

The Impact of Program Dominance on Fan Interest in College Football

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ABSTRACT

College football has been suffering from an attendance problem in recent years. According to a CBS Sports report, attendance to major college football games is at a 22-year low (Duffley, 2019). Though announced attendance has dropped 7.6 % in the past four years, actual attendance is much lower (Bachman 2018). Actual attendance, which is usually not reported by colleges, is based upon actual tickets scanned at a game. According to Wall Street Journal analysis, for the 2017 season, scanned attendance is only 71 % of announced attendance for major college football programs. At Florida State University, which won a National Championship in 2013, it is reported that scanned attendance was only 57 % of announced attendance during 2017. The problem is not new: student attendance at major college football games declined 7.1 % from 2009-2013 (Cohen, 2014).

This exploratory study examines the impact of *program dominance* as a constraint to student interest in college football. Program dominance is defined as a situation in which a college football program which dominates opponents, wins almost all games, and competes for championships on a sustained multi-year bases. The question addressed here is: If students know that a football game will not be competitive, and, their team is highly likely to win/or lose by a significant point margin, does this reduce their interest in the game? Though numerous academic studies have addresses constraints to sporting event attendance, only two studies have addressed student attendance to college football games (Kim & Trail 2008; Simmons et al. 2017; Simmons et al., 2018). Academicians and sports journalists have offered a number of reasons for declining interest/attendance to college football games and other sporting events. However, the authors are not aware of any reported empirical research which has addressed program dominance as a cause for low interest/attendance to the sport. A fan might say, “what is the use of going,” we going to crush them/get crushed.”

Though cases of program dominance have existed throughout the history of college football, a current example of such a program is the University of Alabama, which has played for the National Championship 8 times during the past decade and won it 5 times. Student attendance to the Alabama vs. UL-Lafayette game was so noticeably low, that in his post-game news conference, Alabama Head Football Coach Nick Saban scolded UA students for not

attending the game. (Andrew 2018) Alabama beat ULL 56-14. Clemson University, who has played in the last 3 national championship games and won 2 of those, is expected to face-off against Alabama for a fourth time in this year. Clemson struggled with student attendance as well according. As one reporter stated (Raynor 2017), “at the Wake Forest game this past week had egregiously low attendance on the hill. Of the 3,000 tickets allotted, only 1,539 Clemson students attended — barely half.” The “dominance” issue is not exclusive to elite championship teams, but to strong, ranked programs vs. weak teams. When the University of Arkansas, who has had several years of losing seasons, hosted a talented Auburn in fall 2018, scanned attendance was 25,000 less than announced attendance.

Would this lack of interest reduce their likelihood of attending? The current exploratory study investigates a sample of college students and the impact that two dominant college football programs (Clemson and Alabama) have had on their overall interest in the game of college football. A survey was administered 87 college students who attend a Southeastern US D-1 University which is not a member of the BCS (Bowl Championship Series which represents the so-called “power 5” football conferences. Based upon analysis of data from this limited sample, it could not be concluded that program dominance impacted their interest in college football.

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