule input depends on comparing conferences
Ranked wins	50.5% are over teams that finish unranked; two definitions agree 42.6% of the time; the committee uses a third
Conference-strength tallies	Rest on 0.92 cross-power games per team per year; 11 to 18 power teams a year play none
Committee "record strength" (2025) and conference-strength adjustment (2026)	No published formula, inputs or values
Any rating used to separate teams a few places apart	17 teams sat within one standard error of 12th in the final 2025 FPI

The weak point is the input, not the standard. A resume measure is arithmetic once opponent strength is known, and opponent strength across conferences is largely inferred, because the conferences rarely play each other.

7. The 24-team format: evidence for and against

For

- **Access.** Replaying 2024 and 2025 under the new rules, the Big 12 goes from 2 teams to 9 and the ACC from 3 to 8. The SEC (8 to 14) and Big Ten (7 to 11) add teams and lose share.
- **Late-season stakes.** On a stated definition, games with playoff stakes rise from 53 to 80 in 2024 and from 51 to 73 in 2025 (class D).
- **Audience.** No decline in regular-season audience through the 12-team era. ESPN's 2025 regular season rose 16%, or 8% net of a change in measurement, and the 2025 Big Ten title game drew a record 18.33 million.
- **Proportion.** Twenty-four of 138 teams (136 in 2025, 138 in 2026 after two programs moved up) is 17.4%, in line with FCS, Division II, Division III and Division I basketball. The NFL admits 43.8%.
- **Blowouts.** First-round margins in the 12-team era (17.75 points, 8 games) match four-team-era semifinals (17.85, 20 games). Eight games support no firm conclusion.

Against

- **Low seeds do not win.** In the FCS 24-team bracket every champion was a top-four seed, and 2 of 24 finalists came from the first round (section 8). In the playoff's 12-team era seeds 11 and 12 are 0-4.
- **The bottom of the field.** In replayed fields for 2021 to 2025, 45 of the 60 teams seeded 13 to 24 had three or more losses. The 2025 rules admit 8-5 Duke and 8-4 Iowa and omit 12-1 James Madison.
- **Access outside the power conferences falls**, from 12.5% of the field to 8%.
- **The committee's reach grows.** Three lines now carry value: 8 against 9 for the bye, 16 against 17 for a home game, 24 against 25 for entry.
- **A September loss was already survivable.** Twenty-four of 40 four-team entrants had one loss. What changes is the third and fourth loss.
- **The NFL analogy is partial.** The NFL admits teams by standings. No seed below fifth has won since 2020.

No selection protocol for the 24-team field has been published.

8. The FCS precedent: twelve seasons at 24 teams

The Football Championship Subdivision has run a 24-team bracket since 2013, with eight byes and every round before the final on campus. It is the closest existing model to the format the playoff adopted. The record covers 12 seasons and 276 games.

Who wins

GROUP	ENTRIES	RECORD	SEMIFINALS	FINALS	TITLES
Seeds 1 to 4 (bye)	48	100–36	29	19	12
Seeds 5 to 8 (bye)	48	49–48	11	3	0
Teams that played in the first round	192	127–192	8	2	0

- Every champion was a top-four seed. The No. 1 seed reached the final in 8 of 12 seasons.
- A bye alone is not enough: seeds 5 to 8 went 49-48 with no title.
- Bye teams won 75 of 96 second-round games (78%) at home after 14 days of rest.

- No team entering with three or more losses has won. The 13 teams that entered with five or more went 6-13 and none reached a quarterfinal.
- The deepest run from the first round is Illinois State in 2025: unseeded, 8-4, four road wins including one at the No. 1 seed, then a 35-34 overtime loss in the final.

Whether the early rounds are competitive

ROUND	GAMES	MEAN MARGIN	DECIDED BY 7 OR FEWER	HOME RECORD
First round	96	17.8	30%	69–27
Second round	96	17.7	31%	75–21
Quarterfinal	48	18.1	29%	34–14
Semifinal	24	21.2	29%	19–5
Final	12	14.4	33%	neutral

The first round is no more lopsided than the later rounds. The semifinals are the most lopsided.

