

College Football Playoff Media Conference

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CFP Media Conference

BILL HANCOCK: Good afternoon, everyone. Thank you for joining our call on rather short notice.

First, I want to thank the members of the working group for their diligence over the past two years. They were delayed by COVID, but they kept at it, and the result was the recommendation that they presented today. We all owe them a debt of gratitude. They're with me today, Bob Bowlsby, Greg Stankey, Craig Thompson and Jack Swarbrick.

Today is an exciting day for college football fans. I do want to caution you, per the release, that there's much more work to be done. There's research to be done and many conversations to be had, but the working group did present its recommendation to the full management committee to change the playoff from four teams to 12.

The four-team playoff has been a really big success since it was created nine years ago, actually almost nine years ago this week. And it remains a big success. It's been great for college football. We've been delighted with it.

But the presidents, our board asked the management committee to review the CFP when we were six years in, and the management committee has done just that.

This proposal at its heart was created to provide more participation for more players and more schools. In a nutshell, that is the working group's message: More participation.

Let me tell you what comes next and then we'll be happy to take your questions. This is just a proposal from a



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subcommittee, and it's a proposal that the subcommittee is unified on and is very excited about. For the first time today, they got to present their colleagues the entire proposal.

By the way, I'm going to call time out and say this is a good time to remind you that the CFP management committee that we talk about so much is the 10 conference commissioners plus Jack Swarbrick.

But what's next? Well, in the next few days, the 11 members of the management committee will discuss the recommendation with people on campus, their conferences, presidents, AD, coaches and student-athletes. We want all their input.

The management committee will meet next week in Chicago to decide whether or not to recommend this plan or any other plan, frankly, to the presidents and chancellors, the board of managers, 11 board of manager members, and they are the people who will be in charge of making the decisions.

If a favorable recommendation is made to those presidents and chancellors they will receive the proposal at their meeting on June 22 in Dallas, and if the presidents decide to allow this proposal or any alternative proposal to be considered, we anticipate that there would be a study period over the summer to explore what we believe or what we know to be many details that still remain to be worked out.

The earliest, and I repeat that, the earliest that any final decision could be made by the board would be in September. It certainly could be later, but the earliest is September.

So that's it. We're very excited about where we are, couldn't be happier with the working group's work, what they've done so far, and no matter what happens next, college football will thrive, CFP will thrive, and frankly it's been heartening to see how many people care about this great game that we all love so much.

We'll be happy to take your questions.



Q. What are the implications for player safety here with four teams playing 16 games and two playing 17?

JACK SWARBRICK: Well, I'll take a first shot at that. One of the things that was so attractive about the application of the bye in this model was the positive impact it had in that regard. When you add the bye to the fact that it's unlikely teams in the playoff will also play in a bowl game, that means in the first round, a third of the teams or a third of the total field of 12 will play the same number of games they would have in a normal year with a bowl game.

The bye works so that the most any one of those teams could play in addition would be one game.

The route to get to 17 in this model isn't impossible, but there have been a lot of things built in to make that highly unlikely.

Q. Highly unlikely but still probable. What concerns are there? Is this just take it as it comes?

JACK SWARBRICK: I'm not sure how it could be probable because you'd have to assume to get to the maximum number of games you played in a conference championship, you still qualified for the playoffs in the first round, and then as a 5 through 12 seed you ran the table. Because remember, you're netting out a bowl game you're not playing.

Q. Jack, piggybacking off of that, you mentioned about playoff teams playing potentially in a bowl game, so is it possible that playoff teams that exit after the first round could play in a bowl game?

JACK SWARBRICK: It's not for the working group to tackle that issue. My comment merely reflected the fact purely from a scheduling perspective, regardless of what might ultimately conferences might decide with regard to their bowl games. There would be a real challenge in still participating in the first round and finding a bowl spot.

Q. I'll ask you specifically about Notre Dame. Two questions: One, can Notre Dame qualify for a bye? And two, if not, what are your thoughts on that?

