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Social media boosting college football popularity

Harris Poll, a company that has asked adult fans to identify their favorite sport each year since 1985, recently reported that professional football is the most popular sport in America — for the 30th year in a row.

For some time, "America's pastime" has come in second to football in popularity. But now a different sport is poised to overtake baseball as the country's second most popular sport — college football.

Its popularity is on the upswing. And while part of this surge may be related to the newly adopted four-team playoff structure that will replace the much-criticized Bowl Championship Series, social media is also driving the sport's overall increase in popularity, grabbing the attention of younger sports fans, building fan bases, spreading school spirit and promoting passionate (though not divisive) rivalries.

According to Dave Morgan, president of USA Today Sports Media Group, college football fans are "the most passionate and rabid in all of sports." USA Today and Degree deodorant have launched the College Football Fan Index to, as Morgan puts it, "actually quantify the passion each school's fan base generates beyond the games themselves as well as to determine which traditions and fan experiences resonate the most with fans around the country."

The index is a "cumulative data-based ranking of America's most active and engaged fan bases for the 2014 season as determined by social media and online polling."

It tracks social media activity by team based on the activity of each school's fan base, including sharing photos and videos as well as the results of the site's weekly polls that ask fans to vote on questions designed to highlight the schools that offer the best fan experience. Fans can vote as many times as they want for their favorite team.

To boost their team's rankings, fans are also encouraged to be creative with social media posts about their team on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

The index's weekly polls allow fans to vote for their teams based on weekly "10 best" themes, such as best stadiums (UCLA, with the Rose Bowl, topped that list), mascots (Uga, Georgia's famous English bulldog was No. 1), helmets (the iconic golden domes of Notre Dame came out on top), fight songs (Michigan's "The Victors" was deemed the greatest), team color (starring the burnt orange of Texas), best stadium entrance (Clemson won that one for the team's run down a hill into the stadium), best student sections (Texas A&M's The 12th Man section, complete with five student "yell leaders") and tailgates (LSU Tigers fans apparently take tail-gating to a whole new and gourmet level). Upcoming polling will include best cheerleaders, traditions and football towns.

The numbers are released each Thursday and include the teams' previous rankings and whether each team is "trending up" or "trending down." At the beginning of November, the overall rankings placed USC (484,311 social mentions, 1,919 voting points; same rank as the previous week), Oregon (469,386 mentions, 1,630 voting points; same rank) and Tennessee (398,551 mentions, 2,936 voting points; trending up from fourth place) in the first-, second- and third-place slots, respectively.

Fans also seemed to be finding an artistic outlet for their team spirit at the end of October with some creative pumpkin carving, images of which were featured on the site. The rankings include links to each team's "home" page, which displays a "social heat map" indicating where fans are the most active on Twitter as well as team information and highlights from fans' social media activity for over the past week.

The site also publishes in-depth and descriptive articles on the weekly numbers with images from social media posts and on the weekly polling theme as well as on

team-specific and more general college football news.

The top teams are not the only ones featured on the site. The index also lists the "Bottom Five" — teams from the "power conferences" (SEC, Pac-12, Big Ten, Big 12 and ACC) with fan bases "that aren't as active as they should be" as well as news and social media posts about each team. The "Bonus Five" highlights "notable" teams outside the top 10 with fan bases or squads that "made news" during the week.

The index focuses its analytics on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram, as they tend to be the most popular among sports fans. Of all of the available third-party platforms, photo and video-sharing site Instagram seems to be providing college football teams with more and greater opportunities to reach their target audience — younger fans.

With approximately 90 percent of Instagram's 200 million registered users under 35 years old, that's a big audience — and one that fits squarely within the target demographic for college football teams.

College teams already are using Instagram to boost fan engagements in a number of ways, from sharing "up-close and personal" moments that are often outside of the fans' view, such as images of a

locker room pep talk or sneak peaks and other revelations relating to new facilities, as the University of Houston did for several months leading up to the opening of its new stadium.

While the "insta" part of Instagram means that teams and fans can capture and share images instantly and as they happen in real time, teams are also developing Instagram campaigns (and even some graphics) in advance — much as they have with Facebook and Twitter — to tell specific stories. Instagram has also been promoting college football on the platform, highlighting the start of the 2014 season — the first with the new playoff format — with a blog post on the site encouraging fans follow the teams and players that have accounts.

Will college football squeak past baseball and grab that spot as second most popular sport in America? Which team's fans will boost their school to the top of the fan index? Answers to these questions and many others remain to be seen as the college football season unwinds.

There is one certainty in the sport, however: Social media will continue to be a driver for fan engagement, and smart college football programs will continue to take advantage of that.