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THE EVOLUTION OF INTERCOLLEGIATE ATHLETIC CONFERENCES

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## **ABSTRACT**

The process of how intercollegiate athletics operate constantly changes throughout the years. Beginning in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, college sports ran on a small-scale and in a very unorganized fashion. In contrast, the organized, methodical workings of college sports today pose a very drastic change from some 150 years ago. With the vast growth and expansion of college sports, the alignment of collegiate conferences changes frequently. Previously strong conferences, such as the Big East, evolve into has-beens as universities jump ship to new conferences and new benefits. While schools generally do not reveal the cause for their move from conference to conference, one main source seems to stick out as it skyrockets from deal to deal: media rights. These extreme changes in conference alignment are cause for concern as collegiate athletics stray away from their roots and traditions. These changes also pose a problem for athletes and universities, as the student-athletes travel farther and farther for a single game or match, only to travel all the way back to the university to attend classes. As realignment continues, prominent conferences seek out universities that provide them monetary benefit while ignoring whether or not they fit geographically or within the context of the conference brand or traditions. Although the college sports industry has experienced increasing monetary benefits over the years, the shift in realignment still poses one looming question: Will the current rush to conference realignment produce a structure that best supports the long-term interests of the collegiate sports model, universities, their brands and their student-athletes?

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of Figures .....	iii
List of Tables .....	iv
Acknowledgements.....	v
Chapter 1 Literature Review .....	1
Chapter 2 Collegiate Conferences Through History (1888-1988).....	5
Chapter 3 Penn State Joins Big Ten to Spark 1990s Realignment (1990-2002) .....	11
Chapter 4 The Big East Raid, the Big Ten Network and More Realignment.....	14
The Creation and Influence of the Big Ten Network.....	17
Chapter 5 The Rich Get Richer: Revenue Breakdown By Conference .....	20
Chapter 6 The Expansion Effect on Brand and Olympic Sports .....	26
The Effect on Olympic Sports.....	27
Chapter 7 The Current Conferences .....	29
Looking Into the Future of College Sports Conferences .....	31
Chapter 8 What the Future of College Sports Should Look Like.....	37
Chapter 9 Conclusion.....	42
Appendix A Interview with Tim Curley .....	43
Appendix B Interview with Commissioner Jim Delany .....	44
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	46

**LIST OF FIGURES**

Figure 5-1 WVU in the Big 12 ..... 23

**LIST OF TABLES**

<b>Table 5-1:</b> Media Rights Fees Broken Down by Conference .....	25
<b>Table 5-2:</b> Media Rights Fees Broken Down by School .....	25

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## **Chapter 1**

### **Literature Review**

Experts, journalists and sportscasters constantly discuss the shift in collegiate conferences. However, the extent to which they delve into the future of collegiate athletics and how the conference shifts will affect the success or failure of college sports remains untapped. The focus persists on the “now” and the revenues instead of the future for the brand of college sports and the student-athletes. “Further expansion to reach 16-team super conferences, more playoff games, and tons and tons of money all await” (Arguello, 2012). Little focus is given to the student-athletes. The importance of conference realignment is high due to the effect it will have on college athletes. Intercollegiate athletics started solidifying conferences in the late 1800s as the popularity grew and colleges wanted to make rules regarding player eligibility (“History of Conference Realignment”, 2011). Although many stipulations create the player eligibility of a student-athlete, the core requirement stems from being enrolled in a university. The rush to conference realignment has the potential to destroy the “student first” model that initiated collegiate athletics.

The revenue that conferences reap through college sports continually increases. “Television money is the lifeblood of college sports - specifically college football, the second-most valuable property to television networks after the NFL” (Chi, 2012). Most conference realignment discussions and articles concentrate on this revenue stream—not the athletes themselves, the respective universities or the brand of the conferences, universities and the industry as a whole. New conference networks allow for even higher media rights deals, which lead to higher revenues for the universities, of course. “The [SEC’s] new [TV] deal should be the

richest in college sports, regardless of the specific details, and the conference's patience in negotiating a new contract is further proof of its underlying superiority. The ACC and Big 12 were forced to quickly sign TV deals due to concerns that conference members might otherwise leave for greener pastures" (Smith, 2013). As Smith discusses the "most valuable conferences in college sports," he focuses largely on the TV deals and college football. The little he writes about college basketball pertains to the fallout of the Big East conference, and naturally, he disregards all other college sports. Although he does discuss the media rights deals involved with these conferences, he fails to explore the implications these changes may have on the brand of college sports.

