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HASKELL INDIAN NATIONS ISN'T NO. 1 BUT IS RANKED

by John Pruett - Sports Editor



JOHN PRUETT

Leftovers from Sunday's column on Huntsville physicists Jim Ashburn and Paul Colvert, who teamed up to formulate a computerized college football rating system under the Web site

www.atomicfootball.com:

• The cool-looking Ashburn-Colvert logo is a circle, the inside of which is the familiar interlocking atomic rings enveloping a football in the middle, with "Atomic Football" written across the top of the circle and "Solutio Optimus" across the bottom.

Why Atomic Football? "We wanted to come up with something a little corny, actually," Ashburn said. "The word 'atomic' had gone out of vogue a little bit, and we wanted to bring it back."

And the Latin phrase? "We're certainly not Latin scholars," said Ashburn, "but we believe it means 'Optimal Solution' or 'The Best Answer.'"

• The Ashburn-Colvert algorithm ranks more than 700 college football teams in every division: NCAA I-A, I-AA, Division II and Division III and NAIA.

That's every football-playing college in the country - except 11.

"We don't do the teams in the NESCAA," said Colvert, "because they play only eight games a year, all against each other, and sometimes they play each other more than once."

Members of the NESCAA - the New England Small College Athletic Conference - are Amherst,

Bates, Bowdoin, Colby, Connecticut College, Hamilton, Middlebury, Trinity, Tufts, Wesleyan and Williams.

NESCAA schools don't give scholarships and award financial aid solely on the basis of need, and - novel concept! - the presidents of each institution control their intercollegiate athletic policies.

• Among the small schools the Atomic Football rankings do include are the eight NAIA independents: Langston (Okla.), Webber International (Fla.), Southern Oregon, Azusa Pacific (Calif.), Southwest Assemblies of God (Texas), Waldorf (Iowa), Edward Waters (Fla.) and Haskell Indian Nations of Lawrence, Kan., which also happens to be the home of a



somewhat larger institution of higher learning, the University of Kansas.

In fact, Haskell Indian Nations is at the center of one of Ashburn's favorite examples of the built-in peculiarities that sometimes come into play in any football ranking system.

"The most common criticism of computer rankings is that they sometimes seemingly ignore head-to-head competition," he said.

"People say, 'How can Team X be ranked ahead of Team Y when Y beat X three weeks ago?'"

"Ken Massey (whose system is one of six used in the current BCS rankings) likes to point out how just about anybody could theoretically win a national championship if you went strictly on head-to-head competition," said Ashburn.

"He does a thing where he takes an NAIA team with only one win and goes up the chair through all the divisions, all the way to the highest-ranked Division I-A team with only one loss, and he'll show that you could make an argument for a team like Haskell Indian Nations is better than Tennessee, based on a progression of head-to-head scores. Or that Southwest Assemblies of God is better than Oregon."

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