We know the Southeastern Conference is superior to the Big Ten Conference. Pat Forde, Mark Schlabach, and Gary Danielson say so. The results of the last two BCS Championship Games- average score, SEC 40, Ohio State 19- say so. Legions of message-board experts say so. Hell, if Vanderbilt were in the Big Ten, they'd probably go to the Rose Bowl every year. We know this, because they say so. Or do we? Jesse Lamovsky says there is only one way to find out. On the field.

We know the Southeastern Conference is superior to the Big Ten Conference. Pat Forde, Mark Schlabach, and Gary Danielson say so. The results of the last two BCS Championship Games- average score, SEC 40, Ohio State 19- say so. Legions of message-board experts *(dude slO-SU would be the fifth best team in the SEC!!! go Dawgs!!!)* say so. Hell, if Vanderbilt were in the Big Ten, they'd probably go to the Rose Bowl every year. We know this, because they say so.

Or do we? After all, Big Ten teams aside from Ohio State are 17-15 against the SEC in bowl games since the 1989 season. Michigan and Penn State in particular have been dominant in inter-conference meetings in that span, going a combined 10-4 against the boys from the land of the kudzu and the formally attired tailgate. Even Minnesota is a perfect 2-0 against SEC teams in bowl games since the beginning of the century. Maybe Ohio State's miserable record against the SEC is an anomaly, and the real state of the rivalry lies in the near-parity between the conferences when anyone other than the Buckeyes is involved. Maybe we're putting too much stock in two games and ignoring larger trends in favor of the small, if telling, sample size.

There's only one way to find out. And that's on the football field.

College basketball has long staged early-season conference challenges: the ACC-Big East Challenge, the ACC-Big Ten Challenge- and a similar challenge is the best way to settle accounts between the warring giants on each side of the Ohio River. On one glorious early-season weekend, the two conferences should meet on the field in a showdown to decide if the shibboleth of SEC superiority and Big Ten inferiority is fact- or fiction. Like the basketball challenges, teams will be matched up roughly according to places each conference's pecking order, from elite-elite to dreg-dreg (very roughly in some cases). Three days, eleven games, and a verdict. Well, maybe not a verdict- this is, after all, college football, where nothing is *really* settled- but some pretty good action at any rate.

Let's go to the prospective match-ups, complete with times, networks, and broadcasting teams:

Thursday, 7:30 PM EST (ESPN: Ron Franklin & Ed Cunningham)

Minnesota @ Ole Miss

Why at Oxford? Let's see: tailgating at the Grove amidst gorgeous scenery of every kind, in what is widely regarded as the best setting for college football on the planet, or queuing up to an off-campus municipally-owned domed stadium with all the ambience of an industrial park? Hmm, that's a tough one.

History: They've never met on the football field, but Minnesota and Ole Miss are connected by one of college football's better what-ifs. In 1960, the two schools finished the season ranked 1-2 in the polls, and with the Big Ten's Rose Bowl contract having recently lapsed, the Sugar Bowl half-heartedly attempted to lure the Gophers to New Orleans to take on the Rebels in a national championship showdown. The game would have been memorable from a socio-political standpoint: lily-white, Battle Flag-waving Ole Miss versus a Minnesota team led by Sandy Stephens, the first black quarterback to make All-America. Alas, it never materialized: in lieu of its Big Ten arrangement, the Rose Bowl had decided to

invite the number-one team, which happened to be Minnesota, and the Gophers headed to Pasadena (where they were upset by Washington, spurring taunts that the Big Ten champs were overrated and slow. The more things change...).

Friday, 7:30 PM EST

Vanderbilt @ Northwestern (ESPN: Dave Pasch & Andre Ware)

Why at Evanston? Chicago is the capital city of the Big Ten and easily the largest media market within the boundaries of either conference. So it makes sense to place a game in this series within in Ryan Stadium on the lovely campus of Northwestern University, just a quick ride on the El from the Chicago Loop.

History: Despite a natural symbiosis as the scrawny nerds of their respective conferences, the Wildcats and Commodores have met just twice on the gridiron, the last time back in 1952. Vandy leads the all-time series 1-0-1.

Saturday, 12:00 PM EST

Indiana @ Kentucky (BTN: Thom Brennaman & Charles Davis)

Why at Lexington? All other things being equal, it's probably a better game-day atmosphere at Lexington's Commonwealth Stadium than at Bloomington's Memorial Stadium. I've never been to either place and I'm assuming, which means I'm as much a slave to a part of the SEC mythos- specifically, that nobody parties for football like Southerners- as anyone else.

History: Being neighbors, Indiana and Kentucky have met 36 times, including

every year from 1987 through 2005. The Hoosiers lead the series 18-17-1. Obviously, this rivalry means a little bit more on the hardwood.

South Carolina @ Penn State (ESPN: Sean McDonough & Chris Spielman)

Why at State College? I'm sure they do it up right on Game Day down in Columbia, but Happy Valley gets the nod for its superior football pedigree. Fortunately, the noon start will alleviate some of State Penn's more whimsical fan traditions, such as hurling bags of urine and unopened cans of Natty Light at the visiting band.

History: Despite being fellow independents for a good two decades, the Lions and 'Cocks have played just twice, the last time way back in 1941. No, Joe Paterno was *not* coaching at Penn State when that game was played.

