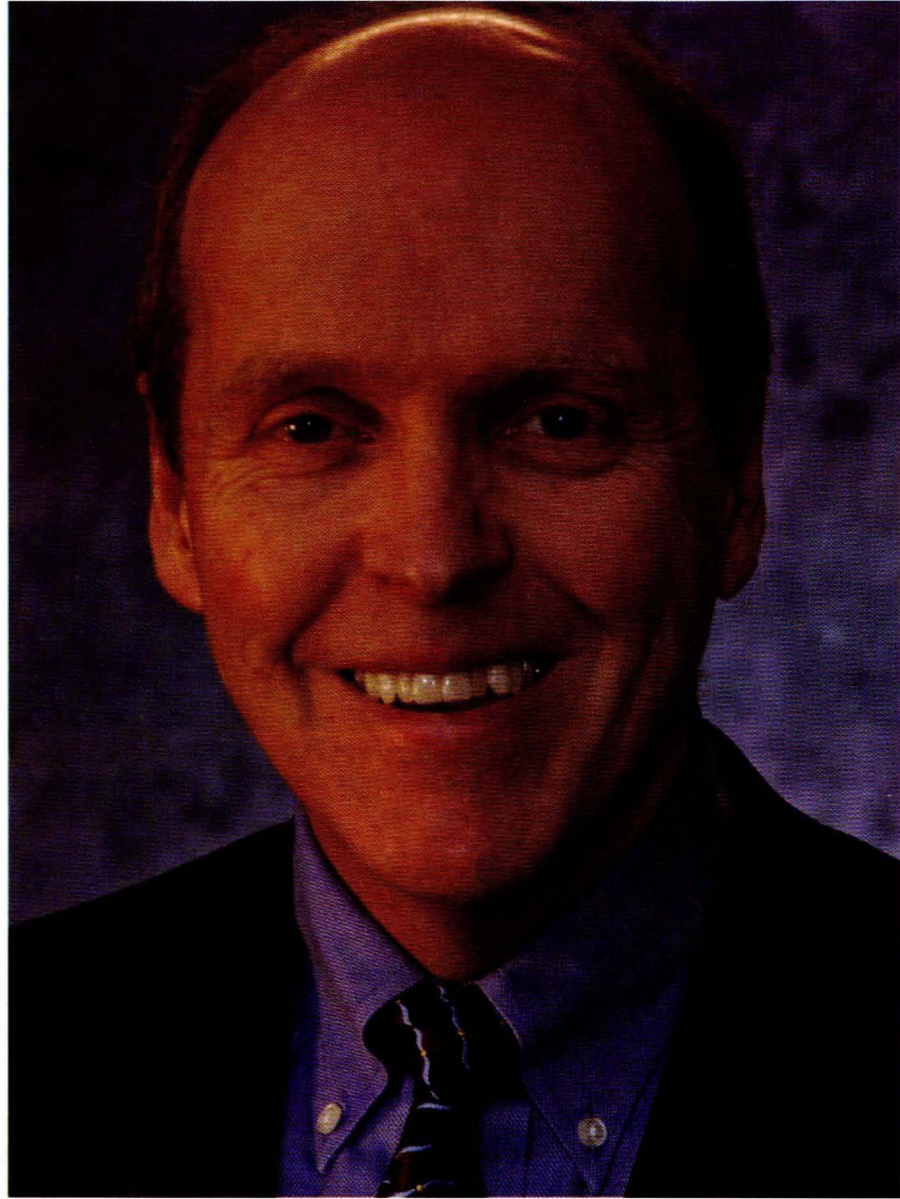


# INTERVIEW

Who would have thought that the BCS, designed to put the nation's top two football teams in a postseason bowl, would arouse such controversy?



## Bill Hancock Takes Your Questions

BY JAY C. UPCHURCH  
PHOTOS PROVIDED

To hear Bill Hancock tell it, the current Bowl Championship Series is about as close to postseason perfection as college football is ever going to get. And the truth is, he may very well be right.

Certainly, the argument he makes in support of the BCS, which he serves as executive director, is compelling. While that is what Hancock is paid to do, his 30-plus years of experience working inside the world of collegiate athletics make him a credible source.

