Making sense of the BCS is never an easy thing, but this year it just seems more complicated than in other years. Enter Mike Furlan, back on our front page after spending the better part of six months underwater on a US Naval submarine. Furls has been with us from day one, and no one breaks it down better once we get towards the end of the college football season. Will the Buckeyes get a BCS bid? And in what bowl against what team? Furls lays it out for us.

Making sense of the BCS is never an easy thing, but this year it just seems more complicated than in other years. In order to make sense of it all you need to read up on the system, make a few assumptions, and then chronologically run through the process and see what shakes out. Just remember, on the field results may not be indicative of future selection.

Lets start at the beginning. In order for a non BCS team to be eligible for a BCS slot the team must be ranked within the Top 12 (or Top 16 while outranking a BCS conference champ). Only one team from a non BCS conference is guaranteed a spot, so this spot is guaranteed to the highest ranking team, Utah. This does not preclude bowl committees from selecting another non BCS Conference school, but they are not required to do so.

In order for a team from a BCS conference to be BCS eligible they must win 9 games and be ranked within the Top 14. Additionally, no more than two teams can be selected from the same BCS Conference. This seems to leave a lot of possible contenders.

In order to simplify this problem we need to make a couple of assumptions about

how the season will play out. I don't think any of these assumptions is a real reach as none of them even call for an upset. In paranthesis after the assumption is my guess at the probability that the event actually occurs.

Assumptions:

1. The winner of the SEC championship game goes on to the NCG and the loser gains an at large berth (100%).

2. Texas will end the season in the BCS Top 4 at the end of the season and get the automatic bid that follows. A team gets in the Top 4 gets an automatic berth if a member of the conference is selected for the National Championship Game.

3. USC will beat UCLA (95%).

4. Oklahoma wins the Big XII Championship game (80%).

Based on these assumptions and bowl tie ins, we can take the complicated BCS problem and sort out some of the variables at least as they apply to Buckeye fans.

The National Championsip Game will feature Oklahoma vs. the winner of the SEC championship game.

The winner of the SEC Championship Game is not relevant except that it drives the order for the selection of replacement teams. For instance, if Alabama were to win then the Sugar Bowl, since they are losing the #1 ranked team, would get first pick of the remaining teams (as long as they are not tied into another bowl) to replace the SEC Champions. If Florida were to win, than it is not likely that the

Gators would jump Oklahoma. That means that the Fiesta Bowl would have first pick of the remaining teams to replace the Big XII Champions. In any case, both bowls (Sugar and Fiesta) are likely to replace their conference champions with their respective runners up, geographically it just makes sense. This takes Florida, Alabama, Oklahoma, and Texas off the board.

The Rose Bowl: USC vs. Penn State.

The Fiesta Bowl: Texas vs. ????

The Orange Bowl: Boston College/VaTech vs. ????

The Sugar Bowl: Alabama/Florida vs. ????

Well, that part was easy. Now comes the tricky part. There are three remaining slots to fill for the Fiesta, Sugar, and Orange Bowls and two tickets are already punched, Cincinnati (Big East Champs) and Utah. So now we need to go back to the BCS Rankings and systematically find the third team.

Rankings up to 14 excluding selected teams:

7 Texas Tech 0.780 (Ineligible due to the two teams per conference criteria)

9 Boise St. 0.703

10 Ohio St. 0.634

11 TCU 0.563

12 Ball St. 0.530

Looking down this list, it is pretty obvious that if a bowl is going to reach for a Cinderella, it would almost certainly be Boise State. If the bowl committees are looking for a major name with classic appeal, well, there is only one of those left. Essentially this boils down to a two horse race, Ohio State vs. Boise State. Your first inclination might be to try to take a systematic look at the contenders and determine who is the most worthy candidate. You could make the obvious arguments:

1. Boise State won all their games but plays in a weak conference.

2. Ohio State plays in a better conference and faced a very good USC team in non Conference play but lost two games.

3. Boise State makes a nice human interest story due to their Cinderella performance a couple of years ago.

These are sound arguments, but they are not really relevant to bowl committees. In order to decide between these two teams you need to think like a Bowl Fat Cat.

In the end, the decision will be made based on dollars and sense (not cents). It is not quite as simple as selling bowl tickets, although that counts. It is not just as easy as which team's fans will come to town and blow some cash, but surely that is a factor. Television ratings are definitely a concern, but they are not the only one. The answer lies in a combination of the three.

In a perfect world, a Bowl Fat Cat is looking for a team who's fans will tune in for the game, travel, fill the stadium, and spend money in the host city while at the same time spark enough national interest to cause less passionate fans to tune in. Let's face it, the passionate fans will tune in to any bowl game, the Fat Cats are looking to get your wife's sewing circle involved.

The answer would seem to favor the big boys in all cases leaving the Boise States of the world out in the cold, but that is not always the case. There is no question that the Buckeyes travel well, anywhere. The large enthusiastic alumni base spans the entire nation, particularly as more and more graduate and desert the failing Ohio economy. You can find Buckeye paraphenellia in every city without looking too hard. The Buckeyes have rapidly become a truly national team, and they spark national interest from fans and haters alike. The Buckeyes' miserable showings in their last few big games and the popular backlash against the team due to their recent flops could set up nicely for the Broncos, but only in the right scenario. That scenario depends almost completely on the actual selection order.

The Selection Process:

The bowls get to select their teams based on the order in which the bowls are played. The last bowl played gets first pick, so essentially the first bowl gets stuck with the leftovers. This year's selection order is: Fiesta, Sugar, Orange.

The Fiesta Bowl, played in Arizona, gets first crack at the teams. The choices are Cincinnati, Ohio State, Utah, and Boise State. I find it very unlikely that the Fiesta Bowl would reach past Utah to get another non BCS team, particularly a team further away geographically. Ultimately, it comes down to Ohio State or Utah. Personally I think they take the Utes, but the important point here is that they don't take the Broncos, and they were probably the best and only chance for the Broncos.

The Sugar Bowl, played in New Orleans, picks next. It certainly does not make sense for them to fly the Broncos out to New Orleans, far away from their fan and alumni base to play the SEC runner up. Again, Ohio State makes more sense than Boise State. It is true that the SEC Runner Up could probably fill the Sugar Bowl, but given the dud that was the Hawaii Warriors last year, it is unlikely that they would purposely set up another game like that.

The Orange Bowl, played in Miami, is already saddled with the ACC Champions. Last year, Virginia Tech and Kansas were unable to fill the Orange Bowl and really played one of the least memorable BCS bowls in recent memory. Again, the likelihood of them flying the Bronco's out, where they will contribute very little in tourism and attendance, really seems like a stretch. Personally, I think the Orange Bowl ends up without a choice, and are forced to field the Bearcats. The Bearcats might be a good team, but in the words of Steve Buffum, "they inspire ennui."

Had the selection order been different, or the guaranteed non BCS at large team not been from the west, I could see the Broncos finding a home in the Fiesta Bowl, but given this year's selection order the Buckeyes will get the nod.

Furls' BCS Projections:

National Title Game: Florida vs. Oklahoma

Fiesta Bowl: Texas vs. Utah

Sugar Bowl: Ohio State vs. Alabama

Rose Bowl: Penn State vs. USC

Orange Bowl: Cincinnati vs. Boston College