

National Frozen League should warm up to neutral sites



ALLEN R. SANDERSON

Owing to the vagaries of the Bowl Championship Series, we don't really know who was No. 1 in college football.

But now all of those ardent, obsessed fans out there who haven't been able to get a good night's sleep because of not knowing if USC or Georgia could have beaten LSU can now take some solace: Because of the National Football League's playoff system that allows games to be scheduled in outdoor stadiums close to the Arctic circle in January, we really don't know who's No. 1 in professional football after Super Bowl XLII either.

Most NFL fans enjoy watching league action on TV either in the comfort of their family rooms or with other rowdy, beer-sotted friends in sports bars. While it may have been exhilarating for those 70,000-plus fans who braved the sub- or near-zero temperatures and snow in Green Bay and Foxboro, Mass., in January, which may have made for good drama and I-was-there stories to tell grandchildren, simple survival loomed so large it did not create a stage on which the best athletes and teams could actually showcase their talent and strategic preparations.

In sports we go to some lengths to reduce — not eliminate entirely because of our perverse streaks and our inherent sympathies for the underdogs — the chance element (or, more formally, the error term). For example, we use better officiating crews for the more important contests and increase from four to six the number of umpires for the World Series. A one-game elimination tournament gives more than a sporting chance to the weaker opponent, something a lengthy series — best of seven — dampens considerably, so we create more “do-over” opportunities when practical.

Even then, chance elements — bad calls and strange caroms — can and do determine outcomes. And as the baseball season creeps further into the shorter, colder days, there is a risk of the Boys of Summer turning into the Boys of Halloween.

We also restrict some competitive



The cold of Green Bay made for great fan stories but not the best conditions for the athletes.

elements in the interest of level playing fields and fair play. For example, the NFL recently banned cheerleaders from “warming up” in front of the visiting team's bench. But we're not consistent here. Quiet is de rigueur while a golfer is putting at St. Andrews or a tennis player is serving at Wimbledon, but fans at Bulls games or in the Dawg Pound in Cleveland are permitted — and even encouraged — to disrupt opponents' concentration.

In baseball we rake the infield twice a game — it used to be only once — to ensure that an errant bounce doesn't hit a pebble. For the safety of players and the comfort of fans we postpone baseball games in inclement weather — rain or simply too cold. (In Arizona or Seattle, with retractable domes, relief from the heat or rain is only a button away.) Why not let Johan Santana bear down from a muddy mound on Albert Pujols trying to get his footing in the batter's box, and with raindrops dripping from the bills of their caps? Sure, these players could get hurt, and it's not a true test of skills, but the same holds for NFL players in the muddy slop of Heinz Field

in Pittsburgh or the frozen tundra of Green Bay.

It's not that the weather necessarily favors one team or play over another, but rather it precludes our seeing the best efforts and skills — other than survival — from these premier league athletes.

Why not let Tiger Woods and Phil Mickelson make their way up the 18th fairway at Augusta in their rain-soaked socks and figure out how to sink a putt on a green with puddles? Or have Serena Williams serve to her sister Venus on a rain-splotched court? The conditions are the same for both players — a level but wet playing surface.

For racing fans, we could allow the Indy 500 or NASCAR events to proceed even in downpours. Who, after all, doesn't enjoy watching spectacular car crashes that mirror our own rush-hour commutes in the rain, snow or fog?

Golf tournaments are not held in the winter in the North; baseball starts after the snows and frost have left most Northern cities. The Masters in Augusta, Ga., is in April, not January. The Australian Open takes place in January

for good reason.

Basketball, played indoors, is somewhat spared such decisions. College bowl games in December and January are for the most part played in Southern states or in domed facilities. Even macho ice hockey, except for the recent NHL contest between the Buffalo Sabres and Pittsburgh Penguins, is played indoors and is thus immune from such questions or speculation.

One way for the NFL to “let the better team win” would be to stage its five-week playoff tournament in more hospitable climates, or in Northern cities with domed stadiums. Phoenix, New Orleans, and several cities in Florida or California offer close to ideal settings. Otherwise, we could have just held the Feb. 3 Super Bowl in Foxboro and be done with it.

That the Super Bowl is held on a, more or less, neutral site has more to do with the league presenting a weeklong spectacle than leveling any playing field; preliminary playoff games are held in NFL cities because of the option value for season-ticket holders — the probability of witnessing a home playoff game if one's local franchise is disproportionately successful — and thus higher prices for tickets that can be milked from them.

Or maybe we should take a page from the NFL playbook and hold televised debates among presidential contenders in Gillette Stadium and Lambeau Field.

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