JACK SWARBRICK: We cannot qualify for a bye. It's limited to the four highest ranked conference champions. I look forward to never hearing again about how we played one less game or don't have a conference championship.

Q. Anyone in the working group, I was curious if someone could speak to what 12 brings to the table that an eight-team format does not.

GREG SANKEY: Well, I'll offer some insight from one perspective, and others have, no doubt, others.

My sense is there's been an expectation for automatic access. I don't think automatic access works if you're reducing opportunities for those teams that are highly ranked. In other words, going to eight and allocating a certain number of AQs, thereby reducing effectively the at-large numbers is not something that really resonated from my perspective.

12 obviously finds a halfway point between those conference champions that could have access, the six best, and then six of the most highly rated teams. Now, there's going to be intersection between highly ranked teams and conference champions, but ultimately that is one of the opportunities that 12 presents.

I think it's also important to note you're going to have teams that might be conference champions ranked outside the 12, and one of the potential conversation points going forward is that 12th ranked team not being a participant. That seemed really difficult to do at eight. Not that it's not going to be problematic at 12, and when you look at basketball, it's problematic at 69 on the men's side and 65 at the women's side.

Overall the model presented some opportunities that weren't there with eight.

Q. I guess I could direct my question to the guys who haven't spoken yet to force them to have to. One very, very short and simple one. When you talk about the seeding not necessarily changing, that would mean 1 would always play the winner of 8-9. I just want to make sure I clarify that.

GREG SANKEY: It's going to be a standard bracket, 5-12, 6-11, so on, so forth, and they would -- that would be the only fair way to construct the bracket.

Q. So the winner of 8-9 plays the winner of 1, the winner of 7-10 plays the winner of 2, not necessarily the winner of 5-12 plays 1.

GREG SANKEY: Standard bracket.

Q. The other thing was the idea of having home games, I think one of the things that's jumped out at people is oh, great home games for those first-round games, but no home games for the highest ranked teams. That seemed to be a bit imbalanced. Why such dedication to keeping the bowls involved in this new format if it comes to be?

CRAIG THOMPSON: I think certainly the history and the commitment to bowls have made to the process and giving them an opportunity to continue to be relevant in the system. It's something that, again, all these points are going to have an opportunity to be discussed. These are the recommendation of four people. There's seven other commissioners that will get to weigh in next week in Chicago and then some, and ultimately the board will make a determination. But simply to keep the bowl system in some terms relevant and to recognize those people that want to participate in the semifinals and quarters.

JACK SWARBRICK: I would add I think this model, in conjunction with the bowls, gives college football an opportunity to reassert ownership of New Year's Eve and New Year's Day in a really powerful way. That's such an important part of the tradition of college football, and this allows us to reassert that.

Q. The argument against a large playoff field for decades has been the effect it would have on the regular season, about the stakes of any individual game, and obviously looking back at some past years we can see that there will probably be three-loss teams or maybe even more in this playoff. How did you guys balance the effect that would have on the regular season? And as people who have teams who play in those high-stakes games in your conferences, what do you envision the regular season will look like now if it's feeding into a 12-team playoff?

JACK SWARBRICK: I'll take a first shot at that. One of the things we were responding to was the concentration that's occurred. 78 1/2 percent of all the opportunities in the first seven years have gone to five teams, not necessarily a model that promotes the regular season.

When we did the analysis of this, one of the things that jumped out was in the current model, in the last five years -- well, in four of the last five years, in the initial selection, no one has moved further than from seventh to the Final Four, which doesn't promote the long-term interest over the season that we might like.

Under this proposal, in every year -- in two of the years you've gone non-ranked opponents in the first Selection Committee report -- three, I'm sorry, three non-ranked opponents that wind up playing in the playoff, and you've got others -- one, two, three, four -- five ranked in the 20s in the first poll that wind up in the playoffs.

We think that's a model that keeps a lot more teams alive a lot longer into the season and generates interest.

