

Upfront

It doesn't feel like fall – 93 degrees with 85 percent humidity today – but football season is upon us. The Skinnie Pick 'Em Football Pool appears in our pages every year around this time.

It's a regular feature of the magazine, running through the bowl season. And it's interactive: You participate. If you don't know how you can play along, turn to page 24 for instructions and your first installment of this football year. It costs nothing to enter, and winners earn real prizes...plus, it's fun to have enhanced rooting interests as each autumn weekend unfolds.

The college football championship is definitive. There can only be one winner. When I was growing up, the champion was crowned by poll voters, injecting subjectivity – even bias – into the process. Today's playoff system is “fairer,” though it's not perfectly democratic, as humans determine tournament invitees.

There is only room for one at the top of the mountain, yet we all want to feel good about our teams. So, we find things to celebrate beyond on-field victory. I was born and raised in Pennsylvania...in Joe Paterno's Pennsylvania, to be exact. We believed that pollsters inequitably dismissed Northeastern football in favor of corrupted, academics-optional programs in other parts of the country. There was a sense of moral superiority emanating from Happy Valley, amped up by the occasional Heisman Trophy or undefeated season (which, sometimes resulted in no better than a final ranking of #2 or #3). Then, Jerry Sandusky happened. And Joe died.

Georgia is the best team in the country. From the beginning of 2022 through the end of February 2023, 13 team members were arrested by law enforcement officers. DUIs and deaths were some of the lowlights of some very bad news. But the winning continued and will again in a few days.

Google something like “most arrests among college football programs” and you get too many pages of results to sift through in one session. Let's choose one: A compilation of the “top-25” between 2010 and 2015 (I'm pretty sure things haven't gotten better since). Washington State (Go, Cougars?!, who knew?) led all comers with 31. But the SEC dominated, as it tends to do in college football, with Florida, Georgia, and Texas A&M all in the first-five; and Ole Miss, Tennessee, Alabama, Kentucky, LSU, Arkansas, and Auburn ensured the conference secured 10 of the 25 spots on the list. Which makes the surprise

showing from mid-major Marshall, with 16 arrests, an impressive (?) anomaly. All-in-all 479 student-athletes were booked and processed among the 25 most-prolifically lawless schools during the half-decade span.

If there's an unscientific correlation between criminal activity and gridiron wins – notwithstanding Washington State – then, perhaps, there's an inverse relationship between Saturday superiority and classroom success. The NCAA has developed a statistic to evaluate relative academic performance between sports programs: the Academic Progress Rate, or APR. In 2022, the Ivy League's Columbia University topped the list, with a score of 998. Northwestern, a Big-Ten school with an elite reputation for scholarship, tied for second at 996 with one its conference foes, Wisconsin. Numbers three through five might surprise you, though, suggesting that pigskin prowess doesn't necessarily dim the hopes that your middle linebacker might make the dean's list. Clemson, Alabama, and Mississippi each posted 995s. What about aforementioned Penn State? Squarely in the middle of the pack, sandwiched between South Alabama and Colorado State, with 958. South Alabama might well be the Harvard of Mobile, but it's not the kind of company that Big Ten presidents like to think they keep (evidenced by the recent handwringing over which parts of the Pac-12's rotting carcass to poach). My alma mater, Lehigh University, happy to forego ultimate athletic glory in favor of studious rigor, posted a respectable, if uninspired, 978, which is sadly subordinate to North Dakota, UNLV, and Ball State.



But what is APR, anyway? It quantifies a team's ability to keep its players in school and academically eligible. What incentive does a system have to give the best wide receiver in the country an F on his art history essay instead of a D so he has to sit out the next rivalry game? Academic eligibility requires self-policing, and a nine-figure athletic budget weighs heavily on potential classroom cops.

Alas, we love who we love. And we find reasons to justify it. Beauty and, to some extent, virtue, are in the eye of the beholder. Would I conveniently ignore a minor domestic battery charge in exchange for a Rose Bowl win? Sadly...probably, yes. But go to a game, linger at a tailgate, find yourself among a monochromatic sea of fans. It's hard to avoid getting swept into the fervor, momentarily blind to sobering, complex truths.

For now, don't worry about the broad societal implications...Just root for you team and play along with our pool on page 24 and in every issue for the next 10 or so.

To contact The Skinnie with your ideas, responses, letters and more, email us at mail@theskinnie.com

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