

Seven-Day Adventurists

A tight playoff schedule can make for fast friends, but it also can wreak havoc on travel plans



BOB LATHAM

It was 7:25 a.m., January 23, when I boarded a plane in Dallas bound for Chicago. Seven days earlier, the Chicago Bears had defeated the Seattle Seahawks in a divisional playoff game to secure home field advantage for the NFC championship game, an unexpected achievement for an inconsistent team. The Bears' victory was made

even sweeter for me by a phone call that came shortly after the end of the game from my longest-tenured friend in Chicago, a longtime Bears season ticket holder, who told me he had a ticket for the game with my name on it.

This would be the first time the Bears and their archrival Green Bay Packers had met in the postseason since 1941. If you were not raised in Chicago or Green Bay it is hard to describe what the word "Packers" means to a Bears fan and what the word "Bears" means to a Packers fan—whatever it is, it's not love. "You can either come now or wait until 2081 when it happens again," deadpanned my friend.

I had an additional incentive to make the trip. I wanted to be part of the de-wussification of America. Several weeks earlier Governor Ed Rendell of Pennsylvania had attributed the cancellation of an NFL game in Philadelphia due to *anticipated* weather conditions as evidence that we have become a "nation of wussies." Thus, if there was going to be an NFC championship game of such consequence, played on the shores of Lake Michigan, in 15-degree weather at kickoff with the temperature dropping throughout the game, I wanted to do my part to get Rendell's America back on track.

My early Sunday morning flight the day of the championship game proved interesting. I encountered a dozen people in the boarding area or on the plane doing the exact same thing I was—by my count, 11 Bears fans and one Packers fan, well-bundled with all manner of cold-weather accessories in their day packs. Call us the Down Dozen. As I took my seat, I realized why this impromptu group of non-wussie sports pilgrims were assembled on this particular morning: the seven-day advance purchase policy of most airlines.

The overachieving Bears were no certainty to make the conference championship game, so no one without a general wish to be in Chicago in late January would have planned a

weekend trip well in advance. It was not until the clinching victory over the Seahawks, seven days before, that we diehard Chicago transplants, scattered around the country, reacted quickly to see a once-in-a-lifetime event.

As I made the two-hour flight to Chicago in the only warmth I would enjoy all day, and having spent the previous two months engaged in debate over the merits of a major college football playoff system, I realized one of the challenges such a playoff would present. If there were college playoffs, as a fan of a team that is progressing from week to week, which game do you go to? When do you reserve your airline tickets? How can you make a weekend of it in the location where the game is played when you

don't know until seven days before that your team will actually be in a game?

WITH A COLLEGIATE PLAYOFF SYSTEM IN PLACE, HOW WOULD FANS FOLLOW THEIR TEAMS WITH SO LITTLE TIME TO MAKE PLANS?

One reason the NCAA basketball tournament is so phenomenally successful is because it is able to get around this problem. There are two games each weekend if your team

wins. There are eight teams per venue, meaning that even though the games are held at a neutral site, the event depends less on the fan base of any one participating team. The tournament is split up regionally to cut down, somewhat, on travel. The arenas are, at least for the early games, less than one-third the size of most stadiums where NCAA football playoff games would be played.

Nevertheless, it would be nice to see an evolution of airline ticketing policies that would make it easier for sports fans to spontaneously follow, physically, their teams. (Yes, I know, frequent-flyer miles can always be cashed in.) As the debate continues over an NCAA college football playoff, perhaps someone needs to bring some forward-thinking airline officials into the discussions. Having said that, the fact that the seven-day advance purchase policy caused each of my new friends among the Down Dozen to be on the same itinerary in January added great spirit to the Sunday flights—the outbound segment being somewhat more joyous for a Bears fan than the flight back. ■

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