BOB BOWLSBY: I would add to that, I think this does just

the opposite. I think it creates energy in October and November that we've actually spent some time talking about what has the playoff done to the regular season. And while it heightens the excitement for a very few teams, it also makes it easy to say, well, they're now out of contention or they're now out of contention.

The practical effect of this will be that with four or five weeks to go in the season, there will be 25 or 30 teams that have a legitimate claim and practical opportunity to participate. That should make for an extraordinarily good October and November.

GREG SANKEY: I'll jump in, as well. I have felt as we've looked at the College Football Playoff impact on the game, we have to take a step back from the assertion that one particular number does or does not impact the regular season.

Clearly an objective when the College Football Playoff was implemented was making sure there was a strong regular season, and I think Bob and Jack both illustrated a different number, a number other than four isn't necessarily exclusive of a meaningful regular season. In fact, you can bring teams in to more higher level of attention, a greater opportunity for postseason access in the playoff.

That has, one could estimate, a positive impact on the regular season.

You know, we also -- Nicole asked about 12. One of the factors in my mind is I still think postseason football beyond the playoff is important, and it's impossible to know exactly where that line might be. That's whether it's regular season or even postseason. There's not an absolute drawn around any particular number for playoff teams.

I think 12 also allows there to still be bowl opportunities that could be substantive for teams not in the playoff, and I want to make sure that's a clear part of my communication around 12.

BILL HANCOCK: I want to add one thing to what everybody said. 12 keeps September important, and it also keeps November important. So for me, as I watched the working group work through the options, that was a real benefit of 12. Both September and November are helped.

Q. To whoever wants to answer this, I think most fans, players, coaches would talk about how great -- I heard your answer to why the quarterfinals will be at a bowl, but most people look at beyond-campus environment, just being such a spectacular part of college football, the pageantry and the traditions. Why go so far from that and actually expand the neutral-site games that



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take the game away from the communities that support the sport all year-round away from the fans? You could be asking your championship teams to go to four consecutive neutral-site games counting their conference title game. In general, why the lack of embrace of trying to play as many games on the sport's great home campuses as opposed to these neutral-site NFL stadiums somewhere?

BOB BOWLSBY: I'll jump in. I think that we are doing just what was stated earlier. I think we've always honored the sanctity and the tradition of the bowl environment, and we have consistently either through the four-team playoff or the New Year's Six games honored that and tried to do things that help everybody in the bowl and college football ecosystem.

I think you also run into just the very practical aspects of -- I'm not sure that playing in East Lansing, Michigan, on January 7th is a really good idea. I think those games probably do in significant ways favor warm weather schools. But there has to be some accounting taken of stadiums that have to be winterized in the months of December and January and the like.

There are some practical aspects to it. There are some philosophical aspects to it. But I think, generally speaking, we tried to strike a compromise that recognizes there's an opportunity for some home games but also recognizes that particularly New Year's Day, as was mentioned before, has long been a bastion of college football.

We chose intentionally to honor that.

Q. I know there's been a long track record of comments I'm sure even from some of you over the years about concerns with lengthening the season and the grueling nature of the playoff as it is now. The way I look at what you've proposed here, you're basically going from August until at least the end of January, and my question is does the impending name, image and likeness rights coming for college athletes play any role in gaining more comfort with adding even more of a workload for some of these student-athletes?

GREG SANKEY: Well, we've walked through the effort to balance opportunities with the addition of games. That was not a conversation centered from my perspective, and I think my colleagues would agree on name image and likeness, but we all know that we're going through a transformational time around college sports and including college football.

But back to the number of games, to add opportunities to

the postseason playoff adds games. One can observe, this is too many, that's not enough, whether that's opportunities or games, that's always going to be there.

Yet I think as the review group looked at structures, this structure seemed to find a balance, and to Dan's question about respecting the tradition of bowl games or creating on-campus opportunities, I would anticipate every one of these elements to be a central part of a dialogue in the next few weeks and months as people react to the format review's work.

