

NOTRE DAME DIDN'T MISS THE PLAYOFF. THE PLAYOFF COMMITTEE MISSED NOTRE DAME.

Notre Dame was robbed of its playoff spot. Just not by the team you think.

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December 12th, 2025

All people of goodwill acknowledge that the process leading to Notre Dame's exclusion from the playoff was flawed, but they aren't outraged because they think that the final outcome was defensible: it's plausible that Miami deserved to get in over Notre Dame since they beat Notre Dame head-to-head. But calling the selection process "flawed" understates just how problematic it actually was, and the final outcome was *manifestly indefensible*: not, however, because it was obvious that Notre Dame should get in over *Miami*, but because it was obvious that Notre Dame should get in over *Alabama*. The Notre Dame-Miami comparison was an orchestrated distraction that allowed Alabama to be gifted Notre Dame's spot without anyone noticing.

What was wrong with the selection process? There were too many flaws to discuss them all, so let's just focus on two of the most serious. First: Why did Alabama leapfrog Notre Dame in the penultimate rankings after narrowly escaping with a win over Auburn, an unranked team having a disastrous season? (They fired their coach weeks ago.) That same weekend, Notre Dame looked unstoppable as they blew the doors off Stanford—another bad team, admittedly. But still, Alabama was *lucky* to escape with that win over Auburn. Moving Alabama above Notre Dame in that scenario makes absolutely no sense at all, and was the first sign that something was rotten in Denmark.

The second major flaw in the process—just as puzzling as the first—is that Alabama didn't fall in the rankings after being *utterly dominated* by Georgia in the SEC Championship Game. Every team in the history of the playoff that lost its conference championship game has dropped in the rankings. (Well, except TCU in 2023, after a close overtime loss to #10 Kansas.) And even this year, BYU dropped after a similarly lopsided loss in the Big 12 Championship. Heck, Ohio State dropped after *barely* losing the Big Ten Championship! So it's not as if the committee adopted a new rule this year preventing a team from dropping because it lost its conference championship. Everyone dropped—except Alabama. And Alabama's loss was much worse than Ohio State's: they didn't *barely* lose, they were badly beaten. Notre Dame rushed for more yards than Alabama that weekend, and Notre Dame didn't even play! (Alabama had *negative three* rushing yards against Georgia.)

These are not mere "flaws" in the selection process, they are *fatal* flaws: flaws that point to outright manipulation of the rankings to keep Alabama in the playoff. The more you examine the process, the more evidence for this you find. CFP commissioner Hunter Yurachek urged the playoff committee to rewatch the Miami–Notre Dame game from Week 1 as part of its evaluation for the final rankings. If early-season results were so important to the committee, why was Alabama's embarrassing Week 1 loss to an awful Florida State team not important enough to revisit as well? The committee's strangely selective consideration of early-season results looks designed to reach a predetermined conclusion—just like the committee's strange decision to move Alabama above Notre Dame in the penultimate rankings, and just like its strange decision not to drop Alabama after getting blown out by Georgia. It

is difficult to avoid the impression that the selection process was structured to ensure Alabama's inclusion in the playoff, rather than to identify the best or most worthy teams.

Perhaps there is an alternative explanation that accounts for these inconsistencies in the process; if so, I would be glad to hear it. I would *like* to be proven wrong, because as things stand, I can't make sense of what happened, and am left with the depressing conclusion that the process was intentionally manipulated in a way that favored Alabama and the SEC. (What conference does Yurachek's school belong to? Oh yeah: the SEC.)

With all that being said, flaws—even fatal flaws—in the selection process could be forgiven if the final verdict were correct. But the final outcome makes even less sense than the procedure that produced it. What is the argument that Alabama belonged in the playoff over Notre Dame? The case for Notre Dame over Alabama is hard to dispute. Almost every data point suggests that Notre Dame is the better team, and the few that don't suggest that Notre Dame is at least better than Miami, and so *still* do nothing to support Notre Dame's exclusion from the playoff. Consider the data:

Alabama: 10–3 record (9-3 FBS record, with one *bad* loss to a *bad* team, and one close loss and one *bad* loss to *playoff* teams); +180 point differential

Miami: 10–2 record (9-2 FBS record, with both close losses to *bad* teams); +243 point differential

Notre Dame: 10–2 record (10-2 FBS record, with both close losses to *playoff* teams); +293 point differential

ESPN FPI: ND #3, Miami #7, Alabama #8

ESPN SP+: ND #6, Miami #9, Alabama #13

AP Poll: ND #9, Miami #10, Alabama #11

Coaches Poll: ND #9, Miami #10, Alabama #11

Old BCS Formula: ND #9, Alabama #10, Miami #11

CBS: ND #9, Miami #10, Alabama #11

ESPN Overall Efficiency: ND #5, Miami #8, Alabama #12

ESPN Strength of Record: Alabama #10, ND #13, Miami #14

ESPN Strength of Schedule: Alabama #6, ND #44, Miami #45

The Power Rank: ND #4, Alabama #7, Miami #8

Versus Sports Simulator: ND #10, Alabama #11, Miami #16

ColleyMatrix: ND #10, Alabama #11, Miami #13

Finally, **Vegas championship betting odds**—probably the most objective real-time metric of team quality we have—had Notre Dame at #4 (roughly +1000) *before* the final CFP rankings were released. Both Miami and Alabama have worse odds *now*, *after* being guaranteed their playoff spots. (Miami is #7 at +2200; Alabama is #8 at +2500.) FanDuel's model has Notre Dame as a four-point favorite over Alabama on a neutral field. (It has Alabama as a 1.5-point favorite over Miami in the same scenario.)

