

Forget the title game; Tom Bowl invites OSU

Thursday, December 20, 2007 3:27 AM

By Ken Gordon

THE COLUMBUS DISPATCH

In the 18-year history of this bowl game, the final score has been 0-0 every year except for once, when heavy fog made it impossible to determine the score.

Oh, and no team has ever actually shown up to play.

Welcome to the wacky world of the Tom Bowl, which, as president Tom Cantrell boasts, "is the only major college bowl not sanctioned by the NCAA."

Cantrell dreamed this up as a student at Michigan State in 1989. Fed up with a bowl system that did not always match the two best teams, he sent letters inviting Colorado and Florida to the inaugural Tom Bowl.

He went home for winter break and forgot all about it.

"When I got back, I had a letter from Colorado declining the invitation, because they could make more money at the Orange Bowl," Cantrell said. "I was floored, I thought that was so cool."

That letter can be seen on Cantrell's web site, www.tombowl.com, along with many other responses. One was from former Ohio State athletic director Andy Geiger after Cantrell invited the Buckeyes and Iowa to play a de facto Big Ten championship game in 2002.

Geiger wrote back that he was honored to be invited to participate in such a prestigious event, but the Buckeyes were committed to play in the Fiesta Bowl.

OSU was invited this year for the fourth time, along with Kansas and Hawaii. Cantrell has dreamed up a system in which each team plays one half against the other two teams.

He sends school officials a game program with each invitation letter.

It's firmly tongue-in-cheek, and delightfully so. The web site includes a Hall of Fame, a Tom Bowl store and kid's corner, summaries of each 0-0 outcome and photos of Cantrell and his small knot of family and friends.

Yes, they actually sit in the stands of Frank A. Schafer Stadium in Beal City, Mich., each year.

Meanwhile, the Tom Bowl has attracted a cult following. It has been featured on CNN Headline News, and he was thrilled that his Wikipedia entry for it was not rejected and actually was updated with last year's "result."

Buckeyes fans, rest assured plenty of tickets are available for Tom Bowl XIX, set for 2 p.m. Monday. As the web site explains, "just walk up on game day and someone will hand you a ticket."

Who knows, maybe this is the year an actual game will be played.

"All someone has to do is show up and they win," Cantrell said.

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Tom Cantrell

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