Another main focus of conference realignment is new target markets. "Not one to be left behind, the SEC will look at the major ACC schools and add two new states to its TV footprint: Virginia and North Carolina...And give it a shot at making \$1 billion in TV money" (Arguello, 2012). Lorenzo Arguello extensively suggests new schools to add to different conferences to expand the target markets and ultimately, increase revenue. The larger the market a conference can acquire, the more demanding a TV deal can be. A largely desired school is Notre Dame. The Big Ten already occupies the geographical location of the Fighting Irish, but it would be the likely candidate to make the best fit for Notre Dame (if they were to succumb to a conference's offer). Because of Notre Dame's large fan-base across the US and its academic standards, the school fits well with the other universities within the Big Ten (Arguello, 2012). Contrast this fit with Rutgers and Maryland joining the Big Ten. While it is suspected that these schools are attractive to the Big Ten to gain the NYC and DC markets respectively, therein lies a big discrepancy with their "fit," which will be discussed later. Meanwhile, Notre Dame ignores its fit within the Big Ten in order to pursue more revenue within the ACC while maintaining its independence.



Jordan Calfee of Bleacher Report examines the season schedules of college football in his article on super conferences. He makes five main arguments pertaining to why conference realignment is bad for college football, specifically: “Some intra-conference teams will never play each other, conference loyalty will disappear, conference affiliation will make no sense, [there will be] no more important non-conference games, and more non-AQ [Automatic Qualifying] exclusion” (Calfee, 2012). The first point regarding intra-conference games pertains to the teams’ heavily loaded schedules with in-conference games, due to a large number of teams within their conference. The second point discussing conference loyalty speaks about fans ceasing to root for the success of their own conference. Next, the third point argues the disconnect between the traditional regional aspect of conferences that would develop into conferences separated across the country. Fourth, non-conference games provide an exciting beginning to the football season. Matchups between conferences that avid fans dream about actually become a reality during non-conference games and this would virtually disappear. Finally, the playing field would be even further separated as non-AQ schools would have even less of a chance to make the playoffs (Calfee, 2012). These aspects of college football are certainly important from a consumer standpoint. Questions remain unanswered as to how the public would react to such changes in college football schedules. Calfee briefly touches on the effect realignment would have on other sports: “How much sense will it make to have Penn State traveling to California at least twice a year? For small sports that can't afford planes for their games, these road trips will be nearly impossible, especially numerous times over the course of a single season.” Sadly, he fails to delve into the subject more, and leaves the argument mostly pertaining to college football-the sport that only travels once a week.

While many suggest what the future of conference realignment is *going* to be, the question remains unresolved as to what the conference alignment *should* be. Because the future of intercollegiate athletics seems to stray so far from its core roots, it is important to analyze what

has made college sports so successful and how this will affect its long-term success moving forward.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Collegiate Conferences Through History (1888-1988)**

The very beginning of collegiate conferences started with the formation of the Michigan Intercollegiate Athletic Association in 1888. Before major sports gained popularity, this conference participated in track and field events with other schools. After some years of success in track and field meets among universities, the Michigan Intercollegiate Athletic Association formed including the following universities: Eastern Michigan University, Albion College, Hillsdale College, Michigan State University, Olivet College, Kalamazoo College, Alma College, Adrian College and Hope College (“America’s Oldest Collegiate Conference”, 2013). Although universities did not yet set rules in stone for player eligibility and their universities, this initiated the beginning of colleges convening formally to play sports.

Next, the Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Association (SIAA) formed in 1894. This conference simply formed due to the increasing need to organize athletic regulations between colleges, such as player eligibility. The SIAA began with the following schools: University of Alabama, Auburn University, University of Georgia, Georgia Tech, University of North Carolina and University of Sewanee. Within the next year, seven more schools joined the conference: Cumberland of Tennessee, University of Mississippi, Louisiana State, Mississippi State, University of Tennessee, University of Texas and Tulane University (Saylor). In simply two years, the SIAA doubled in size and continued to expand nearly every year thereafter. The creation of this conference initiated a wave of new conference formations.

In the next year after the creation of SIAA, another conference (originally named the Intercollegiate Conference of Faculty Representatives and known as the Western Conference) organized. The common problem among schools that needed discussion sprang from the lack of

regulations in regards to player eligibility. As intercollegiate athletics acquired more popularity, professional athletes and other non-students attempted to play for college teams. Because little rules existed, presidents of seven Midwest schools (Purdue University, Northwestern University, University of Wisconsin, University of Minnesota, Lake Forest College University of Chicago and University of Illinois) convened to discuss and agree upon a ruling for their universities. “The presidents' first known action ‘restricted eligibility for athletics to bonafide, full-time students who were not delinquent in their studies.’ That important legislation, along with other legislation that would follow in the coming years, served as the primary building block for amateur intercollegiate athletics” (“Traditions”, 2014). In the following years, the University of Michigan replaced Lake Forest College and both the State University of Iowa and the University of Indiana joined the conference. Instead of being referred to as the Western Conference, the conference then became known as the Big Nine.