“College football is one of the best things in this country, and the BCS is one of the best things that ever happened to college football,” says Hancock, a 1972 University of Oklahoma graduate. “Too many people have forgotten that the BCS was greeted with absolute joy when it was founded in time for the 1998 regular season. Until then, there was no guarantee that No. 1 and No. 2 would meet in a bowl game.”

The BCS is a hot-button topic these days, and Hancock, who served four years as administrator for the BCS before being named its first executive director in November 2009, has become the lightning rod for much of the criticism that rains down from various unhappy factions.

But the Hobart, Oklahoma, native does not seem to mind. He believes wholeheartedly in the BCS, and he loves his job, despite the fact one national sports columnist recently described it as “one of the worst jobs in the world.”

In order to understand Hancock and his role with the BCS, one must look at his extensive history inside collegiate athletics and the journey that brought him to this point. The journey began, for all intents and purposes, in 1970 when he took a job as a student assistant in OU’s sports information department.

The experience Hancock gained serving under then-OU sports information director Johnny Keith, as well as working as sports editor and editor for the student newspaper—*The Oklahoma Daily*—helped provide the foundation for a career immersed in athletics. In 1978, he became media relations director for the Big Eight Conference, which eventually evolved into an assistant commissioner position where he was responsible for overseeing league championships.

Hancock served as co-chair of the organizing committee for

the 1988 Final Four in Kansas City. The following year, he was named director of the Final Four, a position he held for 13 years until his oldest son, Will, was killed in the tragic plane crash carrying members of the Oklahoma State University men’s basketball team. Will Hancock was media relations coordinator with the Cowboys.

“I had retired from the NCAA not long after the OSU airplane crash,” says Hancock, who quietly served as a Final Four consultant over the next three years. “I told myself I would eventually go back to work if the right opportunity came along—

something where I could work with friends, travel just enough, and do something I knew. When the commissioners called about the BCS, I knew it was perfect.”

While the BCS is far from perfect in many people’s eyes, Hancock sees it as the best possible solution, and he is more than happy to tell that to the world. *Sooner Magazine* talked to Hancock recently about his role with the BCS and

to get some insight into his views on why he feels it works.



*Sooner Magazine:* Let’s start with the basics and get the low-down on exactly what it is you do with the BCS.

*Bill Hancock:* As the executive director, I manage the daily operations of the BCS, which entails a great number of things. I suppose I’m the national voice of the BCS, and I basically do everything from media relations to licensing to buying insurance for game cancellation. I am the liaison between the commissioners and the bowls, television and every vendor. If you think of it as the conference commissioners being the overseeing board, my role is to make it all happen. I love it. It’s really great fun.

*SM:* Is it strange at all for you, after having witnessed for so long the excitement and the anticipation that surrounds the NCAA basketball tournament every year, to now hear calls for a similar football tournament? Or since both jobs involve dealing with NCAA athletics, has it been just a natural transition? *continued*



During Bill Hancock's 13 years as its director, NCAA basketball's Men's Final Four became college athletics' most popular event.

*Hancock:* Really, about 95 percent of what I do is the same stuff that I did at the NCAA. And the other five percent is related to what I call the 'misperceptions' of people who don't like the BCS. The biggest difference between the two jobs, of course, is going from an event that people love to one that people don't understand. One of the things that made the NCAA tournament such a success was the fact we enhanced the transparency. We were able to achieve an attitude of 'we have nothing to hide.' The BCS has nothing to hide either, but there's not as much transparency as maybe there should be at this point.

*SM:* What would be the main mission statement for the BCS right now, and in your eyes, has the BCS been a success over the last 11 years?

*Hancock:* The mission is and always has been to match No. 1 against No. 2 in the bowl game. It's pretty simple, really. People

“I really feel strongly that for 99 percent of the student-athletes, what they do in the classroom is way more important to their futures than what they do on the football field.”

have tried to make the mission more than that, but that's all it is. Cutting to the chase—it's been hugely successful. Just look at the games that would not have happened without the BCS. Texas vs. USC. Oklahoma vs. USC. LSU vs. Ohio State. Just go down the list over the last few years—a lot of those great games would never have happened under the old bowl system.

