End of an Era: Spillover Effects of Power Conference Membership to Non-Revenue Sport Success

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The purpose of this study is to examine the impact of changes in the college football postseason on the postseason participation of women’s non-revenue sports. It is expected that because of large television contracts that went to the Bowl Championship Series /Power 5 (BCS/P5) conferences (Dennie, 2012), greater surplus resources would be available to non-revenue BCS/P5 sport teams resulting in increased postseason success of BCS/P5 schools and a decrease of success for schools from other conferences.

Changes in the way the college football postseason is structured have fundamentally altered intercollegiate athletics (Dennie, 2012; Hoffer & Pincin, 2015). The implementation of the Bowl Championship Series (BCS) and the College Football Playoffs (CFP) produced a demarcation between conferences, with some labeled as BCS/Power Five (P5) Conferences and others as non-BCS/non-P5. BCS/P5 conferences have been able to secure lucrative media rights deals, resulting in substantive financial benefits for their member institutions (Dennie, 2012). For example, studies have found increases in game-day attendance (Groza, 2010) and athletic department revenue for institutions that join BCS/Power-Five conferences (Hoffer & Pincin, 2015).

Though the financial impacts of changes in the structure of the football postseason (e.g., BCS and CFP) have garnered the most attention from scholars (e.g., Hoffer & Pincin, 2015) and practitioners (Wofle, 2016), there are other impacts to consider. Studies have examined the impact of these changes on factors such as rivalries (Havard & Eddy, 2013), the environment (Farley et al., 2017), and competitive balance (Perline et al., 2012). Upon closer examination, most studies that seek to examine the impact of changes in the football postseason on non-financial factors tend to focus on revenue-generating sports (i.e., football and men’s basketball). Conspicuously missing from the extant literature are the implications, financial or otherwise, on non-revenue generating sports, particularly women’s sports.

In this study, the top eight women’s softball, volleyball, soccer and softball teams as determined by participation in each sport’s respective postseason tournament will be categorized as BCS/P5 conference school or non-BCS/P5 school. AN ANOVA comparing the two groups at 3 times will be completed: the time period before the Bowl Alliance, a 4-year transition period after the Bowl Alliance, and the time since that 4-year transition window. Initial statistical results on softball suggest that with the changes of the football post-season, BCS/P5 teams have had much greater success. Among the reasons suggested for this domination by BCS/P5 schools is offered, including ability to recruit top coaching talent, improved facilities, increased recruiting budgets, and increased visibility via television.

An additional suggested implication is that the financial windfall offered to BCS/P5 conferences has had a positive impact on women’s sports at these schools. However, a counter argument could be made that these financial disadvantages have “unleveled” the playing field for more sports, nearly shutting out participation of non-BCS/P5 schools at the highest levels of postseason play. Additionally, it could be suggested that some non-BCS/P5 are now pushing more money towards revenue-generating sports at the expense of non-revenue sports at an attempt to attain membership in a P5 conference.