Late summer! You can tell. It's a time for lemonade, monsoon rains, great deals on the '06 models, politicians bellyaching about their opponent's latest illicit tryst with big business and special interests; evening shadows are long and ads for personal jumbo-tron TV's adorn the inside cover of every sports page in the country. It must mean one thing ~ football is just around the corner!

Football, the way men mark the passage of a year, the rites of passage that take us all one step closer to depends and gumming food one day. Football, the greatest game ever invented ~ for fall. Of course I would say that about baseball in the spring looking towards the long warm summer. There is also that 5 weeks in March when college basketball is actually interesting and I think the NBA stages a 7th game at some point in which you are bound to see two minutes of hustle near the end. But college football is still the man's sporting equivalent of a sacrificial virgin to the falling leaf god.

Last year we saw another installment of greatest games ever. Who thought that the Notre Dame USC tilt would be eclipsed by the slugfest between USC and Fresno State or the heart stopping drama of the USC-Texas championship game? Who expected UCLA's meltdown at Arizona or Tennessee's at every other snap? The fact is, the college game is the most unpredictable of all sporting events because there just aren't enough games played even in the expanded 12-13 game seasons to really make the laws of large numbers work.

Baseball has had some great equivalents. Anyone that did not watch the Yankees, cocky and sure of themselves fall apart after a 3 game lead gave way to an improbable as ever Boston miracle just doesn't know great sports and why they help us define the joy of life. College football has moments like that all the time, sometimes in individual games. Who can forget Jim McMahon's last second TD pass to Clay Brown in the 1980 Holiday Bowl to cap a four TD comeback in the last 4 minutes and seven seconds of the game defeating SMU, or Doug Flutie doing the same against Miami. Who can forget Nebraska's fumblerooski or Colorado's magical 5th down against Mizzu? College Football allows us to witness the bazaar. It can dash our spirits or raise them to unbelievable heights in moments. College football is about expectations, those fulfilled, those unfulfilled. It is also about the shock and surprise of what is never anticipated.

I love this game

Outlook for the BCS Conferences

So with that in mind, here are the things I expect from 2006. The Big-ELEVEN will still call themselves the Big-TEN and pray for Notre Dame to join them. The Irish pray to a different God apparently and will again ignore them. Speaking of the Irish, they are loaded and if they can find a defense, will win 9-12 games. If they don't find a defense, they will win 8-11 games and loose once again to USC. The Big-ELEVEN Champion will be IOWA even though they lose early to Iowa State, a team that will challenge Nebraska for the Big XII North title and a spot in the annual cannon fodder bowl which I believe will pit a different Texas team against the Huskers...Texas
The Aggies (A&M) are the only team in America that seems to be able to defeat a name
team one week and fall apart the next. The Longhorns have a great defense and a lot of holes to
fill. Last year was the first time the Longhorns were able to put it all together offensively in every
game…and most of those key players departed.

I see the SEC beating up on a lot of barely 1-A and 1-AA programs as usual and putting
together glossy records, but being generally over rated once again…with a couple of exceptions.
LSU is the real deal and South Carolina is the sleeper. Florida will be great under Urban Meyer,
but faces arguably one of the most difficult schedule in the country. Tennessee will under perform
Alabama and Auburn will both lose games they shouldn't and Georgia will win games they
shouldn't. Not one SEC team will make it through 13 games (including the LCG) undefeated and
will therefore play in the Sugar Bowl, probably against Notre Dame.

The ACC is the media conference. People ask, why did the Big East fall apart and the
all of Florida, Atlanta, the Atlantic Seaboard (Carolinas to Baltimore) and the Northeast with
Boston. The ACC has carved out more than Tobacco road, they have taken all of I-95. Miami and
Florida State will Duke it out with upstarts at Boston College, Clemson, Georgia Tech and Va. Tech
all dark horse candidates. The ACC is the best conference in football…sorry SEC.

