

COMMENTARY

## Who's calling who names?



By David Pickle  
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**W**oe be unto any organization that gives sports columnists an opportunity to exercise their greatest muscle: glibness maximus.

Such a stimulus occurred this fall when Divisions I-A and I-AA changed their names to the Football Bowl Subdivision and the Football Championship Subdivision.

The possibility of the change was first mentioned in *The NCAA News* in February 2005 and was considered at several governance levels before its approval in August 2006. The new terminology became effective in January 2007.

The only sound heard from mainstream media over that period was a yawn.

However, the beginning of the 2007 football season shook some sportswriters out of hibernation on the topic, and Appalachian State's September 1 upset of Michigan threw others into rhetorical overdrive. Here are some outtakes:

- "Hey, it's all about branding, about establishing an identity, even a false one so long as it makes you feel warm and fuzzy. It's the same logic they use to give ribbons to all nine finishers at the youth swim meet." (Kirk Bohls, *Austin American-Statesman*, under the headline "More NCAA gobbledeygook")

- "...Divisions I-AA and I-AAA are crybabies. So in order to get the two to suck on their pacifiers again, the NCAA changed the names of the divisions to make it more 'fair.'" (Tyler Wilson, *Purdue Exponent*)

- "We already knew that I-A teams played in bowls and I-AA teams duked it out in a playoff. So who are the brainiacs who took away our letters? Blame these four N-C-A-A .... We don't need FBS to see the Full-Blown Silliness of this change." (Teddy Greenstein, *Chicago Tribune*)

Certainly, the Association has been subjected to harsher criticism than the foregoing. But the comments do illustrate how contemporary sportswriting often places wit in front of substance.

Throughout the process on this issue, proponents said their purpose was to clarify that there are no Division I subdivisions in any sport other than football. The public historically has not understood that fact, in large part because the media has not understood it. References to "I-AAA baseball programs" and the like have been common for years, and affected member institutions and conferences were understandably interested in finding a remedy. Big Sky Conference Commissioner Doug Fullerton articulated their position well in an *NCAA News* guest editorial that appeared in August 2006.

Nobody disputes that the NCAA's membership

is difficult to label. And some people might argue that the new approach actually is a step back from the old I-AAA description, which was convenient shorthand for Division I programs that don't sponsor football. The new solution ("Division I") doesn't really offer an effective way to set those programs apart when the need arises.

It's also true that Division I Football Bowl Subdivision "does not come tripping off the tongue" (as some sportswriters put it). But few writers explored the corresponding question, which is whether putting an "A" or a "AA" after Division I really described anything. Many journalists were simply comfortable with the old I-A and I-AA descriptions, even if they frequently applied them incorrectly.

Ultimately, it's odd that this particular change set off such a reaction. After all, sportswriters routinely deal with new bowl game names (the Poulan Weedeater Bowl is a distant memory even though the event lives on) and new names for athletes themselves (nobody insists on referring to Muhammad Ali as Cassius Clay because that's his "real" name). Ironically, part of the problem in this case may have involved the stability of the original name. Divisions I-A and I-AA had been around for almost 30 years.

Whether one agrees or disagrees with the new terminology, two things should be clear.

First, the authority to change the terminology belonged, appropriately, to the Association. Columnists who "informed" readers that the NCAA was behind this change were digging on the shallowest level imaginable. The revelation was akin to discovering that the Internal Revenue Service has something to do with the 1040 Form.

Second, if the members of the media didn't like the outcome, then they would not have liked the prospective change when the issue was in limbo. Commentary at that point would have been more useful rather than after-the-fact claptrap that was intended only to reinforce NCAA stereotypes.

That sort of monitoring would require more effort from sports journalists, but it could lead to better public understanding of future issues involving intercollegiate athletics.

If the media truly wants to flex its muscle, that would be a better place to start.

**Comments about new Division I nomenclature as posted on various blogs:**

"Yes, Appy State is the two-time defending 1-AA (or whatever it's called) champs, but it's still 1-AA."

(Dan Shanoff)

"If the NCAA is going to take its branding lessons from IBM and complicate things, they may as well go full tilt. That way, when they see what a stupid idea it is and that fans and reporters are still going to call them 1-A and 1-AA, they can revert to the old names to the delight of all their fans."

(ControlsCaddy.com)

"This is on par with naming the regionals of March Madness to San Antonio, St. Louis, Anaheim, etc. as opposed to East, West, South, etc."

(Turtle Sports Report)

"Championship game? Playoffs? Yes, the FCS (Football CHAMPIONSHIP Subdivision, formerly 1-AA) has a playoff system, and a real, undisputed National CHAMPION! This is what makes small-college football so much more exciting than its bigger cousin."

(Blogspot.com)

"Anyone who calls Division I-AA by the new name 'Division I Football Championship Subdivision' must receive one punch directly to the throat."

(ActuarialOutpost.com)