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FORMULA SAYS STATESMEN WOULD BE TOP-TIER I-AA TEAM

by Tim Munn - The Cleveland News Leader



Have you ever caught yourself wondering where this year's Delta State football team would rank if they were a member of the NCAA's Division I-AA instead of Division II?

What if the Statesmen were somehow thrust into Division I, how would they match-up against the likes of

Southern California, Ole Miss or even top-ranked Ohio State?

Well thanks to Jim Ashburn and Paul Colvert, a couple of extreme football fans from Huntsville, Ala., these somewhat hard to imagine scenarios can be looked at in a logical and realistic manner.

The two men, who are physicists by trade, teamed up in the late '90's to start "Atomic Football.com" after growing tired of the various outlandish polls in the Bowl Championship Series (BCS) rankings. Ashburn, a graduate of Alabama-Huntsville who in 2002 was

inducted into UAH's "Alumni of Achievement", said he'd finally gotten fed up with the rankings system.

"I guess I first started tinkering with this back in '94," Ashburn said. "Like a lot of folks, I'd gotten ticked off at the various polls. It seemed like they were mostly a popularity contest. You make your arguments about your team and the strength of schedule and that sort of thing.

"So I started tinkering with a formula on paper. I didn't actually try doing anything with the computer as far as writing software until '99. I'm not very proficient with that sort of thing. I guess it was about that time Paul (Colvert) had

watched me suffer through and he said, 'Let me help you out and I can redo that for you.' So that's where it started to come to life."

And as far as the Statesmen? Where would they rank as a member of Division I-AA and Division I-A? According to "Atomic Football", which can be

accessed at www.atomicfootball.com, the 2006

Statesmen would be the 33rd best Division I-AA team in the nation and the 109th best Division I-A.



“However you want to read the teams, there’s always a lot of uncertainty and of course that’s what makes it fun,” Ashburn said. “You can argue until you’re blue in the face about who’s better and who’s not, but that’s what makes college football unique.”

According to their website, the men wanted to develop a simple model-based solution to the problem known to mathematicians as “ranking by pairwise comparison”.

“What makes football rather unique among sports, and college football in particular, is the relatively small number of games,” Ashburn said through a release on the “Atomic Football” website. “Given also movement in recent years to de-emphasize “margin of victory” and limit rankings to using only wins and losses (a favorable trend in my opinion), the problem has not necessarily become easier.

“Using only win/loss information, each game is reduced to a single bit of information. Thus for the combined set of about 716 Division I-A, I-AA, II, III, and NAIA teams scheduled to play about 3720 games this year (2006), we will have 3720 bits of data at the conclusion of the season. From this tiny bit of data, we hope to accurately rank 716 teams. Is it any wonder that this is such a controversial problem?”

A major problem with the current BCS, according to both men, is the problem that occurs if a lower tier team defeats a team in the upper echelon. Many of the current members of the BCS do not take this possibility, albeit remote, into consideration and according to Ashburn, that’s where the problem lies.

“One of our concerns,” Ashburn said, “was how to handle these inter-divisional games. In fact, I know some of the guys who actually contribute to the BCS ignore games between Division I-A and lower division opponents. One of them actually expressed his concern that if a highly-ranked team lost to a Division I-AA opponent he wouldn’t

reflect that in his rankings. It’s unlikely that USC is going to go 10-1 with a loss to a I-AA team, but it’s possible. So we just wanted to cover all the bases.

“So right from the outset we started ranking everybody. We ranked them all as one big group, although we don’t publish them (on the website) that way. But if you look at our composite ratings, and you notice the highest rated team in Division II you can look at the number and then look at the I-A and see where they might fall in I-A. We can actually tell how good the divisions are relative to each other. If a team wanted to move up from one division to another we could probably give you a pretty good idea on how well they can expect to do.”

While “Atomic Football” is certainly recognized nationwide, currently it is not a member of the BCS. But Ashburn quickly added that Colvert and himself would like to be included.

“We would love to be a part of the BCS, I’m not going to hide that fact,” Ashburn said. “But not simply because we want to be, but because we feel like we have a good product. From a mathematician’s point of view, (ranking teams) is really not an easy problem. Most sports aren’t that tough, but what makes college football unique is that the teams don’t play a lot of games.”

“We wanted to come up with an answer that at least handled that uncertainty the right way. But it’s difficult. If it were a solved problem, there wouldn’t be six BCS computers out there and there wouldn’t be nearly as many arguments. There’s not a consensus on what the right solution is but we think we have the best solution out there.”

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