Access against outcomes

Eighty-seven programs appeared in 12 seasons. Titles went the other way: four programs won all 12, and North Dakota State won eight. The 16-team era's last 12 seasons had nine different champions. The concentration began before the field reached 24 and follows one program, so it cannot be assigned to the format. On this record expansion changed who appears and not who wins.

Crowds, television and money

- **Crowds.** First-round attendance averaged 4,754, against 9,776 in the second round and 15,437 in the semifinals. The first round is played on Thanksgiving weekend, six days after the field is named.
- **Television.** In every season 14 to 16 of the 16 first-round and second-round games were streaming only.
- **Windows.** The final drew 1.04 million on ABC on a Sunday opposite the NFL (January 2024) and 2.41 million on ESPN on an open Monday night a year later. The same pattern holds in the playoff's own first round: games opposite the NFL drew 4.4 to 8.9 million, and games clear of it 13.4 to 14.9 million. Seed and network differ between those groups, so the causes cannot be separated.
- **Money.** FCS pays nothing for qualifying or advancing. A school must bid to host, and the NCAA takes up to 85% of net gate. Montana State's 2024 run to the final was reported as a $40,000 loss.

The calendar and the bye

COMPETITION	BYE TEAM IDLE (DAYS)	SITE	BYE TEAMS' RECORD
FCS second round, 2013 to 2025	14	Bye team's campus	75–21
NFL divisional round, 2020 to 2025	13 or 14	Bye team's stadium	9–3
Playoff quarterfinals, 2024 and 2025	25 or 26	Neutral bowl site	1–7
Playoff second round from 2027	19 to 21	Bye team's campus	no record yet

The FCS plays four rounds on consecutive weekends and then waits two to three weeks for the final. The announced 2027 playoff runs 46 days from first game to final, with waits of 13 to 16 days before the quarterfinals and 12 to 14 before the semifinals. Rest, site and seed quality move together in all three records, and eight playoff games is a small sample.

What the people inside it say

No conference with an automatic bid holds a title game; standings and tiebreakers assign the bid. No FCS administrator or coach was found saying 24 is too many; the pressure has been to add at-large places. Coaches' criticism is about workload and the transfer window. Fifteen programs moved to FBS from 2013 to 2026, and programs that have since left won 10 of the 13 titles from 2013 to 2025. None of the seven departure announcements read names the playoff as a reason.

What carries over

FCS LESSON	CARRIES TO FBS	WHY
Titles stay with the top four seeds	Partly	Same bracket shape; FBS talent is less concentrated in one program
A two-week bye and a home game win three times in four	Partly	The 2027 second round is at home after about 20 days
The first round is as close as later rounds	Likely	Flat margins by round in FCS; eight FBS games so far
Expansion widens who appears, not who wins	Likely	In FBS the appearance itself carries money and recruiting value
A clear window beats a bigger network	Yes	Seen in both subdivisions
First-round crowds collapse	No	Thanksgiving, six days of notice, small stadiums and a bid system
Schools lose money on a run	No	The playoff pays per team and per round
Title games are not needed to assign bids	Partly	FBS title games carried large media revenue

9. Scheduling, windows and the calendar

How many big games there are

A season has about 41 games between two ranked teams and 6 to 11 between two top-10 teams. Larger conferences have not raised the count: 42.3 a season from 2014 to 2019 and 40.5 in 2024 and 2025. In every full season, 5 to 8 of the 13 or 14 weeks had no top-10 matchup.

