

Blockbuster BCS main event, with iffy undercard

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By RALPH D. RUSSO

The Associated Press

NEW YORK — The penultimate Bowl Championship Series gave college football a national championship matchup low on controversy and loaded with star power.

No. 1 Notre Dame against No. 2 Alabama in Miami on Jan. 7 for the national title. No complaints.

That Fiesta Bowl with No. 5 Oregon against No. 7 Kansas State looks good, too.

After that, well, you can see why so many fans are so eager to get rid of the BCS.

No. 4 Florida goes to the Sugar Bowl in New Orleans to face No. 22 Louisville, a Big East team that was unranked as recently as last week.

Then again, at least the Cardinals are ranked. Big Ten champion Wisconsin will be the first five-loss team to play in the Rose Bowl when it faces No. 8 Stanford in Pasadena, Calif.

Then there's the Orange Bowl in Miami, where No. 13 Florida State will face No. 16 Northern Illinois, the Mid-American Conference champion that took advantage of the lackluster Big Ten

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and Big East champions to slip into the BCS with a 12-1 record.

“It’s a great story,” Orange CEO Eric Poms said Sunday night, trying to put the best spin possible on a matchup that looks like a potential mismatch. “I think we’ll be just fine.”

Meanwhile, here’s a list of teams that won’t be playing in the BCS

— No. 3 Ohio State. The Buckeyes’ postseason ban helped put the Badgers in the Rose Bowl.

— No. 6 Georgia, No. 9 LSU, No. 10 Texas A&M and No. 11 South Carolina couldn’t get in because of the rule that permits no more than two teams from one conference.

— No. 12 Oklahoma was all but a lock for the Sugar Bowl, before NIU took the backdoor to being a BCS-buster.

“We’re 12-1,” Northern Illinois quarterback Jordan Lynch told ESPN. “We faced tons of adversity this year. We won tons of games. ... We definitely deserve to be in there.”

Maybe the Huskies can become this year’s Boise State and shock the Seminoles. The fear is the team that lost to Iowa and barely beat Kansas will be more like the Hawaii version of BCS-buster — a 41-10 loss to Georgia in the 2008 Sugar Bowl — than the Utah-kind. The Utes beat Alabama 31-17 in the ’09 Sugar Bowl.

If the undercard doesn’t look like much, the main event has the making of a potential blockbuster.

“The tradition of Alabama and Notre Dame brings special attention to it but we’re just trying to be the best team on Monday, Jan. 7,” Notre Dame coach Brian Kelly said Sunday night. “All of

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that tradition, what's happened in the past, is not going to help us Jan. 7 but we do respect the traditions."

The Irish clinched their spot a week ago in Los Angeles by completing a perfect regular season against rival Southern California.

Alabama earned its spot Saturday, beating Georgia 32-28 in a thrilling Southeastern Conference title game.

The program that coach Paul Bryant turned into an SEC behemoth in the 1960s and '70s, winning five national championships and sharing another during his tenure, is again dominating college football with a modern-day version of the Bear leading the way in Tuscaloosa, Ala.

Coach Nick Saban and the Crimson Tide are on the verge of one of the great runs in history. Alabama would become the first team to repeat as champs since the BCS was implemented in 1998; it would be the 11th time a team has won consecutive AP titles since the poll started in 1936. Alabama is already one of seven programs to repeat. The Tide has done it twice. Notre Dame is another.

Alabama also won the 2009 BCS championship under Saban. The last team to win three major national titles in four seasons was Nebraska, which went back-to-back in 1994 and '95 and finished No. 1 in the final coaches' poll in 1997.

In a world full of spread-the-field, hurry-up offenses, Alabama is a bastion of traditional football.

The Tide put its no-frills muscle on display Saturday, mashing Georgia with 350 yards rushing behind tailbacks Eddie Lacy and T.J. Yeldon.

The Tide has been more potent offensively this season than last to make up for a defense that has slipped — but only a bit. Alabama leads the nation in total defense (246 yards per game)

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and is second in points allowed (10.7 per game).

When Kelly was hired at Notre Dame three years ago, he looked at Alabama and the SEC, which has won six straight BCS titles, and decided the Irish needed to play like that.

Kelly built his reputation and winning teams at previous stops on fast-paced spread offenses. In South Bend, Ind., he has put the fight back in the Irish, who have won eight AP national titles — only Alabama has as many — but none since 1988.

Notre Dame has allowed the fewest touchdowns in the country (10) and is sixth overall in total defense (286 yards per game).

“It’s clear that the formation of any great program is going to be on its defense,” Kelly said. “If you play great defense, you’ve got a chance. For us to move Notre Dame back into national prominence, we had to develop a defense.”

The face of the Irish isn’t a strong-armed quarterback or speedy ball-carrier. It’s middle linebacker Manti Te’o, a 255-pound offense-wrecker with a nose for the ball. The senior has seven interceptions and is a likely Heisman finalist.

Te’o, 300-pound linemen Stephon Tuitt and Louis Nix have formed a red-zone wall for the Irish. Late goal-line stands highlighted victories against Stanford and USC.

“This is just a good all-around football team with tremendous balance on offense and a very physical defense,” Saban added.

In two years, college football switches to a 4-team playoff to determine its champion and a new way of filling the other marquee bowls. It probably won’t cure everything that ails the postseason but it’s safe to say many won’t miss the BCS.

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