

Pollspeak Report to the USA Today

College Football 2007



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Inside this volume of the Pollspeak Report is all of the research and reports involving the Coaches' Poll during the course of the 2007 college football season. Section 1 contains an executive summary along with Pollspeak's general recommendations. Section 2 contains all of the supporting information.

Section 1

Executive Summary

If the USA Today only takes away one point from this report, it should be this: implement public ballots. Currently the only Coaches' Poll ballot made public is the final regular season ballot...this is a BCS requirement. However, there is no BCS restriction that all other ballots can't be public as well. So this is strictly a decision between the USA Today and coaches.

Certainly having one public ballot is better than none; however, having any closed ballots leads to a perception of hiding something. There is no way for the public (or BCS) to know if the coaches are subtly changing the way they vote for the public ballot. This is especially true since the final poll of the year (after the bowl games) reverts to being private. If we had to rank the importance of each poll, the final regular season poll is certainly the most important and the final poll of the year is the second-most important. So just making the final ballot of the year public would be an improvement. However, every ballot is important to the teams and their fans, which is why all ballots should be public.

A team's poll ranking (particularly its BCS ranking) is not just important at the end of the season. Aside from the obvious implications that polls have on deciding the national championship, there are other benefits of a poll ranking that affect far more teams than the few playing for the big trophy. When a team is ranked in the top 25, it gets more press. The team is listed in every newspaper that covers college sports. The team is listed more often on the ESPN Bottom Line score ticker. Their games get better TV and radio coverage. This all turns into more exposure for the school, which positively affects the team's perception and financials. Equally important (if not more so), the extra exposure has a big affect on recruiting and the attitude of the high school players and coaches. Recruiting is the lifeblood of college sports. So it may not be so important if a team is ranked 17 vs. 18. However, it is VERY important if a team is ranked in the polls at all. It is also worth noting that some coaches may receive incentives in their contracts for being ranked in the polls. This gives some coaches even more reason to be biased in the polls.

Which leads us to our second topic – bias. Any coaches' poll is going to be inherently biased for many of the reason listed above. A coaches' poll gives the coaches power to affect their own destiny. They could improve the standings of their own team or conference allies. They could lower the standing of their nearest competition or rivals. They could affect the outcome of their own contract bonuses. There is likely no way around this inherent bias completely. However, there may be ways to mitigate the bias. The USA Today should investigate these possibilities. For example, is there a way to preclude coaches from voting for their own team or teams in their conference? Or maybe coaches from other divisions (i.e. IAA) should be voting for IA teams instead? This is something the USA Today should publicly address because the inherent bias

coupled with private ballots is an extremely worrisome combination for college sports. For examples of obvious bias in the current poll as well as the types of potential bias, see Section 2.

A standard suggestion for all of the polls is to weed out bad voters on an annual basis. Like any organization, you are only as strong as your weakest link. By enacting a policy of reviewing and replacing voters each year, the Coaches' Poll will strengthen its reputation. Pollspeak intends to help in this endeavor by providing some tools and information needed to do these reviews. However, to be truly effective, we would need to see public ballots each and every week.

What is a bad voter? There is no easy answer to that. Pollspeak has its definitions as do our readers. The USA Today likely has its definitions as well. Those definitions should be published publicly and explained to voters before they are chosen. Right now voting is completely open ended, but some basic rules could help align the voters towards a common goal. The USA Today must determine these rules on their own, but some suggestions include:

- Rank the teams based on their performances up to this week. Do not try to predict the future, which is of course unknown. You will have time to change team rankings each week based on their latest performances. So there is no need to guess in advance.
- Give ample weight to games played on the field. If two teams have similar records, and they have played each other already, generally rank the winner higher. This is a rule of thumb more than a definitive rule because other factors (such as injured players) can also be taken into consideration.
- Do not show unreasonable bias towards any team, including your own. Maybe this goes without saying. Or maybe the idea is that if all coaches are biased, they will cancel each other's biases out. Either way, the intent should be stated and used as criteria for rating performance. Otherwise, you will get most coaches demonstrating bias and some (like Texas' Mack Brown this year) who show less bias but derive no benefit from being unbiased. See Section 2 for details about Brown's and other coach's ballots.