How they fall across Saturdays

MEASURE	RESULT
Ranked matchups in a peak week	5 to 7
Weeks a season with one ranked matchup or none	About 1.5
Unevenness across weeks (Gini), 2014 to 2025	0.246, against 0.27 to 0.31 for random placement
Same measure, 2024 and 2025	0.199
Thinnest weeks	Weeks 2 and 3 (2.1 and 2.2 ranked matchups); the week before rivalry week (2.7)
Fullest week	Rivalry week (4.2)
FCS opponents	85% fall in the first four weeks; four SEC teams play one on November 21, 2026

The spread across Saturdays is no worse than chance and narrowed through 2025. The thin weeks are real and fall in the same places each year.

Whether placement in advance can fix it

Only 54% of ranked matchups had both teams in the preseason top 25, and only 55% of preseason ranked pairings were still ranked matchups at kickoff. Spreading the preseason pairings evenly leaves the calendar about as uneven as it is (0.259 against 0.246, a simulated figure, class D). Within a Saturday the picture reverses: 85% of ranked matchups had both teams ranked the week before, inside a 12-day window for choosing kickoff times.

Collisions inside a Saturday

- The two best games of a week kicked off within 90 minutes of each other in 20 of 147 weeks, and in 4 of 69 since 2021. Two top-10 matchups went head to head three times in 13 seasons, none since 2018.
- Lesser ranked games overlap often: 44% kicked off within 90 minutes of another ranked matchup, and 127 of 160 same-window pairings could have been avoided with four windows.
- The noon share of ranked matchups rose from 15% to 29%.
- The cost falls on the weaker game. On November 7, 2026, Miami at Notre Dame drew 9.1 million while Georgia at Ole Miss drew 4.24 million in the same slot. Two strong games have both held (10.42 million and 8.5 million on September 27, 2025). No controlled study exists.

Thursday and Friday

Thursday games between power-conference teams fell from 12 in 2014 to 1. Friday games rose from 4 to between 17 and 21. The SEC plays on neither night. Friday audiences averaged about 2.3 million in 2025, against roughly 6 to 9 million for the main Saturday windows.

Who controls the schedule

Conferences set opponents and dates, networks set kickoff times, and schools hold vetoes over night games and dates. No body holds scheduling power across conferences. Media rights run to 2029-30 (Big Ten), 2029 (Notre Dame), 2030-31 (Big 12), 2033-34 (SEC) and 2035-36 (ACC). The NFL's flexible scheduling is narrower than commonly assumed: about one to four prime-time games a season moved from 2023 to 2025, and most NFL games overlap regionally on Sunday afternoon.

The postseason calendar

CALENDAR	FIRST GAME	FINAL	SPAN
12-team playoff, 2024 season	December 20	January 20	31 days
24-team playoff, 2027 season (announced)	December 9 to 11	January 24, 2028	46 days
Five weekly rounds from the first weekend of December 2027	December 3 or 4	January 4 or 8, 2028	About 5 weeks

The exhibit in section 16 sets both calendars against the fixed dates. A schedule of five weekly rounds from the first weekend of December 2027 puts the semifinals on Christmas Day and the final in the first week of January. It meets these fixed dates:

- Army against Navy on December 4, 2027, and the Heisman Trophy weekend
- the likely early signing period
- final examinations at 8 of 11 schools sampled

- the first Saturday open to the NFL, December 18, 2027
- bowl dates under contract through 2031-32

The announced calendar starts five or six days later and ends 9 to 20 days later. Its wait before the final is 10 or 11 days; its long waits are in the middle of the bracket. The lowest audiences of the 12-team era were the two lowest-seeded home games, both on TNT opposite NFL games (6.2 million and 4.4 million). First-round and second-round days, kickoff times and networks for 2027 have not been announced.

10. Money and media

ITEM	FIGURE
ESPN's added payment	$345 million a year for five years, about $1.7 billion gross, for 12 added games
Fees the networks stop paying for title games	About $190 million a year ($140 million ESPN, $50 million Fox)
ESPN's net new cost	About $205 million a year
Conferences' net	Near zero after lost title-game rights, tickets and sponsorship (reported)
2026-27 revenue-share cap	$21,583,913 per school

The playoff disclosed no financial terms; the figures are ESPN's and other outlets' sourced reporting. The SEC title game was not uniquely valuable: the Big Ten game sits in the same reported band.

