

'Those nerds are a threat to our way of life'

By David Carico

It is an oft-repeated phrase that a person is in control of his or her own destiny. One might expect this would be the case in sports such as football where the final score dictates the winner. The Leland Stanford Junior University (Stanford) football team has amassed an impressive 34-5 record since 2009. However, despite the team's consistent winning record, Stanford continues to be underappreciated in the final college football poles. Why is that?

Rather than continue to bemoan the situation with my other Stanford faithful, I decided to conduct an investigation into the matter. My conclusion is that college football rankings are a combination of a team's record, football culture, economics and public perception, although not necessarily in that order. Stanford succeeds as far as the team record is concerned but lags behind in the polls because it has not monopolized California football culture like its counterparts from the South.

"Football way of life in Texas" is the title of a recent article by Jeff Fedotin for Yahoo Sports. Fedotin quotes a high school football coach who states that Texans value "family, religion, tradition, and football, although not necessarily in that order." Thousands regularly attend high school football games. Fans fill professional stadiums for state high school championships. Football is also woven into the social fabric in the South where the high school football season effectively extends the entire school year because of spring football.

Sports media's interest in commercially exploiting the demand generated by football culture in the South practically guarantees that Southeastern Conference (SEC) teams will have top-billing on cable television. ESPN negotiated a 15-year, \$2.25 billion dollar contract to televise SEC games. More television time translates into greater visibility for the SEC teams and greater visibility equates with higher national rankings. Sports cable television ratings go up as nationally ranked teams face off. Moreover, since



Stanford quarterback Kevin Hogan throws during practice for the Rose Bowl NCAA college football game in Carson, Dec. 29, 2012.

ESPN owns the rights to televise all Bowl Championship Series (BCS) games and the national championship, it further inures to ESPN's benefit that nationally ranked SEC teams play in those games. College sports analysts add to the hype by focusing their attention on the SEC and repeatedly referring to this conference as the best in college football.

For Stanford to achieve the recognition it deserves in the college polls, the school will have to address the following deficiencies:

Stanford does not require football allegiance as a prerequisite for admission. Communities that place high value on their college football teams seem to fare better in the rankings. This is exemplified by the University of Texas, which we know collectively places a high value on family, tradition and football. The "Longhorns" underwhelming 9-4 record did not seem to affect their ranking as greatly as one might imagine. The

Longhorns ended up ranked in the Top-20 ahead of every other school with a 9-4 record. Stanford, unfortunately, does not require allegiance to its football team as a pre-requisite to belonging to the Stanford community. Hard to believe, but true, there are people at Stanford, including professors, who have never been to

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a Stanford football game.

Stanford does not have an easily identifiable football mascot. Some schools can be immediately identi-

fied by the names of their mascots. Notable examples are the "Crimson Tide" (Alabama); "Ducks" (Oregon); "Buckeyes" (Ohio State); "Fighting Irish" (Notre Dame); and "Bulldogs" (Georgia). There seems to be a correlation between a team's readily identifiable mascot and its college football ranking. The teams associated with the aforementioned mascots were ranked 1-5 in the final college polls, respectively. Stanford does not have an official mascot. The team is referred to by the media as the "Cardinal," a recognizable genus of bird, much like the Duck. Certainly, a "Cardinal" doing pushups is something the media could identify with. The Stanford Band pays homage to "El Palo Alto" (Spanish for "The Tall Stick") by having the "tree" as its mascot. This liberal "tree hugger" image does not enamor Stanford with conservative and independent college football pollsters.

Stanford football is a good bargain rather than a huge profit-making

enterprise. Stanford football is not valued in the upper echelon of profit-making college football teams. Seven of the top 10 money-making teams come from the SEC, led by LSU ranked No. 3 in the pre-season, now worth \$102 million. A few Pac-12 teams have cracked the top 20 money-makers. For instance, Oregon is ranked 15th on the Forbes list at \$74 million and USC is 16th at \$68 million. Oregon and USC were ranked No. 5 and No. 1 in the pre-season polls, respectively. At the end of the season, LSU had fallen to No. 14, the Ducks had risen to No. 2 but failed to win their conference, and the Trojans had fallen out of the rankings completely. Georgia, ranked No. 5 in total value and profits (\$99 million value/\$52 million profits) eerily ended up also ranked No. 5 in the final polls. Stanford is a better football value, and arguably a better football team, than Oregon, USC and the SEC schools ranked ahead of it while spending less money per win (about \$1.5 million) than any other NCAA Division I football program except Kansas State. Clearly, a winning record and frugality do not equate with college football rankings.

Stanford is not in the SEC or the state of Oregon. SEC teams accounted for five of the top-10 ranked college football teams. Stanford had consecutive wins over four nationally ranked teams in its final four games of the season. Stanford had more wins over ranked teams than any SEC team ranked ahead of it. Stanford beat the Oregon Ducks in Eugene, Ore., a significant accomplishment given that the Ducks had lost only once in Eugene in three football seasons. Stanford went on to win the Rose Bowl surrendering only 14 points to a Wisconsin team that had scored an astronomical 70 points against the 12th ranked Nebraska Cornhuskers in the Big-10 title game. Georgia, an SEC team that finished with an identical 12-2 record to Stanford, beat only one nationally ranked team during the regular season, and surrendered over twice as many points to Wisconsin as Stanford, but ended up ranked ahead of Stanford. Georgia ended up ranked No. 5 to Stanford's No. 7.

Stanford can't seem to get its mug

on ESPN. To say that Stanford's success on the football field is met with ambivalence by the sports media is an understatement. In 2012, ESPN televised most of the Oregon Ducks regular season games and four games played by Georgia. ESPN televised only one of Stanford's regular season games, possibly because no SEC team was playing that day. ESPN commentator Lou Holtz publicly aired his desire for an SEC (Alabama)/Oregon Ducks showdown in the national championship game. Holtz, the one time coach of the Fighting Irish of Notre Dame, stated that he was sorry the Stanford field goal kicker made his kick in overtime to beat the Ducks. I guess the "luck of the Irish," who made it to the national championship despite several overtime wins (including one over Stanford on a controversial call), was not meant for the likes of Stanford.

"Those nerds are a threat to our way of life" said the well-coifed jock in the 1984 comedy "Revenge of the Nerds." It is safe to say that if past success is any indicator of future performance that Stanford will continue in its winning ways. What Stanford's continued success portends for football culture beyond football players using iPads to review plays is unknown. Maybe college football will loosen up a little bit and we will see more "scatter bands" like the Leland Stanford Junior University Marching Band that value inclusiveness (you don't have to play an instrument to be in the band), fun and irreverence (with notable half-time show themes such as "Those Irish, Why Must They Fight?") over military-style marches and pushups. Perhaps colleges that make enormous amounts of money off of their student athletes will have to pay them or at least guarantee them a quality education. Perhaps "the Pop Warner Mission" to provide fun athletic learning opportunities for children, while emphasizing the importance of academic success" will become a reality in college football.

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