Saturday, 1:30 PM EST

Iowa @ LSU (ESPN2: Mark Jones & Bob Davie)

Why at Baton Rouge? LSU's last game of 2007-08 was a victory in the BCS title game. Iowa's last game was a home loss to Western Michigan. Deference in this case goes to the Bayou Bengals.

History: The only meeting between the schools took place at the 2005 Capital One Bowl - the last great moment of the Kirk Ferenz Era at Iowa and the last moment of any kind for the Nick Saban Era at LSU. Since then, the Tigers have risen to new heights under Les Miles, while the Hawkeyes have faded into irrelevance.

Saturday, 3:00 PM EST

Alabama @ Michigan (CBS: Vern Lundquist & Gary Danielson)

Why at Ann Arbor? In return for having the fewer number of home games, the Big Ten gets the privilege of having its elite enjoy home cooking. And there is no more long-standing elite program than Michigan, which was winning national titles under Fielding "Hurry Up" Yost back when there was still a land bridge between Alaska and Siberia. Not for nothing, it's also a battle between two of the more notoriously untrustworthy coaches in college football. Patrons in the upper levels of the Big House will have a tough time seeing the action through smoke billowing from the bridges burned by Nick Saban and Rich Rodriguez.

History: Michigan and Alabama have played three times, all in bowls: the 1988 Hall of Fame, the 1997 Outback and the 2000 Orange. The Maize-and-Blue has won two of the three meetings. Michigan is 5-1 against the Southeastern Conference since the turn of the century, proving that there's still at least one thing the Wolverines can do better than Ohio State.

Saturday, 4:30 PM EST (Regional Telecasts)

Illinois @ Georgia (ABC: Dan Fouts & Tim Brandt)

Why at Athens? It is the site nearest to Atlanta, which is to the SEC what Chicago is to the Big Ten, and Georgia's game-day scene is regarded in a way Illinois's never will be. Like Indiana, Illinois is more of a basketball school than a football school; like the Hoosiers, the Illini will hit the road.

History: The Dawgs and Illini have never played, although the Zooker did go 2-1

against UGA while at Florida. The schools did meet in the second round of the 1985 NCAA Tournament, where Lou Henson's Illini defeated Hugh Durham's Bulldogs 74-58. Perhaps Illinois will name Ken Norman and Doug Altenburger honorary captains for this one.

Michigan State @ Auburn (ABC: Brad Nessler & Bob Griese)

Why at Auburn? Alabama is going to Michigan, so it's only fair to have Michigan State go to the Plains.

History: Auburn and MSU have met once, in the 1938 Orange Bowl, which Auburn won 6-0. At the time, the Spartans were an independent, not to join the Big Ten until 1953. Michigan State hasn't played a regular-season game against an SEC opponent since 1947; Auburn hasn't played a regular-season game against a Big Ten opponent since 1931, when the Tigers were in the Southern Conference.

Saturday, 7:30 PM EST

Purdue @ Tennessee (CBS: Craig Bolerjack & Steve Beuerlein)

Why at Knoxville? The oldest elite SEC programs are Alabama and Tennessee, and if one has to go on the road, the other should get to stay home. UT wins on the strength of the Volunteer Navy and Neyland Stadium's checkerboard end zones.

History: Like many of their Big Ten and SEC brethren, the Boilermakers and Volunteers have met only in the postseason, in this case the 1979 Bluebonnet Bowl in Houston. Purdue won that meeting 27-22 on a late Mark Herrmann

touchdown pass. This is probably the most uneven match-up of the Challenge in terms of prestige: Tennessee is one of the SEC's most consistent powers, while Purdue, aside from its period of national prominence in the '60's and the Rose Bowl trip in 2000, has generally been an also-ran in the Big Ten. Not only do the Boilers have to hike the World's Largest Drum all the way to Knoxville, they don't get Bob Griese or Gary Danielson on the crew. It's a tough deal all around Joe Tiller's boys.

Mississippi State @ Wisconsin (ESPN: Chris Fowler, Craig James & Doug Flutie)

Why at Madison? Madison is one of America's most idyllic college towns, Camp Randall is one of the Big Ten's most boisterous venues, and the state of Mississippi is already hosting one of the games in the Challenge.

History: They've never played. Like Tennessee-Purdue, this is a battle of mismatched historical resumes. While not on the level of the elite, Wisconsin has had more than one stretch where it has been a Big Ten heavyweight several years in a row, most notably under Barry Alvarez in the ‘90s. Mississippi State, on the other hand, hasn't won an outright SEC title since 1941 and is one of three conference members, along with Vanderbilt and "new arrival" South Carolina, to never play in the Sugar Bowl.

Saturday, 8:00 PM EST

Florida @ Ohio State (ABC: Brent Musberger & Kirk Herbstreit)

Why at Columbus? I'm a Buckeye homer, and I want the option of driving two hours to Columbus for this game. Also, Florida hasn't played a Big Ten team on the road since 1965, Steve Spurrier's junior year (and that was Northwestern, which only sort of counts). Is it a good idea to give C-Bus an extra four or five

hours to get lubricated for a prime-time start? Probably not, but what the hell.

History: The teams have met once, in the '07 BCS title game. Florida won in rather emphatic fashion.

Arkansas gets left out, because someone had to be, and besides, the Hogs should be in the Big 12 anyway.

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So there it is: the SEC-Big Ten Challenge. I think it's a capital idea. No, it'll never happen. But it should.