The thing the founders—Roy Kramer and Tony Pettiti—are most surprised at are two things: one on the negative side and one on the positive side. First of all, they never anticipated the controversy. On the positive side, they never anticipated the positive aspects the BCS has brought to the regular season. I believe they thought they were going to make everybody happy by guaranteeing that No. 1 and No. 2 would meet in the BCS bowl game, and didn't realize the impact it would have on the regular season. You have to remember at the time the BCS was created just how frustrated college football fans were that the right teams couldn't meet each other in the bowl game and decide the national championship on the field.

*SM:* With parity becoming more and more prevalent in college football over the last few seasons, there has been talk about possibly restructuring the BCS to include more teams in the big picture. Is the current model set in stone or is the BCS always open to ways to potentially make it better?

*Hancock:* The current format is in place for this season and four more. But the commissioners are open-minded to change. They are very much willing to listen to people with different ideas. You know, I'll bet I have 900 different playoff plans stored up on my computer. The passion that some of these people must have to go to such lengths as they do is just amazing. I get 12-, 14-, even 20-page papers on playoffs. But they all seem to be missing one thing or another that the commissioners have covered and dismissed.

Some want to reduce the regular season back down to 10 or 11 games and do away with the conference championship games. That's a non-starter. Some would have all of the playoff games

at the various bowl sites. That's the most common one. But you can't do it mainly because most people traveling with schools simply can't afford to do it for four weeks. It's not feasible. Plus, we don't know what interest say an Oklahoma-Troy game would have in Pasadena at the Rose Bowl. How many people would travel to see that game in the round of 16?

**SM:** What are some of the other common suggestions concerning a playoff system?

**Hancock:** Of course, you hear them say 'play them at home.' Well, we had so much controversy during the NCAA when tournament games were played at campus sites. They eventually stopped doing it and moved everything to neutral sites. Of course, there are always going to be neutral sites that are not all that neutral. You run into that problem with some of our bowl games. Is New Orleans ever going to be a neutral site for the SEC opponent? No.

Look, it's easy to dream up a hypothetical playoff plan. But when you look at the reality of it, it's hard. Just like trying to play football during a finals week—well, that would be so disrupt-

tive to the university community. Everyone knows what home football games are like at big universities. You're talking about changing the entire culture of the whole place in order to squeeze in a playoff game.

Another disconnect we have is some people want it to be a junior NFL. There is a tide of folks out there who are pushing for college athletics to be junior pros. Of course, there is a wall of people pushing back—like college presidents and faculty and many others—who are saying, 'No. It's not all right. It's college sports.' If that sea wall doesn't hold up and the junior NFL ocean washes over it, we will have lost a lot in this country. I really feel strongly that for 99 percent of the student-athletes, what they do in the classroom is way more important to their futures than what they do on the football field. It would be a real crime to lose sight of that.

**SM:** So do you think the BCS format will ever include some sort of playoff system?

**Hancock:** It's funny, but when they talked about the plus-one system—which was about two years ago and which is really a

four-team playoff—and if they would have said, 'We are going to stop here at four teams, that the bracket will never expand beyond four,' I really do feel it would have gone through. I believe that. But no sport in America has ever stood firm against bracket expansion. All of the pro sports have expanded their brackets over the years, and every NCAA championship has expanded their brackets. The problem is that teams five and six, over time, would demand it. And then you'd have to go to eight teams. And then teams nine, 10 and 11 would demand it be expanded to include them. Someone is always going to feel left out in some way or another.

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BCS executive director Bill Hancock, at left unveiling the 2010 championship game logo with Tournament of Roses CEO Mitch Dorger, is convinced that a public fully informed about the series will be supportive.

*SM:* Obviously, there have been other factions that have tried to get involved in the BCS debate. Did we learn anything from the Senate Judiciary hearings and all of the talk about anti-trust law violations back in the summer?

