

Not So Secret Ballot

By Reg P. Wydeven
September 12, 2009

Ah autumn, and the return of football! While it's mildly nauseating to see Brett Favre in the loathsome purple and gold, I'm excited to watch Aaron Rodgers and also the new 3-4 defense of the Packers. I'm also looking forward to another season for my hometown Papermakers to see if they can return to form after a loss to a tough North team.

I'm probably least optimistic about the Badgers' season. They have underachieved the last few years, but hopefully they can turn things around in 2009. Unfortunately, they are not ranked in the top 20 teams in the country, a place where they had been accustomed to being.

I wished more college coaches would vote for Wisconsin to be ranked No. 1 in the country. I'm guessing they won't, because who each of the coaches vote for is published. However, starting next season, the American Football Coaches Association decided the post-conference championship game USA Today Coaches Poll ballots will become secret.

Of course, these ballots are the most important, as the Coaches Poll accounts for one-third of the Bowl Championship Series formula, along with the Associated Press Poll and Harris Interactive Poll. The BCS formula determines which teams will earn spots in BCS bowls that pay millions of dollars more to BCS schools and conferences than to their non-BCS counterparts. The formula also ultimately determines which two teams will play for the national championship.

According to University of South Carolina coach Steve Spurrier, secret balloting allows "a chance for some real hanky-panky." That's why Sports Illustrated's website, SI.com, has threatened to take legal action to ensure the coaches' votes are made public. Sports Illustrated also fears that in addition to the impact of secret ballots on bowl games, coaches may have a financial incentive to rank their own programs higher if their jobs depend on how they finish in the polls.

Before they would ever get to court, SI plans on taking advantage of the various states' Freedom of Information Acts to make open records requests for the coaches' ballots. Because most of the coaches in the Football Bowl Subdivision work for public universities, their votes are subject to their state's open records law. Sports Illustrated has actually started filing records requests this season in 30 different states with the employer of each of the 51 public school coaches who currently vote. Once received, SI.com will publish the contents of each of the ballots.

Sports Illustrated has also made record requests under the federal Freedom of Information Act for two schools: Air Force and Navy. While the Act specifically does not release records that are "properly and currently classified in the interest of national defense or foreign policy," the coaches' ballots probably aren't a matter of national security.

SI is leading this charge, claiming that as consumers, we make college football a multibillion dollar per year business. Therefore, we have a right to know how the voting takes place. Secondly, since most of the coaches in the poll work for athletic departments at schools subsidized by our tax dollars, we have a right to know how those coaches voted.

I suppose that if the Badgers end a season ranked as the No. 1 team, I won't really care how they got there. However, if they go undefeated and don't end up in the top spot, I sure as heck will want to know why not.