Study: College football coaching changes are overrated

By Paul Myerberg
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Now that we're just weeks away from the close of the regular season, it's time to ask a meaningful question: Is the grass always greener on the other side?

With recent history as our guide, somewhere around 20 FBS programs will make a coaching change after this season. Is change a good thing? On average, is the new boss better than the old boss?

To help answer that question, professors from the University of Colorado system and Loyola University Chicago created a study looking at what happened to FBS programs that changed head coaches for performance reasons between 1997 and 2010. According to its summary, the study is the first of its kind to analyze the effects of results-based coaching changes on the performance of college teams.

The methodology, in short: The professors compared the performance of programs that replaced their coach with similar programs that decided to retain their head coach. The study then "assessed how coaching replacements affected team performance for the four years following a replacement."

After completing the study, the professors came to a pair of interesting conclusions:

When a team had been performing particularly poorly, replacing the coach resulted in a small, but short-lived, improvement in performance after a change.

The records of mediocre teams – those that, on average, won about 50 percent of their games in the year prior to replacing a coach – became worse.

Basically, poorly performing teams might get a brief improvement when changing coaches, but the change doesn't last – bad teams remain bad. And average teams, those that hover around six wins every season, actually get worse after making a coaching change. That's fascinating.

The findings "suggest that the relatively common decision to fire head college football coaches for poor team performance may be ill-advised," write political science professors Scott Adler of Colorado-Boulder, Michael Berry of Colorado-Denver and David Doherty of Loyola University Chicago.

"Despite the fanfare that often accompanies the hiring of a new coach, our research demonstrates that at least with respect to on-field performance, coach replacement can be expected to be, at best, a break-even antidote," Adler said.
"For every team that does better following a change, there is another that sees a dip in performance. Moreover, there is just as much volatility in win/loss records of teams that do and do not replace their coaches."

Of course, those universities eyeballing a coaching change in December – or even before the end of November – are confident that the next coach will be the one who turns the tide.

But the study's findings might give schools like California, Purdue, South Florida and others reason to consider the potential fallout of a coaching change. California, for instance, might need to weigh Jeff Tedford's $6.9 million buyout against the fact that coaching moves can be considered a "break-even antidote."