Pollspeak has one final, minor suggestion regarding making the ballots public. The current flash presentation of the end-of-regular-season ballots looks nice, but it would also be good to present the ballots in an HTML format (like the AP) or even spreadsheet format. At the very least, Pollspeak would appreciate receiving the data this way for easier analysis.

Section 2

Unfortunately, due to the Coaches' Poll's closed ballots, there is very little supporting information we can provide here, but we have included the lone article we have written based on the lone week of public ballots. Formatting in this document is an approximation of how it originally appeared on the web. To view the original information, see the Football section of Pollspeak: www.pollspeak.com. In contrast, you can see the 40 pages of information we provided to the Associate Press in our *Report to the Associated Press* here:

<http://pollspeak.com/reports/Pollspeak%20Report%20to%20the%20Associated%20Press%20-%20Football%202007.pdf>

A similar amount of data would be provided to the USA Today if their ballots were also made public each week. The USA Today could use this data to help identify errors and continuously improve the Coaches' Poll.



The Coaches' Perspective (posted 12/12/07)

Since this is the first time we get to see the Coaches' ballots all season, this column will be a bit different. The Coaches' Perspective is part analysis and a large part opinion and guess-work. It is generally accepted that coaches are going to be biased when they fill out their ballots. After all, they have a vested interest in how the polls turn out. Besides, the polls are secret for all but the last week, so who would ever know? In fact, if coaches aren't biased, fans could argue that they aren't doing their job as coach. A better argument is: why would you let the most inherently biased group of people vote in a poll with so much at stake...let alone secretly? It's like having the prisoners run the parole board.

This column will focus on the Coaches' Poll we have today, point out some of those alleged biases and give opinions why they exist. In many cases these will just be educated guesses supported by circumstantial evidence. We can't really know what goes on in the minds of the coaches...or in some cases, the assistants who may or may not actually fill out their ballots for them. There is also the very real possibility that there are no ulterior motives in the following votes, and our suspicions are purely coincidental.

Let's start by looking at the five most extreme coaches according to [Pollstalker](#):

1) **Howard Schnellenberger** -- FAU's only BCS top-25 opponent is **USF**, but The Bulls aren't one of his extreme votes. Unlike **Kansas**, who he has highest in the nation at #2. Most of the other coaches voting Kansas nearly that high are in the Big 12. Schnellenberger briefly coached at **Oklahoma** and can't have fond memories of his infamous stint in the Big 12. Ah, there is a pattern -- Schnellenberger ranks every Big-12 team (**Kansas** - #2, **Missouri** - #4, **Texas** - #14) in the highest 10%...except for Oklahoma, which he ranks in the bottom 10% (#7). It seems he doesn't have an issue with the Big 12...just Oklahoma.

Schnellenberger also ranks **Florida** lowest in the nation at #21. This might be due to the Gators running up the score on FAU this year, 59-20. A ranking of #21 certainly isn't a sign of respect for the drubbing. Less

likely, maybe Schnellenberger still holds a grudge against the Gators for handing his 1983 National Champion, **Miami Hurricanes** their only loss that season.

As for his five other extreme votes...theories welcome on the [forums](#).

2) **Bobby Bowden** – voted **West Virginia** highest. As anybody who has seen "We Are Marshall" knows, Bowden coached West Virginia (1970-1975) before **FSU**. Also, FSU recently hired offensive line-coach **Rick Trickett** from West Virginia, and Offensive Coordinator/Head-Coach-in-waiting **Jimbo Fisher** was born and raised in West Virginia...so there are plenty of ties to West Virginia on the staff.

Bowden voted **Oklahoma** lowest in the nation at #10. Oklahoma is one of the few traditional powerhouses Bowden has played but never beaten. He lost to the Sooners during the regular season in 1976 and lost all three Orange Bowls with them at the end of the 1979, 1980 and 2000 seasons. Additionally, the head Coach of Oklahoma, **Bob Stoops**, ran the **Florida** defense for the Gators' first national championship win over **FSU** in the 1996 Sugar Bowl. Bowden certainly has no love lost for the Sooners.

Bowden ranks **Clemson** highest in the nation at #11. Clemson is coached by his son, **Tommy Bowden**. Even Tommy couldn't rank his own team that high (#14)...although that is the Tiger's second highest ranking next to his dad's.

Bobby Bowden generally ranks his ACC brethren higher than most voters nationally. He's not as conference-biased as some others, but he is the only coach to give **Wake Forest** a vote (#22). The Demon Deacons have beaten FSU two years running.

