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Presidents Seem Ready to Punt on B.C.S. Playoff

By **PETE THAMEL**

When the college football season ended in January, the outgoing Bowl Championship Series coordinator, Mike Slive, declared a “season of discussion” about the future of the series. Talk about change in the postseason structure had percolated through the bowl season as lopsided matchups and sluggish television ratings provided a jarring contrast to a compelling regular season.

The annual B.C.S. meetings involving 11 conference commissioners and Notre Dame’s athletic director, which start Sunday in Florida, were seen as an important milepost on the way to any changes. But in the past three months, the optimism has turned to pessimism and the “season of discussion” appears likely to be nothing but talk.

“I don’t know if we’re in a place to have a serious conversation,” said Notre Dame Athletic Director Kevin White, echoing the sentiments of several high-ranking officials interviewed last week.

The reason these meetings were seen as a potential impetus for change is that any agreement would have to come before negotiations for a new television contract begin in September.

Two years remain on Fox’s \$320 million deal with the B.C.S., and those television rights would be more valuable if there were a better way of determining a national champion. Although there is no chance of the N.F.L.-style playoff that many people want, the most realistic alternative, the so-called Plus One model, is expected to be discussed this week.

John Swofford, the Atlantic Coast Conference commissioner who is also the new B.C.S. coordinator, said that the model would seed the top four teams at the end of the regular season; after No. 1 played No. 4 and No. 2 played No. 3, the winners would meet in the national title game. But perhaps the most glaring sign that the Plus One will not materialize is that the commissioners who have been open to change have not gathered any momentum.

“I haven’t really seen any hard and fast, black-and-white proposals,” said Craig Thompson, the Mountain West commissioner.

The lack of momentum behind a specific model combined with opposition from the Big Ten and the Pac-10 mean that the status quo appears to be the likely route. Swofford stressed that any change had to be approved unanimously.

“It isn’t really a case of being open-minded,” Tom Hansen, the Pac-10 commissioner, said. “It’s a case of having certain goals and certain historical relationships that we are very protective of.”

The Pac-10 and the Big Ten have a television contract with the Rose Bowl and ABC separate from Fox’s B.C.S. deal. That relationship with the Rose Bowl is something the conferences cherish for its tradition and its high television ratings.

Jim Delany, commissioner of the Big Ten, said the four-seeded-teams model would soon morph into an 8-team or 16-team playoff. He is adamantly against any playoff.

“The one that seeds them, it is what it is,” Delany said. “It has a tail and it barks. It’s a four-team playoff.”

Nothing scares university presidents, to whom the commissioners report, more than the potential of a football playoff. E. Gordon Gee, president of Ohio State, said: “You’ve got to persuade 60 university presidents to move to a playoff system. That is just not going to happen, at least in this generation.”

The likely next window for significant change in the postseason would be 2014. That is when the Pac-10 and Big Ten’s deal with ABC for the Rose Bowl expires.

“With the lack of contractual symmetry, it’s a futile exercise in the short term,” Notre Dame’s White said.

Until then, the biggest drama is probably going to be whether Fox keeps the rights to the B.C.S. Fox is pleased with the results so far, including the ratings, and it will probably need to pay much more next time. College football’s popularity, as measured by regular-season ratings and attendance, has increased significantly in the past few years.

Ed Goren, the president of Fox Sports, said that the relationship with the B.C.S. had been a “lovefest,” and that retaining the contract was the “No. 1 priority.”

“If there are modifications in the system, I’m sure we’ll be as interested in the relationship,” Goren said. “But it’s not for us to say. There are already probably too many agendas and voices to sort this out. They don’t need any help from us.”

The commissioners have been generally pleased with Fox’s presentation of the B.C.S. games, as the network comes through on its promise to preserve the flavor of college sports. Fox has been helped by two rich story lines the past two years, Boise State and Hawaii of the Western Athletic Conference each having an undefeated regular season and reaching a B.C.S. game.

Fox has a one-month exclusive negotiating window in September, though ESPN has expressed its interest in acquiring the games.

“I think that sort of goes to our interest,” said Burke Magnus, ESPN’s senior vice president for college sports programming. “We are interested now, and we’d be more interested if it was slightly tweaked.”

There is a feeling among the commissioners that the B.C.S., though not immune to criticism, has overcome some of its earlier controversies and that the public has developed an understanding of it. The biggest roadblock to change may come from administrators who do not want to water down the regular season, which they say has a playoff-like feel every week. The Big Ten’s Delany and Wright Waters, commissioner of the Sun Belt Conference, mentioned the lack of buzz surrounding regular-season college basketball.

And while the ending of the football season may generate controversy every season, the buildup is among the best in sports.

“I would say that a lot of people from an operation and a working standpoint seem to feel pretty good about the B.C.S. as it exists,” Swofford said.