I think there's value in that conversation. This is not a dictate, this is a fulfillment of an assignment and an opportunity to look at how might the game continue to transform itself but also keeping in mind that delicate balance that does exist around so many elements, first and foremost the support of our student-athletes.

JACK SWARBRICK: I would just echo Greg's comments. The presidents gave us a list of evaluation criteria to focus on, and first on that list was student health and welfare with several sub-elements of that. That was first and foremost in or conversation as Greg said, it was balancing that and looking for ways to create opportunity but also be very mindful of what the impact of additional games would be.

As we said earlier, with the way it works, I think it's safe to say that clearly sort of objectively the majority of teams are only going to play one game. Some will play no additional games from what they would in a regular season, and we've addressed the opportunity issue.

Right now a football player has a 3 percent chance of participating in the postseason tournament. His colleagues in basketball and baseball and hockey, they have a 24, 22 percent chance of participating.

So we were trying to balance the two, and I think Greg said it perfectly. There was a lot about this that we thought struck the balance, but it's a starting point for a dialogue.

Q. Jack, I hear what you're saying about one additional game for most of the teams involved, but I do think that teams used to play 12 or 13 games and now you're at 16. It's one additional from one additional that you put in a couple years ago, and I think that's more to what I'm getting at.

JACK SWARBRICK: Yeah, I acknowledge that. Just keep in mind that if the bowls net out the way we think they will, it's no additional for a number of teams.

Q. I'm curious, in terms of increased participation being a goal, was there a metric for fan disengagement



or fan ennui, or however you want to characterize it, that struck the working group as something that, okay, we need to address this? Was there a trend there or a particular way of defining that issue that struck you?

BOB BOWLSBY: Well, I can take a crack at that. We probably underestimated -- "we" being the A5 commissioners -- how difficult it was to be on the outside looking in on a four-team playoff. I think that was a factor. There was certainly lots of consternation around those of us that were left out at one time or the other, so I think that was an element of it.

I think the idea that greater participation could take place was always sort of underlying the very essence of talking about this, but we also -- I have to say, I was proud of our subgroup because I think we started at very different positions. I think we -- and I want to give particular credit to Jack as our leader and to Greg, because the SEC is going to do just fine whether we stay at four or go to eight or move to some other number, and I really feel like everybody that was in the room was looking at this from the standpoint of what is best for college football and what is best for the participants.

When you start at that position, I think we had the luxury of having, as Bill said, a model that is clearly superior to any predecessor organization, but looking at it from the standpoint of how can you make something that's good and well-respected and well-accepted even better. It isn't the absence of controversy, it's thinking about things like what makes the regular season better, what helps us to feature college football.

You know, as we start to see some young people opt out of their postseason experiences, you wonder if there will be as much of that among a larger number of teams that have a dog in the fight for a National Championship.

You know, I think over time we evolved. I can't say that there was -- at least for me, I can't say that there was a specific motivation where I said to myself, if we don't do anything else, we've got to fix this aspect of the playoff. I think we've had the luxury of taking something that was better than anything we've ever had before and trying to find ways to make it better.

I think, from my vantage point, that is how we've arrived where we are.

Q. What kind of feedback have you gotten from Ohio State and Alabama and Clemson who have been in the playoff a lot of years? Have you gotten any feedback from them about how they'd react to a larger playoff?

GREG SANKEY: We're early in the process. I think my teams are pretty confident of success generally. That doesn't mean it happens. But questions like we've had here about number of games, placement of games, when would the season conclude, why does this work, what does it mean for the regular season, I think that's the kind of healthy conversation we would expect.

Q. Jack, why would Notre Dame and other independents support a format where they can't get that first-round bye, especially knowing your program has finished in the top four the last seven years? The second question would be, eight was such a popular format every year, like the last couple years, it was all about talking to eight. What led to skipping eight to get to 12?

