There's few people I know that know more about the game of college football than Jesse Lamovsky. And he's got an itch he needs to scratch, which he does on our front page this morning. Jesse has an idea, an idea for a 16 team end of the season NCAA Football tournament. One that makes a lot of sense, and would ensure that December's sports consciousness would belong to college football the same way March's belongs to college hoops. And he lays it out for our readers in his latest column.

The attraction of an NCAA Division I-A Football Tournament really hit me when I was watching Buffalo put the finishing touches on its 42-24 upset of Ball State in the MAC Championship Game. The Bulls had just pulled off something special, going from the dregs of the sport (10-69 in their first seven seasons in I-A) to the pinnacle of their conference in just three years, and topping off the transformation in style by knocking off an undefeated favorite to win the MAC title. Their players were dumping Gatorade on the coaches, the little Buffalo contingent at Ford Field was transported, Turner Gill was *vaklempt*- and rightfully so. They'd done a hell of a thing.

It's a great story, the stuff of Jim Nance voice-overs in March. But it won't get that glossy treatment. This story only winds up in Toronto and a cul-de-sac fate in the International Bowl again a middling Connecticut squad. You have a historic season, win your conference, and your reward is a third-tier bowl game in a foreign country that no one will watch. Nice trip for the Buffalo faithful, to be sure. Nice story, too. Only when it's over, no one remembers the story except the ones

who wrote it. The 2008 Buffalo Bulls deserve better. And damn it, so do we.

Okay, *we* don't really deserve better, but it'd be cool to see it.

There's going to be plenty of time to talk BCS and the bowls, and we'll do that, both on the Buckeye Friday podcast and within these pages. But first, allow me to bore you to tears with my idea for an NCAA Football Tournament.

(This is my second design for an NCAA Football Tournament. My first had a twelve-team field, four three-team regions
a la
the basketball Tournament, eleven spots for I-A conference champions and one at-large berth reserved for an independent team or a Big Ten co-champion in years the co-champions don't meet in the regular season. The lack of any at-large consideration, the skimpy regional format, the bowl tie-ins with Tournament sites, and the built-in favoritism to Notre Dame make this design a little shaky, so I've updated and refined it a little bit.

A few things (six things, to be exact):

First off, this Tournament is *all-inclusive*. Champions of all eleven current BCS conferences would get automatic bids, from SEC to Sun Belt. This isn't the eight-team playoff involving the six BCS conference champs and two at-large teams, a bit of foolishness espoused by otherwise sensible pundits like Pete Fiutak. Such a scheme would never fly, and nor should it. You can't have a Division I-A playoff and cut out nearly half the conferences in I-A, and besides, what have the Big East or ACC done to be entitled to such a lofty status? Let all conference champions play and that'll decide who is big-time, and who isn't.

Second, my plan is for a sixteen-team Tournament, similar to Division I-AA, with eleven spots for conference champions and five at-large spots- not so many as to

make the regular season meaningless, but enough so that we aren't leaving out teams that are capable of playing for a title. Roughly 13 percent of Division I-A teams would qualify for the Tournament, less than the percentage of Division I basketball teams that qualify for March Madness (around 19 percent.) So you'd get a Tournament with a spot for any school in I-A, including Buffalo, or Akron, or Kent- well, maybe not Kent- and a lot of great, non-watered down football besides.

Third, I'd keep the BCS two-teams-per-conference rule. The NCAA basketball Tournament had the same rule in effect when it was a 32-team field in the late ‘70s, and it is worth preserving even in an expanded football playoff. Such a rule would keep the at-large bids from being completely hogged by the "big four" conferences. My Tournament field in 2008 has spots for TCU and Georgia Tech, the Mountain West and ACC rewarded for solid seasons with multiple bids.

Fourth, opening-round and quarterfinal games would be held at campus sites, as a means of cutting travel costs and increasing attendance at Tournament games. There's no sense in trying to shoehorn the bowls into the arrangement- better to let them remain separate from the Tournament as a sort of NIT of college football. Neutral sites for the early rounds just wouldn't work, not like in hoops, where you can get four or eight teams to one site for a long weekend, not just two in a day. You want people showing up for those first-and-second-round games. Better to reward the higher seeds with home dates at sold-out campus stadiums than hold the early-round games at half-empty neutral stadiums.

Fifth, I wouldn't drag this sucker out for too long. The regular season, including conference championship games, would be over by the end of November, with the schedule cut back down to eleven games. The Tournament would start in the first week of December and end on January 1st, and the season would be wrapped up by the time conference play in college basketball and the NFL playoffs begin, as it should be.

Finally, there's no special rule for Notre Dame. The Irish get tossed into the at-large pool, where they will sink or swim.

Here's how the field would break down here in 2008. I'm using the AP poll as my seeding guideline, with a few small adjustments:

First Round- December 5 & 6, 2008

@ Campus Sites

(16) Troy @ (1) Florida

(9) Boise State @ (8) Ohio State

(12) Georgia Tech @ (5) USC

(13) Virginia Tech @ (4) Alabama

(11) TCU @ (6) Penn State

(14) East Carolina @ (3) Texas

(10) Cincinnati @ (7) Utah

(15) Buffalo @ (2) Oklahoma

A couple of first-round games would be played on Friday night- one EST (TCU-Penn State) and one PST (Georgia Tech-USC.) Then six Saturday games, starting at noon. There are some washouts in this round (Florida-Troy and Oklahoma-Buffalo), but Utah-Cincinnati, Georgia Tech-USC, and Virginia Tech-Alabama have a chance to be decent, and Texas Christian, with its stout defense, could present a challenge to Penn State in wintry University Park.

By the way, I'm aware that Boise State is ranked higher than Ohio State and ought to get that 8-9 match-up at home, but I'll be damned if I'm sending the Buckeyes off to play in a blue-turf bandbox in Idaho instead of keeping them at home in the Horseshoe. You don't like it; make up your own damn Tournament. J

And look at those potential second-round match-ups. USC-Alabama? Texas-Penn State? Day-um!

Round of Eight- December 12 & 13, 2008- at Campus Sites

Round of Four- December 20, 2008- at Neutral Sites

Championship Game- January 1, 2009- at Neutral Site

With such a Tournament, December's sports consciousness would belong to college football the same way March's belongs to college hoops. New Year's Day would continue as the sport's end-of-season banquet. The regular season would still matter. The elite programs would get their prerogative, the smaller programs would get their day, and the kids would be off the field by the beginning of spring semester. We would put together office pools and fill out brackets and fun stuff like that. Somebody give me a downside here, please.

And with such a Tournament, the intrepid Buffalo Bulls would be celebrating not only a Mid-America Conference Championship, but the opportunity to go on and play for a National Championship. They probably wouldn't get there, probably wouldn't get out of Norman without having half-a-hundred hung on them- although Turner Gill might feel right at home in Owen Field- but they'd have an opportunity to take the field with the best and win it or lose it right there, on that field, in the NCAA Football Tournament. They- and all of the teams and players of Division I-A college football- have earned that opportunity.