

# Boise State leaves us wanting more

By ANDREW BAGNATO  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz.

Say what you will about the BCS, and many have said plenty.

But if it wasn't for the Bowl Championship Series, most football fans wouldn't know Boise State from Boys Town.

The ninth-ranked Broncos would never have been given a crack at No. 7 Oklahoma on a stage as grand as the Fiesta Bowl. They'd have run all those gadget plays against Memphis, or someone like it, in the YourNameHere Bowl in Shreveport.

Ian Johnson would still be a 5-foot-11 tailback nobody wanted. Well, nobody except a certain cheerleading captain.

Instead, he's the giddy kid who proposed to his girlfriend on national television moments after scoring the game-winning points.

On WFAN radio in New York Tuesday morning, they interrupted their regularly scheduled rants to rave about ... Boise State?

That's the power of the BCS. It creates storylines even if it sometimes leaves out the happy ending.

But the BCS also did what no one else could this year: It stopped the Broncos cold.

The BCS gave the Broncos their moment on the national stage and then quickly ushered them out the side door.

It was more than a little symbolic that the Broncos had to check out of their resort hotel Tuesday to make room for the



AP PHOTO  
Boise State running back Ian Johnson, right, kisses his girlfriend, cheerleader Chrissy Popadics, after he proposed marriage Monday after Boise State beat Oklahoma 43-42 in the Fiesta Bowl in Glendale, Ariz.

Florida Gators, who arrived to begin preparations for their title game showdown with Ohio State.

Thanks for coming, Broncos. Have a safe trip home!

The Broncos' performance made the BCS folk look like geniuses. It also gave them another reason to do everything they can to prevent a playoff.

In a playoff, the power conferences would have to deal with Boise State every year — or Utah, Fresno State and Brigham Young.

And the more exposure and money those programs receive, the bigger and badder they'll become.

Once upon a time, there was a women's college in Tallahassee, Fla. It decided to admit men and fielded its first football team in 1947, losing all five of its games.

That team eventually became the fearsome Seminoles.

Boise State started playing Div-

ision I-A football in 1996. Eleven years later, it won the Fiesta Bowl.

The BCS doesn't want to see Boise State every year. But it can put up with the occasional upset, if that's what Boise State's win was.

Think about this: the Broncos beat five bowl-bound teams during the regular season. Those teams went 4-1 in the postseason. The Sooners beat six bowl-bound teams. They went 2-4.

The BCS honchos went into full self-congratulation mode Tuesday for showing the foresight to invite the Broncos. Don't be fooled. Boise State and its ilk gained admission only under threat of federal legislation and lawsuits.

But it was nice of the Broncos not to embarrass themselves when they showed up. They used the right fork at team dinners and accepted the Fiesta Bowl's lavish hospitality with grace.

Then they smoked the Sooners to the delight of millions.

Now the Broncos have returned to the land of potatoes, but they've left a lot of us wanting more.

More trickery. More undersized and unrecruited players. More of rookie coach Chris Petersen, looking like a man who had a peek at the cards after the dealer shuffled.

Petersen was caught smiling on the sideline Monday night. Doesn't he realize how serious this is supposed to be?

Bless him if he doesn't. Reporters asked if he planned to declare his team the uncrowned national champions.

"Hey, we don't worry about that," Petersen said. "We just go and play who they tell us to play. The pollsters vote how they want to vote. We're just happy to control what we can control."

It wouldn't take an NFL-style playoff to squeeze one last bit of fun out of Boise State.

If there were a "plus-one" championship game after the bowls, as has long been discussed, the Broncos might be in line for a shot at the Ohio State-Florida winner.

Maybe that would be a bad idea. The Broncos might be overmatched. Jim Tressel's well-drilled Buckeyes wouldn't fall for that amazing Statue of Liberty play, would they?

Thanks to the BCS, we'll never know. This is as good as it gets for Boise State: for now, and maybe forever.

Andrew Bagnato covers sports for The Associated Press. Send comments to letters@thejournalnet.com.

# Gators shelter Nelson through tough times

By MARK LONG

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

SCOTTSDALE, Ariz.

