

Are New Year's Day Bowl Games Standing on Thin Ice?

Written by Wayne G. McDonnell, Jr.
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For as long as I can remember, New Year's Day has been synonymous with two time honored traditions: revelers recovering from an evening of alcoholic bliss and a never ending buffet of college football bowl games that lasts well into the late evening of the year's first day. At one point in time, the beginning of the New Year represented the most important day on the calendar for a college football aficionado. From morning till night, the pageantry and excitement that surrounded a handful of bowl games captivated an audience in such a unique manner. Before embarking on the resolutions of a new year, many Americans would spend this day huddled around televisions and radios hoping that their favorite team would win the Orange, Sugar, Fiesta, Cotton or Rose Bowl.

College football's current immersion in ambiguity has created an environment of contempt and doubt amongst its normally faithful congregation. The thirty two bowl games have also diluted the overall relevance and importance of the bowl season. In a time not too long ago, an appearance in a bowl game represented prestige and excellence. Today, an invitation to a majority of the numerous bowl games is a reward for mediocrity. Unfortunately, it has become a normal practice to see participants in a post season game with at least five losses or even a losing record. In some instances, the overall integrity of the bowl season has been compromised by the advent of cable television and the attractiveness of sports sponsorships.

In recent times, the American sports fan has been inundated with several irrelevant bowl games whose participants are regional in scope and lack a national presence. The postseason of college football is an exercise of endurance and patience. The bowl season begins a few days before Christmas and ends in the second week of January. By the end of the three weeks, several questions still exist about the validity of the national champion and the structure of the Bowl Championship Series. College football's inability to institute a playoff system could eventually lead to an exodus of fans and sponsors.

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During his much maligned commissionership, the National Hockey League's Gary Bettman has been viewed as the antithesis of innovation and prosperity. He has been criticized vociferously for the 2004/2005 lockout, franchise expansion into hockey challenged markets, cost certainty, the declining American audience and his partnerships with unfamiliar television networks just to name a few. However, his recent attempt at restoring credibility to a league that has lost its luster could prove to be his greatest contribution.

The nationally televised New Year's Day game between the Buffalo Sabres and the Pittsburgh Penguins encompassed all of the romantic qualities that the sport of hockey has to offer. The contest also showcased hockey's intrinsic value to a curious audience: stellar goaltending, highly skilled skaters, and the ever popular shootout. Even the casual fan could appreciate the sport's speed, precision and aggressiveness in its natural habitat. Most importantly, the Winter Classic presented the league with an opportunity to promote its most marketable player since the likes of Wayne Gretzky. Pittsburgh's Sidney Crosby was finally given the appropriate venue to demonstrate his immense talent for all to see. While the participants and 71,000 fans had to endure freezing temperatures and inclement weather, the sport of hockey finally awoke from years of hibernation and procrastination.

While the Winter Classic in Buffalo was deemed an overwhelming success, it is now the responsibility of Gary Bettman and the National Hockey League to capitalize on this momentous occasion. An event of this magnitude needs continuity since an interested audience has already been established. It would be in the National Hockey League's best interests to seriously consider an annual outdoor contest that takes place on New Year's Day. Gary Bettman could conceivably introduce American sports fans to a new tradition on New Year's Day. However, time is of the essence.

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