This data is not cherry-picked. Across every major evaluative system—human polls, computer models, betting markets, and so forth—the pattern is the same: Notre Dame is almost always the best of the three, and never the worst. There isn't a single metric I can find that places Notre Dame behind both Alabama and Miami, and almost all of them place Notre Dame ahead of Alabama. The narrative that has been pushed on the public focuses on Notre Dame versus Miami, where Notre Dame's head-to-

head loss provides a plausible rationale for choosing Miami. That's defensible, even if I don't agree. (The results of the head-to-head matchup are *already* factored into the rankings, so factoring them in again when the two teams are close in the rankings seems like double-counting.) What's indefensible—and, as far as I know, undefended—is picking Alabama over Notre Dame. If there is a metric that puts Notre Dame behind both Miami *and* Alabama, I haven't seen it. As I said above, I would *like* to be wrong about this. It would be comforting to believe that things are not as corrupt as they appear. Offer me a blue pill, and I might take it...but you have to at least offer me the pill.

Even if you accept all of this, you might think Notre Dame's decision to forgo a bowl game reflects poorly on the program, and that they should have taken the opportunity to "prove they belonged" by dominating BYU in the Pop-Tarts Bowl. I *understand* this sentiment (unlike the process or the outcome), but I'm not convinced. Bowl games these days are more like exhibition matches than meaningful contests. Top players regularly opt out: Notre Dame's star running backs Jeremiyah Love and Jadarian Price were certainly not going to play in the Pop-Tarts Bowl, nor were many other important players who needed to recover from injuries or would have had their NFL futures on the line, including both defensive stars and starting offensive linemen. The team that would have taken the field would have been a pale shadow of the 2025 Notre Dame football team. (After getting snubbed from the playoff in 2023, FSU played in the Orange Bowl with a depleted team. They were humiliated by Georgia 63-3.)

Notre Dame has operated for the past two seasons with the singular objective of winning a national championship—*every* game has been played as a means of achieving that goal—and so declining to play a depleted, if not decimated, roster in a low-stakes exhibition game is a perfectly reasonable choice (Although I do grant that reasonable people may disagree in this case.) The decision becomes even more understandable when we remember that playing the bowl game works to the financial benefit of the very same corrupt institution that robbed Notre Dame of their playoff spot in the first place.

What is that corrupt institution, and why would they want Notre Dame out of the playoff? ESPN owns the broadcast rights for the CFP. They also own the broadcast rights to the SEC and the ACC. Alabama is the crown jewel of the SEC, and if Miami hadn't made the playoff the ACC would have lacked representation altogether. ESPN is heavily financially invested in the success of those conferences. On the other hand, ESPN's competitor NBC owns the broadcast rights for Notre Dame. If Alabama dropped out of the CFP after losing the SEC Championship Game, that would have likely been the death knell of conferences championship games. But those games are big money makers for ESPN and its partners, including the SEC and ACC. Similarly, the ACC getting shut out of the CFP would have been devastating for the future of the ACC, which is already in a precarious position. Conversely, leaving Notre Dame out of the playoffs primarily hurts ESPN's competitor NBC. Leaving Notre Dame out of the playoffs had nothing to do with on-the-field metrics: we saw above that those metrics all favored Notre Dame over Alabama, Miami, or both. Leaving Notre Dame out of the playoffs had to do with off-the-field *money*. Money for ESPN and its partners in the SEC and ACC.

Notre Dame *was* robbed—but by Alabama, not Miami, in a move masterminded by ESPN. Before this year, no team had *ever* made the playoff with three losses. This year, Alabama became the historic first. And before this year, no team (other than the 2023 TCU team mentioned above) had ever lost their conference championship game and not dropped in the rankings. And so this year Alabama became a historic *second*. It's just not plausible to think that this is just a coincidence, that the college playoff committee honestly believed, contrary to every metric we have, that Alabama deserved to be

in the playoff over Notre Dame. This wasn't a football competition between Notre Dame and Alabama. It was a *business* competition between ESPN and NBC, and ESPN was holding all the cards.

It's worth mentioning that there was *another* historic first required to keep Notre Dame out of the playoff this year: before Miami, no team had ever made the playoff with two losses to unranked teams. I don't mean to let the ACC totally off the hook here. The need to get an ACC team into the playoff is presumably why, if the committee wasn't going to drop Alabama for losing to Georgia anyway, they didn't simply leave Notre Dame at #9 and Alabama at #10, as they were before the penultimate rankings. That would have left enough space between Notre Dame and Miami to prevent the head-to-head result from coming into play (according to the bizarre rules the committee was purportedly operating under). But as noted above, not having a team in the playoff would have been disastrous for the ACC. *All* of this could have been prevented—all *three* teams could have made the playoff—if the ACC's absurd tie-breaker rules hadn't kept Miami out of the ACC Championship Game where they belonged. Alternatively, perhaps the committee moved Alabama in front of Notre Dame in the penultimate rankings precisely so they could drop Alabama but still keep them in the playoff if they lost to Georgia in the SEC Championship Game. Duke winning the ACC Championship then forced the committee to change tracks. Or perhaps most plausibly of all: the committee dropped Notre Dame in the penultimate rankings for both these reasons. It's good to have contingency plans if you're masterminding a heist.

The problem is not that Notre Dame didn't make the playoff. That happens. The problem is that, by all objective measures, Notre Dame *did* make the playoff. But the committee simply disregarded those objective measures and handed Notre Dame's spot to Alabama. *That* is why Notre Dame fans are upset. They deserve to be. The week before the committee's final rankings, Notre Dame had the fourth-best odds of winning the national championship. The *fourth*-best! But now we will never know if they would have. And that's why you should be upset too.