JACK SWARBRICK: Well, both sort of go to the same dynamic that Bob talked about. I'll take the second part of that first. None of us entered this process two years ago at the same place, and it's been fascinating as we worked through the analysis to watch each of us evolve in our thinking about it and to reach a very firm consensus by the end of it.

I can tell you this is -- we all serve on a million committees in this business. This was the most rewarding experience I've participated in.

The engagement of my colleagues, the fact that you guys didn't get a leak for two years, it was just a great process. It took us someplace we didn't fully anticipate. That of course includes for me. I didn't go into it thinking 12, and I certainly wasn't thinking about implications of 12. But you needed to keep the broader interest of the game in mind, and we all understood that.

From my perspective, it was an appropriate trade-off to get a model that I thought was the right one for college football. Even though we don't play in a conference, I recognize the importance of strong conferences and providing opportunity to the G5. We wanted to do that.

And then finally as I said somewhat sarcastically earlier in this, I do think it's helpful to us to be able to say, look, Alabama put its position at risk in its title game, or Oklahoma put its position at risk in its conference title game. We're doing the same thing in the first round. We are on par in that regard, other than not enjoying a potential 1 through 4 seed.

Q. Greg, I believe you're the associate commissioner of the SEC back in 2008 when some form of the playoff then known as the "Plus-One" was bandied about at a hotel in Florida as an idea and then shot down. I bring

that up just to say, we've come a long way in 13-ish years to going from not being able to speak the word "playoff" to 12 teams. I know your old boss, friend, and mentor Mike Slive was very passionate about this. I wonder if you'd speak about how we've gotten to the cusp of 12 from being scared of saying the word.

GREG SANKEY: Well, there's a lot in that question, so I was trying to figure out which hotel and when, whether or not I might have been at that meeting. Was that the one where everybody was crowded onto the same sofa outside a meeting room?

Q. It was '08. It was I think a Westin in Hollywood, Florida.

GREG SANKEY: I think that's it. There's like six of you crammed into a couch and some of you sitting on the floor as people would go to the restroom. Maybe we can see that we've changed our approach because you're in comfortable places listening to a conference call as opposed to chasing people down a hallway.

But the reality is there is transformational change happening all around us. All around us. We were assigned a task, which is at the halfway point of the College Football Playoff, let's take a step back and see where we are. This is not 2008. I am not my predecessor. That provides a bit of freedom to think about what's in front of us.

We've got seven years of experience now with the College Football Playoff. I heard from Jim Delany that the brand impact, if you will, or the impact on your conference when it was a two-team playoff was negligible when you were left out. When we expanded to four, it was enormous, and others have experienced that. I've laid awake at night worrying about that reality.

We've had a part of the country not involved generally. We took a deep dive, and Jack identified some of the give and take on his end. I've been happy at four. I've been very clear about that. It's worked. It's served its purposes, yet we have to take a step back and look at the game, look at what we're being asked to do as leaders.

So that work has produced an opportunity for a conversation around a 12-team College Football Playoff format.

Will there be detractors? Will there be criticism? Absolutely, but we were charged with leading a conversation, and we know that not everything is going to be perfect or ideal, and we'll continue to work to see if we can have the kind of college football postseason that builds

meaning into the regular season, determines a clear national champion and provides a lot of opportunity and excitement in between.

Q. Do you think Mike is smiling today?

GREG SANKEY: I had a picture last week, being in Oklahoma City with him in 2014, it was the healthy Mike I saw before he had the cancer fight, and he was smiling that day. So in response, that's the picture that's anchored in my mind was literally what popped up on my Facebook timeline last week was the smiling Mike Slive with a full head of hair and a lot of energy.

Q. Getting back to the quarterfinals and the bowls, you mentioned, Bob mentioned not wanting to play a game that late in the year or early in the year in East Lansing but wouldn't you be doing that anyway potentially in the first week? Is it somewhat ignorant of what the fans will face if they're asked to travel three times to watch their team win the National Championship?