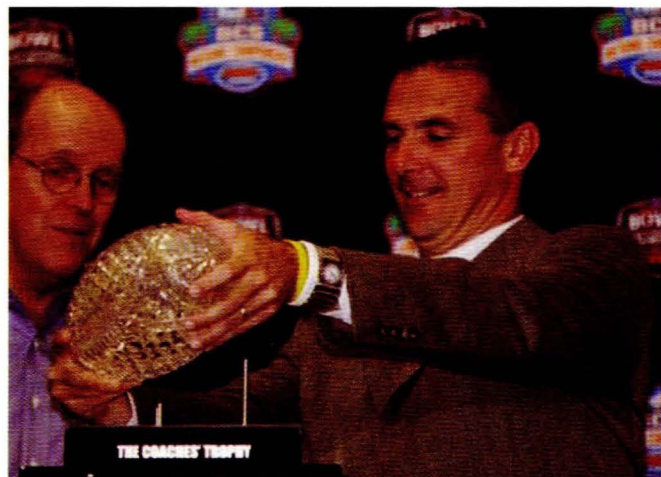
*Hancock:* I believe we learned there is not a lot of interest in Congress about this matter. With the House Subcommittee meeting, there were 32 or 33 members of the subcommittee, and only three of them came to the meeting. In the Senate Judiciary, there are 10 or 11 members, and really only one person participated. Two other senators came in for literally less than two minutes. But in reality, Senator (Orrin) Hatch was all by himself. I think most of our representatives in Washington (D.C.) know that they have more important things to do.

*SM:* Does the government, in your mind, have any business sticking its nose into the world of college football?

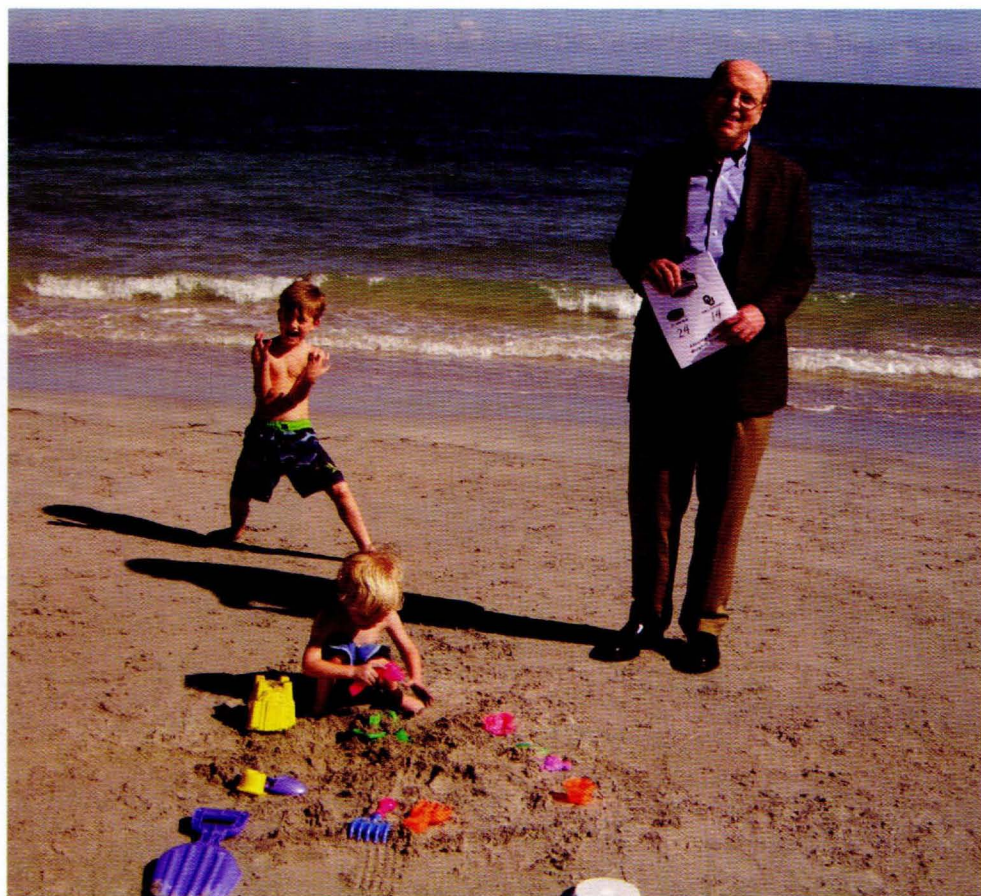
*Hancock:* We have treated the Congress people's interest in the BCS with a great deal of respect. Congress is out there to serve the people, but I don't think the voters want Congress managing college football. To me, managing the lives of college students needs to be in the hands of the universities, and that definitely includes collegiate athletics.