Only one person ranked **Penn State** higher than Bowden, and it is well known that **Joe Paterno** and Bowden are long time friends and mutual admirers.

Bowden ranks **South Florida** highest at #17. The obvious reason might be that Bowden is just trying to help another Florida school make its mark. While USF could be seen as competition, Bowden is known for helping the underdog. However, there is another connection. FSU receivers coach and alumnus **Lawrence Dawsey** just returned to FSU from...USF. On that note, prior to that, Dawsey worked at **LSU**, Bowden's #1 team. Although LSU has an even stronger tie with **Jimbo Fisher**, whose last job was Offensive Coordinator for LSU. Is there a chance that Bowden's staff is somehow having an influence on his ballot?

Why would Bowden vote **Illinois** lowest (#18)? Fighting Illini head coach, **Ron Zook** was the coach at **Florida** for three years, but there was no public animosity between the two. Then again Zook did beat Bowden in his last game as a Gator.

Bowden was also one of four coaches not to rank **Tennessee**. Tennessee beat FSU in the 1998 National Championship game played at the Fiesta Bowl. That's enough...we should move on.

3) **Dennis Franchione** – **Texas A&M's** ex-coach was 5-0 against **Hawaii** as the head coach of **New Mexico** and **TCU**. It seems a lack of respect may have carried over to this year's ballot, ranking the Warriors lowest at #22.

Otherwise there aren't many obvious biases on his ballot. Franchione shows no particular bias towards the Big 12...in fact, maybe a slight bias AGAINST the Big 12 South. **Texas** at #20 and **Oklahoma** at #6 are both in the lower range nationally, but much lower than you would expect from a Big 12 coach. We can only guess that since Franchione was ousted by the Aggies (technically he retired), he doesn't have to play politics any more. In fact, based on his ballot, he might be planning a move to the ACC, Big East or Pac-10. USA Today should note that a more unbiased poll than the current Coaches' Poll might be "The Recently Ousted Coaches' Poll."

4) **Mark Dantonio** of **Michigan State** shows the typical conference bias you would expect -- **Ohio State** #1, **Illinois** #9, **Wisconsin** #14, **Penn State** #23. With the exception of Wisconsin the rest are either on or near the extreme high, and only 3 people voted higher for Wisconsin. No surprises there.

His ranking of **Missouri** (#12) and **Kansas** (#13) lowest in the nation is surprising, though. Dantonio was Kansas' secondary coach under **Glen Mason** from 1991-1994. Maybe there are still some hard feelings towards the Jayhawks and possibly Missouri who he beat 3 out of 4 of those years, too.

Dantonio's last team, **Cincinnati** might be feeling burnt by their ex-coach's #25 ranking. 49 of the 60 coaches ranked the Bearcats higher.

As for **Air Force's** highest ranking at #22...feel free to discuss theories on the [forums](#). Could he have family in the service?

5) **Bill Doba**, the recently fired coach of **Washington State** also shows the typical conference bias -- **USC** highest (#2), **Arizona State** highest (#7), **Oregon State** highest (#20). He could have joined **Oregon** coach, **Mike Bellotti** and six others in ranking Oregon, but maybe he didn't appreciate this year's 53-7 pounding by the Ducks, which was the Cougars worst loss of the season. Otherwise, this is Pac-10 bias to the extreme. He was fired on November 26th, before these ballots were turned in. So is it possible the ballot was completed by somebody else? Or maybe it just didn't affect his attitude towards his competition.

He also ranks **Clemson** lowest in the nation at #21. This is a stretch, but Doba was defensive coordinator at **The Citadel** (The Military College of South Carolina) in 1987-88. In 1988, The Citadel made it to the I-AA national playoffs, but were shut out earlier that year by Clemson 24 – 0. We seriously doubt he has had an axe to grind with Clemson all these years, but since there is no historical record of ballots for us to check, who knows? Also, who knows what other biases head coaches or assistant coaches harbor that no reasonable amount of research would uncover.