The GIG LEAST has barely hung onto BCS status. After loosing Va. Tech, Miami and BC
to the ACC, it had to scramble to find teams. Suddenly recent 1-AA entrants and C-USA
champions like Louisville became cast members. There are eight teams in the Big-EAST and the
winner is likely to be the former C-USA champ. How far has Syracuse fallen? People are out
shopping for snow lowers in stead of reading sports pages.

Turning west we find the best offenses and most exciting teams to watch in the country.
Starting with the BCS bound PAC-10 Champion can you say Bears? Yes this is the year Berkeley
will be known for something more respectable than love beads and tie dye T-Shirts. Marshawn
Lynch is the real deal, Cal has the best nucleus and most favorable schedule in the PAC-10. USC
will reload but ASU, Oregon and CAL all field exceptional offensive football teams. Washington
State and Oregon state could surprise some people and three consecutive top caliber recruiting
classes at Arizona may finally start to pay off. Only Stanford and Washington look to have no shot
at an upper division finish. The downside to all those great offenses...where's the “D”. The PAC
ten's #3-7 defenses all gave up over 405 yards/game defensively last year. Fortunately the BIG-
ELEVEN was just as bad with seven teams at or below that 400 YPG mark of crappiness as well.

Best of the Rest

Five conferences play outside the media hype known as the BCS. Most of this is because
these five conferences are lead by commissioners who could not negotiate a tray table back into
place on a commercial airliner. C-USA, the Western Athletic Conference, the Mountain West
Conference and the tweeener conferences (Sun Belt and Mid America) just don't get it. The 66 BCS
schools (including Notre Dame) have a TV package. The 54 non-BCS schools (also including
Notre Dame ~ the Irish get to play both sides of the fence) just don't get it. They don't really have a
contract. Well Notre Dame does, but it's also a small country and has a United Nations ambassador. The rest of the non-BCS programs keep trying to pry their way into a closed shop.

Now there are some exceptional programs in that non-BCS group, especially when you add basketball and minor sports into the mix. You have Brigham Young, Utah, Colorado State, San Diego State, Fresno State, Tulsa, Tulane, Marshall, New Mexico, Nevada, UNLV, Boise State, SMU, TCU, Memphis, Houston, Hawaii, East Carolina (school that needs a state), Southern Mississippi (Katrina Survivor) and Louisiana Tech. You have the service academies in this group. All those programs are on pretty firm ground financially. All of them can play ball. Some of them have facilities that would be the envy of any BCS school (BYU for example). So here is a suggestion commissioners, while you get your executive assistants to fix your tray tables before landing this year, get together, form your own football association (say the American College Football Association) and start negotiating with the power you do have. Wouldn't your five conferences that span every major media market and every time zone have one heck of a lot more power than any single BCS conference?

Stop colluding with the BCS to your own demise. Stop scheduling them. Stop letting them rule over you. I dare say that ABC and ESPN have done a great job of getting back 90% of what Judge Barciaga took away back in the early 80's (the NCAA-ABC exclusive TV pact was ruled an illegal trust and busted). That leads us to the world of free market choice...and college football is more popular than ever. Barciaga's ruling was good for college football...ABC and ESPN have for the most part turned back the clock a bit with the BCS. But ABC and ESPN are not CBS, NBC and TBS. Those other networks have allowed themselves to be sucked into ABC's dominion.

Here's a novel thought for the five non-BCS conferences. Form your own competing cartel, stage your own national championship game and grab a CBS, TBS or NBC and go head to head with the BCS cartel as the underdog competitor. CBS owns CSTV, but the fact is, those 54 teams need to do this or die hoping for the crumbs that fall from the BCS table. Forget the crumbs. Make your own bread. Ban together and have power. No you'll NOT be as strong as the BCS. But you'll be significant as one.

All the BCS-non-BCS hype aside, College football is still pretty important in those non-BCS programs. So! Here is how I see the season shaking out there. The best of the non-BCS conferences is a toss-up between the Mountain West Conference, the WAC and Conference-USA. Right now the MWC is probably the best of the three because the bottom half of the WAC is pretty weak.

