

Utah's Championship Claim

The 2008 college football season ended with a number of teams claiming to be the best team in the country.

- Florida (13-1): won the BCS championship game vs Oklahoma
- Utah (13-0): only team to finish undefeated, beat Alabama in the Sugar Bowl
- Texas (12-1): defeated Oklahoma in the regular season
- USC (12-1): defeated Penn State in the Rose Bowl

First let's dispense with the notion that a **best** team exists and can be known. Here are a few reasons:

1. Football is not a one-dimensional game. Due to matchups and the general complication of the game, Florida might be better than Texas, Texas might be better than USC, and USC might be better than Florida. By **better**, I mean "would win a majority in a long series of games played under neutral conditions."
2. The winner of one game is not necessarily the better team. A coin weighted 55-45 may come up tails quite often. So even if a **best** team does exist, a short season won't always provide evidence of that fact. Extending this idea, a playoff tournament champion is not necessarily the best team in the field.
3. Team strength is not constant in time. The best team at the end of the regular season may not be the best during bowl week. Intangibles are always a confounding factor. One team may be the best when it plays at peak level, but inconsistency may damage their claim to be the best over the long run.

So there may not be a best team, and if there is, we can only hope to guess who it is based on evidence that is inherently sparse and random. Let's therefore relax our mandate, so that instead trying to crown the **best** team, we seek the **most deserving** team. This selection can be either subjective (e.g. via human polls), or objective (via a computer algorithm). Either way, certain criteria are implicitly or explicitly assumed. There are a few generally agreed upon indicators of deserving teams:

- a good win-loss record (undefeated is ideal) - "you play to win the game"
- a tough schedule (quality wins)
- head-to-head wins over other teams competing for the title
- finishing strong (early season losses are discounted)
- style (ugly wins may be discounted)

One voter may focus on record, strength of schedule, and body of work, while another emphasize style and recent performance. In fact, the criteria form a continuum. At one extreme, we reward teams for what they have accomplished. At the other, we try to predict hypothetical future performance. My personal opinion is that when crowning a champion, the former should be our goal. Bookmakers will focus on the latter.

In summary, I cannot argue that Utah is better than Florida, but I will argue that they are deserving of the 2008 national championship:

- Even though the Mountain West is not historically a strong conference, in 2008 they were 9-6 vs BCS conference teams (including 6-2 vs the Pac-10).
- Utah attempted to play a strong non-conference schedule: Michigan and Oregon State.
- Utah beat Oregon State, and Oregon State beat USC.

- Utah beat Alabama, Alabama beat Mississippi, and Mississippi beat Florida
- Mississippi beat Texas Tech, and Texas Tech beat Texas
- Utah is not a fluke - they have had other highly ranked teams in recent years.
- Utah dominated Alabama at least as convincingly as Florida did.
- Utah was the only undefeated team, and played a sufficiently tough schedule.
- The gap in schedule strength between Utah and other contenders is exaggerated by preconceived bias. Ask yourself if an undefeated Ohio State team would have been awarded the championship for playing the same caliber schedule.
- In 1984, BYU was crowned champion despite a much weaker strength of schedule than Utah had in 2008.

Taken individually, some of these are weak arguments, but as a whole I believe they make a compelling case. I'm not at all upset that Florida is the official national champion - they did it by the BCS rules set up before the season started. My purpose here is to justify the position that Utah could also claim a championship from any system that ranks them #1 (such as many of the BCS computers). As the only undefeated team, they have no losses to explain away.

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