*SM:* The BCS television contract with FOX Sports runs out after this season, and ESPN will take over next year. In what way will that affect the BCS, or will anything change?

*Hancock:* First of all, we've been real happy with FOX. Their management structure is very lean and mean, so the same guy who produces the World Series also produces the BCS. And we've really enjoyed working with those folks. But ESPN will bring a broader set of platforms to help promote the BCS and college football. This is a little thing, but they will bring announcers who people are more familiar with. You have the best young announcer in the world, but if he's not Keith Jackson or



Florida coach Urban Meyer's Gators had just defeated Hancock's alma mater when the BCS director handed him the 2009 trophy.



There was not much leisure time for Hancock during the 2009 BCS championship week in Miami, but he managed one trip to the beach to watch grandsons, William and Jack, build sand castles.



His career in intercollegiate athletics administration has taken Bill Hancock to Olympic Games around the world—the Vancouver winter games in February being his ninth. An avid runner, hiker and biker, he was able to visit the Great Wall of China during the 2008 games in Beijing.

someone like that, people aren't going to have the same level of interest. All of the FOX announcers are great professionals and good at what they do. But they aren't Brent (Musburger). That sort of name recognition brings even greater credibility.

**SM:** Unlike FOX, ESPN is strictly a cable station. Does that have any effect on your ability to reach the masses?

**Hancock:** Well, a little over 90 percent of homes in this country have cable. The other 10 percent is a concern, frankly. It worries me. But that number is getting smaller all the time, and I believe by the end of this (four-year) contract that number will be down to 6 or 7 percent. Now, that's still a lot of people when you figure 115 million people have TVs, and those people are going to have to go somewhere else to watch games. But the commissioners believed the pluses far outweighed the minuses in this situation.

**SM:** How often do you get suggestions from the public or complaints, either via emails or calls or letters?

**Hancock:** I get emails. That's the biggest thing. I don't really get that many calls because there's not a national office for the BCS. People think there is a company or an association called the BCS. But the fact is the BCS is not an entity. It's just a series of five games, and people try to make it out to be more than it is. There is an ironic element to the BCS in that the commissioners' desire to keep it small led them to not defend it as strongly in the early days and not educate people as thoroughly as they should have. That led to a lot of the misinformation about it. Honestly, 90 percent of the people I talk to one on one and explain the situation to, they leave the conversation saying 'Gosh, I hadn't thought about that. You're

right. We're better off now with the BCS.'

**SM:** What do you say to the critics who feel the BCS does not provide equal opportunities for all schools, especially those in non-BCS conferences?

**Hancock:** The criticism from fans of the non-AQ (automatic qualifying) conferences—a pet peeve of mine is the use of the term 'BCS conference' because all 11 are BCS conferences—is sad, because it is so misinformed. Truly, the six commissioners are being criticized

for creating an event that gives those conferences more access to the major bowl games than ever before, and more revenue from post-season football than ever before. They all had a chance to earn automatic qualification. The 2004, 2006, 2007 and 2008 regular seasons were evaluated to determine if a seventh conference received AQ for 2009 and beyond. None made it. They will have another chance in three more years.

Just look at last season and how it affected a school like Utah. Without the BCS, do you know where Utah probably would have been last year? In the Las Vegas Bowl, where the No. 1 Mountain West team plays. Instead, Utah plays Alabama in the Sugar Bowl and ends up bringing about \$9.2 million to the MWC last year. It would have brought \$900,000 if it had been in the Las Vegas Bowl.

**SM:** Obviously, you hear the criticisms and calls for a playoff system of some sort because it does seem as though there is always some faction unhappy with the BCS. Yet you believe the current BCS system is the absolute best thing for college football?

**Hancock:** Oh, I feel very strongly that is the case. And I believe many other people feel the same way. I never get tired of defending it. Oh, sure, it would be easier to defend ice cream and lilacs. But this is so worthwhile, so beneficial to everyone involved in the game. Besides the fact it brings the No. 1 and No. 2 teams together, I believe it's helped make a good thing even better.

*Jay C. Upchurch is editor in chief of Sooner Spectator magazine and writes freelance OU sports articles for Sooner Magazine.*