TCU, UTAH and BYU all have the talent to challenge for the MWC title. Any of those schools could compete with any BCS program on any given game day. All have the ability to crash the BCS party. Utah has the best shot...getting a requisite named BCS program in week one and then TCU and BYU at home with a lot of bite-them-in-the-butt games in between. I like Utah's chances and would put them at the top. TCU has to travel to UTAH but does get BYU at home only five days after the Cougars must play USU in Provo. Advantage TCU. What people forget is that TCU won last year in overtime after fumbling the ball before it crossed the goal line. MWC officials successfully repealed the laws of physics and awarded the TD to the Horned Frogs even though to evidence clearly showed the ball was out of the back's hands before it crossed...BYU had recovered in the end zone. BYU will come into the game with a chip on their shoulders and by
far one of the top offensive teams in the nation. The down-side for BYU? Their Texas Tech like offense will be the second Texas Tech-like offense TCU will face....as the Frogs will play the Raiders the week before. BYU plays five of its 12 games in the first 26 days of the season vs. Arizona (road), C-USA Champion Tulsa, Boston College (road) and at TCU. If the Cougars come through that unscathed, look-out, they could be the BCS buster and not UTAH. San Diego State, Colorado State and New Mexico all have talent and could surprise some folks.

Speaking of C-USA Champs Tulsa, they will battle Houston, UTEP and Southern Mississippi. Marshall and SMU are not quite there yet and Tulane is still rebuilding from last year’s schedule that included Hurricane Katrina. I am going with SMU...the Mississippi version, not the Ponies of Texas who moved from the WAC...a conference where four teams can win it all, Hawaii, Fresno State, Boise State and Nevada. I like Boise and Fresno to duke it out for the top spot.

The MAC is one of those conferences that is just on the edge of being 1-AA and not quite 1-A. What the MAC needs are better names but absent changing an entire university structure, or using catchy slogans like, “The Other Miami,” it’s a conference that isn’t sure where it fits in...or maybe it does and I don’t. The MAC is similar to C-USA in that it is a legitimate super-conference. The MAC includes 13 members, about three to five which can compete to some degree with most midlevel BCS programs; Miami of Ohio, Toledo and Akron are there and Bowling Green might surprise. But can anything good come from Ball State? What? Someone said “Letterman?” Like I said, “Can anything good come...”

The Sun Belt is a collection of teams that have no real home. It changes members more often than Paris Hilton removes her top. It’s to college football what Hooters is to fine dining. I look for Troy State to come out of there a winner. Why, I don’t know...maybe it's because I expect them to come out of their OOC (out of conference) schedule with a win somewhere.

I think the BCS National Champion will be from the GIG-LEAST. It’s simply because they will be the least beaten up. I suspect most of the money programs to suffer 2 losses along the way. See, 12-13 games is a lot of chances to go flat or have the badly thrown ball bounce off a lineman's foot and be turned into a TD (anyone remember that Miami victory over Va. Tech a few years ago)? See this season's big TV match-ups in any network crystal ball. But, Louisville or West Virginia could run the table. I think one of those two GIG-LEAST schools make it to the show.

Finally, here’s a monkey wrench to toss out there. What if the next best school turns out to be undefeated UTAH, BYU, Houston or Fresno State? HAHAHAHAHAHAHA! Now, THAT would be justice! Would they get to play in the show? NO! Utah didn't get too in '04 and yet they proved the best of GIG LEAST (Pittsburgh) didn’t even belong on the same field with them. Could happen again, but the BCS will never allow a non BCS school to play for the title. That takes me back to my original thought, don't play with them. Ban together and back away from BCS programs altogether. Put together their own collusive agreement, play among themselves and stage their own title game. How long was it before the NFL decided it needed to merge in the more exciting AFL? Not long. How many super-bowls did it take for the AFL to defeat the FL? Three!

Fall is just around the corner. It's time to kick-it-off and play the game. How I love this sport.