Doba is also one of two coaches to leave either **Wisconsin** or **Texas** unranked (he leaves both off). No serious guesses here. Of course, if the ballot was filled out by a replacement after Doba was fired, then we don't even know whose biases we're dealing with. Pollspeak has contacted both the **Washington State** and **Texas A&M** athletic departments to see how ballots were handled after their coaches departed. As of this writing, there was no comment from Washington State. Texas A&M responded: "*Coach Franchione has done his own voting the entire time and will finish this year after the bowls are finished.*"

(UPDATE 12/13/07: Washington State responded: "*Coach Doba did fill out the final ballot.*")

Those are just the first five coaches we looked at. We have neither the time nor space to make those connections for every coach. However, here are some more quick highlights:

- Half of **Oklahoma's** #1 votes came from their head coach, **Bob Stoops**. Stoops also gave **LSU** their lowest ranking (#6) behind Big 12 members **Missouri** (#3) and **Kansas** (#4). You can't blame him for trying to reach the national championship game (but you can blame the BCS).
- By contrast, only two of **LSU's** 11 first-place votes came from SEC schools. One of those was **Les Miles** himself. Miles also gave **Arkansas** and **Auburn** their highest rankings, **Tennessee** and **Florida** their second-highest rankings, and **Georgia** a respectable #3 ranking (but not so close to affect LSU's trip to the title game...just in case.)
- While **Tyrone Willingham** (**Washington**) was at **Notre Dame**, he lost to **Boston College** all three years. Coincidentally he is the only coach to leave the Eagles off of his ballot.
- **Michigan** was only ranked by six coaches. Five of them were Big Ten coaches and the other was Michigan alum, **Les Miles**.
- **Tommy Bowden**, **Howard Schnellenberger**, **Mike Bellotti** and **Bobby Bowden** were the only coaches to vote **Missouri** ahead of **Oklahoma**. Talk about breaking [rule #1](#)! These teams have the same record, and the Sooners beat the Tigers TWICE this year.
- **Art Briles**, **Houston's** ex-coach – cast the only vote for **Houston** (#23).
- **George O'Leary** of **UCF** gives his own team its highest ranking of #17.
- **Virginia Tech's** **Frank Beamer** gave the Hokies their highest ranking of #2.
- **Hawaii's** only #1 vote came from fellow WAC coach, **Hal Mumme** of **New Mexico State**.

- Illinois' highest ranking of #9 came from three Big Ten coaches: **Bret Bielema (Wisconsin)**, **Mark Dantonio (Michigan State)** and **Ron Zook (Illinois)**.
- Wisconsin's highest ranking of #13 came from Wisconsin coach **Bret Bielema**, and seemingly unbiased picks from **Texas Tech's Mike Leach** and **Southern Mississippi's Jeff Bower**.

One of the most unbiased coaches is Texas' **Mack Brown**. Texas finished #17 in the Coaches' Poll, which is exactly how Brown voted them. Every other coach with a vote and a team in the top 25 voted their team higher than the final poll. Well, one exception is **Jim Tressel** who voted **Ohio State #1**, but you can't call that an act of modesty. Mack Brown also had no votes on the extreme, and shows negligible Big 12 bias. So he is actually Good Voter of the Week-worthy. However, this is the Coaches' Poll. So our question to Coach Brown is...Why bother? Nobody is trying to hold you to a higher standard, and you can only hurt your own team or conference by voting without bias. Even Pollspeak wouldn't ask this of you.

We would ask the BCS to remove such an inherently biased poll from the formula. Alternatively, the Coaches' Poll could be modified to disallow voting for any team from your conference (including your own team). Although this could cause issues with the number of votes cast. Also, while exploitation is still possible by downgrading your nearest competition, it wouldn't be as damaging as the current system. Aside from making all ballots public, which should be a requirement of all BCS polls, our favorite option, is to convince the NCAA to include a Biased Vote Infraction into the football rulebook, resulting in a 15-yard penalty on the coach's next kick off...even if he changes schools. Maybe that will help hold coaches' personally accountable.

We can't point out every instance of alleged bias in the Coaches' Poll, but with just some basic research, we think we've pointed out many of the TYPES of bias:

- Conference
- Own Team
- Poll Competition
- Alumni
- Past Jobs
- Family
- Staff
- Friends
- Rivals
- Bad Sportsmanship/Revenge

Biases exist in all polls, but the Coaches' Poll seems particularly susceptible to bias due to the voters' vested interest in the results and the close relationships within the coaching fraternity. The goal of this article is not to put coaches in the spotlight. It is to put the Coaches' Poll in the spotlight and hope steps are taken to fix the inherent problems with using such a poll in the BCS.