Network ties

ESPN holds all SEC rights through 2033-34 and operates SEC Network. It also holds the ACC through 2035-36, a share of the Big 12 and the entire playoff. It holds no Big Ten rights; Fox is reported to own about 61% of Big Ten Network. Network ties to conferences are general, not particular to the SEC.

Coverage

COLLEGE GAMEDAY CAMPUS SHOWS	SEC	BIG TEN
2014 to 2022	28	26
2024 to 2026 (to November 7)	18	12

The gap opened in the year ESPN took exclusive SEC rights, lost the Big Ten and the SEC added Texas and Oklahoma. The count cannot separate those causes. Peer-reviewed work finds television exposure associated with AP votes. No study measures a network's airtime or tone by conference, and none tests the committee.

On the 24-team decision itself, the documented positions run against a simple reading: ESPN is reported to have preferred no more than 16, the SEC's position, and the SEC was the last conference to agree.

11. Who opposes expansion

Of 2,069 users of the largest college football forum who display a team affiliation and stated a position after the announcement, 76.6% opposed 24 teams, 17.9% supported it and 5.5% were mixed.

FAN BASE	OPPOSED
SEC	77.3%

FAN BASE	OPPOSED
All others	76.4%
Alabama and Georgia, pooled	83.4%
Ohio State	75.0%
Outside the power conferences	81%

The same community supported the 12-team format in 2021 (64%) and 2022 (57%). Opponents cite money (23%), a devalued regular season (16%) and the loss of title games (13%). Supporters cite access (31%) and the view that title games had already lost their meaning (20%). Eight percent of supporters make the parity argument.

The sample is self-selected and is not a survey of fans. Positions were classified by language models; two independent passes agreed on 83.8% of a sample with no reversals. The playoff's executive director said that "many fans aren't in favor of expansion" and that this was weighed.

Among national broadcasters, most ESPN voices found are opposed or mixed and every Fox voice found is in favor. Coaches' groups supported expansion.

12. What is uniform and what is not

ALREADY NATIONAL	SET BY EACH CONFERENCE
Playing rules	Hiring, assigning and disciplining officials
Revenue-share cap	Replay centers and how they operate
Transfer window	Number of conference games; tiebreakers
Eligibility	Availability reports; fines
Roster limit (105)	Revenue distribution
Postseason officiating crews (never from either team's conference)	How a champion is named from 2027

There is no national minimum for cameras. A replay official put a regular-season game at 12 to 15 cameras, against more than 70 for the title game. The NFL owns 12 boundary cameras in every stadium. No conference publishes officiating grades.

Constraints on reform

- **Ownership.** The conferences own the playoff and hold their regular-season media rights into the 2030s; the Big Ten's and Notre Dame's end first, in 2029-30 and 2029.
- **Law.** The Sports Broadcasting Act covers professional leagues only, and centralized sale of college television rights was struck down in 1984. A fixed pay scale is a tighter restraint than the present cap; it needs a statutory exemption or collective bargaining, and most players attend state schools outside federal labor law.
- **Congress.** A bill that passed the Senate 77 to 22 on September 28, 2026 would allow pooled media rights with the agreement of 75% of schools and cap conferences at 20 members. It creates no commissioner and is silent on officiating, replay and scheduling. It has not passed the House.
- **Scheduling.** The NFL's formula depends on equal four-team divisions and no outside games.

Without title games, conferences keep media rights, scheduling, officiating, revenue distribution, votes in governance, ownership of the playoff and the automatic places.

13. The earlier reform drafts against today's sport

Four written drafts from 2023 to 2025 describe a top tier of 30 or 35 programs in five regional sections, a 12-team and then a 16-team playoff, and a pay scale by class year.