Reggie Nelson protected Florida all season, making big plays in crucial situations and serving as the team's last line of defense.

Now, the Gators are protecting him.

Teammates and coaches are shielding the All-American safety from having to deal with what could be difficult questions regarding his mother's death two weeks ago.

"I think it's very important," said Gators coach Urban Meyer, whose mother died of cancer in 2000. "I was really worried about that. ... I went through the same thing seven years ago. If anybody's gone through that, the last thing you want to do is deal with other people asking how you're doing. He's doing much better."

Nelson hasn't spoken publicly since his mother's death Dec. 21. He was scheduled to be available for interviews Wednesday, five days before No. 2 Florida plays top-ranked Ohio State in the Bowl Championship Series title game, but he was pulled from the lineup and declined several requests following practice.

When will he talk? "That certainly will be up to him," Meyer said. "He's a grown man, and he can handle those kind of things."

In the meantime, his teammates and coaches are doing all they can to support Nelson, a hard-hitting safety who makes touchdown-saving tackles, comeback-ending interceptions and momentum-turning hits look routine.

"It really has been a rough week for Reggie," co-defensive coordinator Charlie Strong said. "What has helped him the most is getting back around his teammates and just going through (practice). Any time you lose your mama, it doesn't matter what age you are. You can be 20, 30, 40, still the pain is there."

Nelson's mother, Mary Lakes, battled breast cancer for more than three years. She discovered it three months after Nelson failed to qualify for Florida and



AP PHOTO  
Florida's Reggie Nelson returns an interception during the Southeastern Conference championship game at the Georgia Dome in Atlanta on Dec. 2.

enrolled at Coffeyville Community College in Kansas. She tried to hide her disease from him by wearing a wig after chemotherapy had robbed her of her hair.

It didn't work. He figured it out and committed himself to taking care of her, even while he was more than a thousand miles away.

Lakes felt better at times and even attended a game in early September despite having to carry an oxygen tank. Nelson later said doctors told her she had to stay out of the sun and couldn't go to any more games.

"She tells me to pray every day, and that's what I've been doing," Nelson said in November. "She can't do too much but be strong."

Teammates said Nelson remained strong following his mother's death and during her Dec. 30 funeral, which several of them attended along with some coaches.

"We're just trying to help him through everything," cornerback Ryan Smith said. "He's kind of quiet, but he's doing fine. He's going to be all right. He'll make it through this. It's tough on him, but he'll be all right. When you have a team like this that's a family and he feels like he has comfort in a situation like this, I'm sure that helps."

# Cardinals running back: 'We're going to be a powerhouse'

By WILL GRAVES

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

MIAMI

Bobby Petrino is going to have to find a new motto to drill into the heads of his Louisville players.

The Cardinals, it seems, are finished with "finish."

Petrino's players showed during their remarkable 2006 season that they were listening when the coaching staff chanted "finish" over and over during every workout, practice and game.

The Cardinals' 24-13 victory against Wake Forest in the Orange Bowl capped a breakout year in which the program secured its first 12-win season and perhaps finally proved that it has arrived.

"In the near future, if not now, we're going to be a powerhouse," said running back Kolby Smith.

The Cardinals may already be there. Only a second-half meltdown at Rutgers on Nov. 9 prevented Louisville from finishing the season undefeated and earning a shot against Ohio State in

the BCS title game.

Not bad for a team that lost star running back Michael Bush to a broken right leg in the season-opener against Kentucky and played parts of three games without quarterback Brian Brohm, who injured the thumb on his right (throwing) hand in a win against Miami in September.

Louisville persevered without its stars and showcased the depth of talent Petrino has cultivated during his four years at the helm. Backups and role players

like quarterback Hunter Cantwell and running back Anthony Allen made vital contributions for a team aching to show it belonged among the nation's elite.

"We showed that we're a team, not just one guy or two guys," said wide receiver Harry Douglas. "It takes all of us to get it done."

Still, whether the Cardinals enter the 2007 season with legitimate national title hopes could depend on the next two weeks. Brohm and Bush have until Jan. 15 to decide if they will return in the fall.

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