

COLLEGE FOOTBALL: NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP GAME

Gators erase all doubts

Florida proves SEC is strongest conference in nation

By RALPH D. RUSSO
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

GLENDALE, Ariz.

So you're a college football fan in the Midwest or living on one of the coasts, and you've already had it up to here with Southeastern Conference arrogance.

COLUMN

Sure the SEC is good, you think. But sometimes those coaches, players and fans — especially the fans — sound like the rest of the country is playing intramural compared to what goes on in the Deep South.

For you, SEC hater, the bowl season was a disaster.

"I do think people get tired of hearing us talk about how good we think we are," Auburn coach Tommy Tuberville said.

Ohio State had the final chance to slap some of that swagger out of the SEC on Monday night by taking down Florida in the BCS national championship game.

Many outside the South believed the Gators got into the title game only because the media had bought into the SEC's self-importance and influenced the poll voters who helped set the BCS finale.

The Gators' response? Florida 41, Ohio State 14. They were speaking for the whole SEC.

"I could name four or five teams in the SEC that could probably compete with them and play the same type of game we did against them," Florida defensive end Jarvis Moss said after the game.

Four or five? OK, that might be a bit much. However, which team are you taking on a neutral field, LSU or Ohio State? How about Tuberville's Tigers, the team that beat Florida, or Ohio State in a bowl game?

The Gators' romp was the final statement of a 6-3 bowl season for the SEC, with victories against Notre Dame, Nebraska and Virginia Tech.

"In 12 years in this league, this is the best year from top to bottom," Tuberville said by phone Tuesday.

The Fighting Irish did well to hang with LSU for a half in the Sugar Bowl before all those future NFL draft picks simply overwhelmed the Irish. That game in the Superdome was 41-14, too.



Florida quarterback Chris Leak raises the national championship trophy after the Gators defeated Ohio State 41-14 in the Bowl Championship Series title game in Glendale, Ariz., on Monday.

Before the Gators played their best game of the season, many were touting LSU, which lost road games to Florida and Auburn, as the SEC's true best team.

Auburn won the Cotton Bowl 17-14, beating a Nebraska team that played for the Big 12 championship. Georgia beat Virginia Tech, the Atlantic Coast Conference's most talented team, 31-24 in the Chick-Fil-A Bowl.

And remember, neither LSU nor Auburn won the SEC West. Arkansas took that crown and gave Florida a good run in the conference title game before falling 38-28.

The Razorbacks lost 17-14 to Wisconsin in the Capital One Bowl, one of the few bright spots in a 2-5 postseason for the Big Ten, during which its best teams were exposed.

A week before Ohio State was humiliated by the Gators, Michigan got run out of the Rose Bowl by Southern California. That Game of the Century in Columbus,

Ohio, between the top-ranked Buckeyes and No. 2 Wolverines in November doesn't seem quite so important a month-and-a-half later.

Credit Florida coach Urban Meyer. He was unfairly criticized for lobbying for his team to make the BCS championship.

By the time Tuesday arrived, Meyer, his first national title in hand, was done making a case for his team and his league.

"I don't have time to validate," he said. "We're fine. ... We play in a great conference. I don't want to get into that because then someone will take it as disrespect to some other conference. I don't know if I even have to go there."

No you don't, coach. It's a good lesson SEC fans. We all know how good your football is. No need to gloat.

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Gwynn, Ripken voted into Hall; McGwire misses

By RONALD BLUM
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

NEW YORK

Mark McGwire fell far short in his first try for the Hall of Fame, picked by 23.5 percent of voters, while Tony Gwynn and Cal Ripken Jr. easily gained baseball's highest honor.

Tarnished by accusations of steroids use, McGwire appeared on 128 of a record 545 ballots in voting released Tuesday by the Baseball Writers' Association of America.

Ripken was picked by 537 voters and appeared on 98.53 percent of ballots to finish with the third-highest percentage behind Tom Seaver (98.84) and Nolan Ryan (98.79).

The former Baltimore Orioles shortstop said he was both relieved and euphoric. If he had been picked by two of the eight voters who didn't select him, he would have set the percentage record. But he didn't mind.

"All I wanted to hear was, 'You're in,'" Ripken said. "I really didn't get caught up with wanting to be unanimous or wanting to be the most."

Gwynn received 532 votes for 97.61 percent, the seventh-highest ever, also trailing Ty Cobb, George Brett and Hank Aaron.

"It's an unbelievable feeling to know that people think that what you did was worthy," Gwynn said. "For me, it's kind of validation. The type of player that I was doesn't get a whole lot of credit in today's game."



GWYNN



RIPKEN

Goose Gosage finished third with 388 votes, falling 21 shy of the necessary 409. His percentage increased from 64.6 to 71.2, putting him in good position to reach the necessary 75 percent next year. The highest percentage for a player who wasn't elected in a later year was 63.4 by Gil Hodges in 1983, his final time on the ballot.

Jim Rice was fourth with 346, his percentage dropping to 63.5 from 64.8 last year. He was followed by Andre Dawson (309), Bert Blyleven (260), Lee Smith (217) and Jack Morris (202).

McGwire was ninth, followed by Tommy John (125) and Steve Garvey (115), who was in his final year of eligibility.

McGwire's dismal showing raises doubts about whether he will ever get elected — players can appear on the BBWAA ballot for 15 years — and whether the shadow of steroids will cost Barry Bonds, Sammy Sosa and Rafael Palmeiro places in Cooperstown.

McGwire finished with 583 home runs, seventh on the career list, and hit 70 homers in 1998 to set the season record, a mark Bonds broke three years later.

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