TOPIC	DRAFTS	TODAY
Top tier	35 programs; Indiana in the lower tier	7 of the last 24 playoff berths went to programs outside the 35, including the 2025 champion
Sections	Five regional groups	Three now straddle two conferences
Playoff seeding	AP poll, coaches' poll and committee	The same inputs the present argument rejects
Base pay	$50,000 to $80,000 by class	Median school pay by position: $50,000 to $105,000; quarterback $75,000; kicker $1,000
Top of market	$1,000,000 for the Heisman winner	Quarterback 90th percentile: $1,266,500
Team payroll	"$8 to 12 million"	$7.5 to $9.2 million with no team bonuses; $45.6 to $56.2 million for a national champion, against a cap of $21.6 million

The base scale sits on the market median. A scale by class alone overpays specialists and underpays quarterbacks, which supports the later idea of a position factor. About 24.9% of rostered power-conference players currently receive nothing from their school. Direct pay, a five-year eligibility clock and a January transfer window have since arrived in some form. Central scheduling, central officiating, camera minimums, objective selection criteria and a cap level appear in no draft.

14. The article, claim by claim

Eighty-seven separate claims were tested.

VERDICT	CLAIMS
Confirmed	33
Needs qualifying	40
Wrong	7
Not supported through 2025	3
Not testable	4

Wrong

CLAIM	FINDING
Opponents of expansion are typically SEC fans	SEC fans 77.3% opposed; all others 76.4%
Subjectivity and favoritism are waning	The format sets 20 of 24 places by committee ranking
Texas and Oklahoma were at once two of the SEC's five best	Oklahoma 2-6 in the league in 2024

CLAIM	FINDING
Texas played in two straight SEC title games	2024 only
Texas won the Big 12 once	Four times; once in its last 14 seasons
No other sport is decided on subjectivity	College basketball, baseball and FCS football use committees
"Most deserving" is entirely subjective	It has a published definition and the committee tracks it

Not supported through 2025

CLAIM	FINDING
9–3 is the new 11–1	Loss counts up by a quarter to a third of a loss; not significant
More three-loss teams able to contend	No three-loss team has reached a semifinal
Indiana may be the last unbeaten champion	Eight of the last 16 champions were unbeaten

These three are forecasts. The finding is that the record through 2025 does not yet show them; section 4 lists the indicator and the season in which each becomes readable.

Confirmed, among others

Every game in the account of Indiana's 2025 season; Ohio State's 2024 path as a 10-2 team seeded eighth; the 1997 split title; that a three-loss team had no route in the four-team era; Alabama and Georgia's 11 of 12 SEC titles since 2014; the Ohio State receivers, all six of them first-round picks; that conferences employ their own officials; that no agreed definition of a ranked win exists; that the committee's process is closed.

The full ledger, with the restated versions of several claims, is R1_claim_ledger.md.