BOB BOWLSBY: Well, I would suggest that there's a pretty good alternative right in your living room if you don't want to travel to the games. I'm sure we have some people that travel three weeks in a row, but the majority pick and choose. Some go to champ games, some go to bowl games. I don't think it's accurate to assume it's the same cadre of people that go to every place on every occasion.

The ones that do are largely family members, and I think we've done a good job with the CFP providing travel expenses and the like for travel of family members to participate in the CFP playoff games.

You know, are there some logistics to it? Is it different than what we've experienced previously? Yes to both. But I don't know that it's fair to assume that 25,000 are going to travel to each site three weeks in a row and they're going to be the exact same people.

Q. I've heard the argument you want to own January 1st but you can have games in South Bend or Norman on January 1st. Have the higher-seeded teams get the host games, because it seems a little weird that you have higher seeded games not getting to host but lower-seeded teams getting to host, and is that not a better television product anyway, a full campus stadium versus maybe it's full in an NFL stadium?

BOB BOWLSBY: I guess reasonable people can disagree on that.

One of the things that's a challenge with the home stadiums is if you're sold out during the regular season, where do you find the tickets for the visiting team.

Q. You don't because the higher seeded team gets more.

GREG SANKEY: Yeah, I'll add -- let's go back to where we started, which is our review committee spent a lot of time on different options, different conversations. One of those produced a respect for what has been built around bowl games, and those have provided pretty special moments over time a playoff structure can do the same. There's also a significant advantage built in to the top four teams by not having to play, by having opportunity to watch their opponent in a contest, one of which they're going to be playing, and yeah, did that debate take place? Certainly.

I actually think there's some stress around playing even that first-round set of games on campuses with December commencements and placement of those games, the ability of some of these communities to host on short notice that type of influx.

There are talking points certainly on each side, but the format review committee had a healthy conversation about the traditions and while we're breaking away from tradition, one of the parts that's still respected in the recommendation is the importance of bowl games.

Q. It's hard for me to imagine that we would get to this point, have this press conference today and talk about this in such detail if you didn't receive a favorable response from your peers earlier today when you presented them with it. My question is what obstacles, if any, would prevent you guys from coming to a consensus on this next week?

BOB BOWLSBY: Well, to be clear, we did not get any input from our colleagues this morning. This was an informational process that was intended to lay this out. We didn't have the luxury of sharing information broadly, and we were, as we mentioned earlier, we swore ourselves to a cloistered treatment of the issues.

This morning was really a download so that our colleagues could go back with their ADs and presidents and talk about what their institutional and conference positions are to be.

We didn't seek, nor were there any comments provided, that would give us indication of how anybody is feeling about it.

Now, there may be some of those that come out over a period of time while we're socializing this with the multitude

of constituencies that we have but we haven't done that to this point in time.

Q. Do you foresee any specific obstacles, though, that would prevent a unanimous agreement next week?

JACK SWARBRICK: I think several people have referenced it, but this is the start of a dialogue. We've had the benefits of two years of talking to each other about it.

I suspect from our colleagues we'll hear many of the same issues you've raised collectively today, and we look forward to their input. We look forward to the perspective they'll bring to it. As we said when we set up this sequence of three meetings, if you will, we have reached a point where it's critical that we get the input from our colleagues, and we're looking forward to getting that.

GREG SANKEY: I'll go back to Bill's opening statement about this is a point, and there's still much to come. So certainly can we foresee things? Absolutely. We probably could have written the questions here, and as you can hear from your questions, there are different perspectives, and I think we will have the opportunity to review that.

I think as Bob noted and Jack noted, we've all had to move in different ways. It'll be interesting to see how our colleagues react and then from there the board of managers. It ultimately makes this decision based on guidance from each conference.

BILL HANCOCK: Just want to thank everyone for joining the call. Appreciate the candor that I know you felt like you've heard from the four members of the working group, and thank them again for their work. Thank you, take care, and we look forward to seeing you down the road.

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