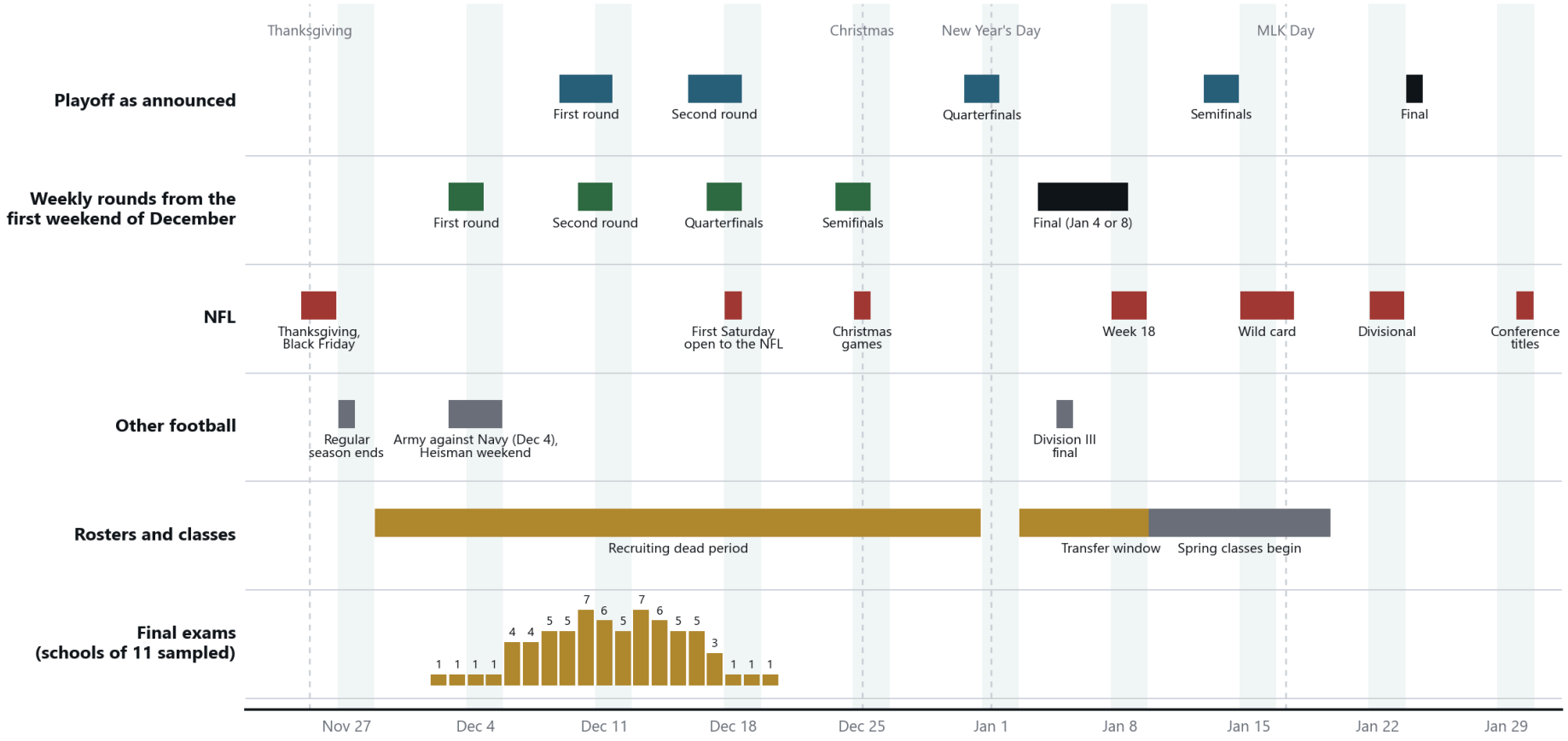
15. Open items

- No 24-team selection protocol has been published, and three of four power conferences have not said how they will name a champion.
- AP poll figures are class C until checked against the Associated Press's own panel list.
- Selection-day ratings before 2020 were not recovered; end-of-season values were used.
- Positions of national media voices are reported in aggregate; a broad collection of their statements over time is in progress.
- Whether the playoff adopted conference-neutral replay is unresolved.
- The effects of the SEC's ninth game, the ten-game standard and unlimited transfers rest on one to three seasons.
- Quotations from coaches and officials on the bye layoff and on broadcast windows were taken through a page summarizer and need a check against the linked pages.
- No game-level audience model exists; the cost of overlapping windows rests on individual cases, and most game audiences are class C.
- Early signing dates for December 2027 are unconfirmed, and NFL dates for that season are projections.

16. Exhibit: the postseason calendar, 2027 season

The postseason calendar, 2027 season

The announced 24-team playoff, weekly rounds from the first weekend of December, and the fixed dates around them. Shaded columns are weekends; dates on the axis are Saturdays.



NFL dates for the 2027 season are projections from the 2024 to 2026 pattern. First-round and second-round days and kickoff times are not announced. The early signing period and the FCS bracket for 2027 are not announced and are not shown. Exam dates are from each school's published calendar.