As the Big Nine expanded and college sports gained momentum, university faculty and professors quickly feared the power that sports held on campus. This fear escalated when then University of Michigan’s football coach became incredibly powerful and popular around campus—so much so that the Big Nine reconvened to organize even more regulations for college sports, such as: reduced number of games, stricter player eligibility rules, regulations regarding revenue from sports, and the almighty “accept or abolish” rule. The “accept or abolish” rule mainly indicated that if a university decided not to accept the regulations of the Big Nine conference, they would need to leave the conference (“Yost and Michigan Leave the Western Conference”, 2008). When the University of Michigan broke some of the rules, they left the Big Nine conference for about nine years (until rejoining in 1917). This implementation of strictly enforced rules, especially “accept or abolish,” signified the true power college sports garnered.

The Ohio State University originally began in a small conference named the Ohio Athletic Conference (OAC), which formed in 1902. Despite the OAC’s attempt to model

themselves after the Big Nine, Ohio State's short-lived membership ended in 1912 when it jumped ship to the Big Nine conference, during a time period in which their membership slipped to eight due to Michigan's withdrawal. This addition would prove to last much longer than Ohio State's tenure with the OAC. Additionally, the conference stayed at ten members for nearly 30 years, with only an exit from the University of Chicago, which led to Michigan State University's admission in the late 1950s. The Big Ten also implemented a revenue-sharing model for the first time in that same decade ("Traditions", 2014).

In the early 1900s, college sports also caught the first glimpse of what the then Big Nine conference's brand would ultimately become. Beginning in 1915, the Big Nine acknowledged a student-athlete for their accomplishments both academically and athletically by awarding the Medal of Honor. "It is awarded annually by each conference institution to a student of the graduating class who has attained the greatest proficiency in scholarship and athletics. It is the most prestigious honor a conference student-athlete can receive" ("Traditions", 2014). This idea of stressing the importance of academic success alongside athletic success founded a tradition that would eventually encompass the brand of the future Big Ten.

As the early 20<sup>th</sup> century continued to encourage the expansion of conferences, another new conference dawned in 1907 as the Missouri Valley Intercollegiate Athletic Association (MVIAA). Its members included: the University of Kansas, University of Missouri, University of Nebraska, and Washington University of St. Louis, with Iowa State University and Drake University joining the following year. The University of Iowa held dual membership in both this conference as well as in the Big Nine conference (Gall, 2012). Over the next twenty years, the MVIAA underwent a series of additions and subtractions of universities until 1928, when its membership became the original six (leaving out the University of Iowa, who officially joined the Big Nine) plus Grinnell College, Kansas State University, University of Oklahoma, Oklahoma State University.

The year 1928 brought about big changes in college sports conferences, as the MVIAA split into two conferences. Drake University, Grinnell College, Oklahoma State, and Washington University of St. Louis broke away together to create the Missouri Valley Conference (MVC). At the same time, Iowa State, University of Kansas, Kansas State, University of Missouri, University of Nebraska, and the University of Oklahoma broke away from the MVIAA name to build the (commonly referred to as) Big Six conference (ESPN Stats & Analysis, 2010). Finally, the Big Six experienced some solidity for the next thirty or so years, until adding the University of Colorado in the late 1950s. Just about ten years later, Oklahoma State decided to rejoin the pack and the conference would officially be renamed the Big Eight.

As the appeal of organized intercollegiate sports competition grew, schools on the west coast gathered to create the Pacific Coast Conference (PCC) in 1916. In just 12 years, this conference expanded from four colleges to ten colleges and included the Universities of Washington, California (Berkeley), California (Los Angeles [UCLA]), Oregon, Southern California, Idaho and Montana, Oregon State University, Washington State University, and Stanford University. The PCC encountered little realignment for over twenty years, until the University of Montana left for the Mountain States Conference (Gall, 2012).

In 1959, a scandal shook the steady Pacific Coast Conference. A “pay-for-play” scandal, which involved paying the student-athletes, a major violation of student-athlete eligibility, confronted four PCC schools. USC, UCLA, University of California (Berkeley), and the University of Washington all admitted to partaking in this pay-for-play activity. Due to this, the PCC split up in 1959. This revealed the control college athletes had over the universities and their coaches, foreshadowing a problem that continues to persist today. Even though the conference disbanded, a new conference formed immediately, comprised of University of California (Berkeley), Stanford, UCLA, USC, and University of Washington. In just ten years, the conference resumed expansion with the additions of most of its original PCC members:

Washington State University, University of Oregon, and Oregon State University. Finally, after the additions of Arizona State and the University of Arizona in the late 1970s, the conference changed names to the Pacific-10 Conference (“NCAA”, 2008).

Returning back to one of the oldest conferences, the Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Association grew to thirty schools by 1920. Because of this large number, the conference separated by bigger and smaller universities. This became one of the earliest indications of separation between small schools and larger schools, which would become a trend for many future conferences. During the early 1930s, the Southern Conference (SC) matured into a powerhouse of twenty-three universities. In late 1932, however, thirteen schools decided to create their own conference again. “...the 13 most western and southern members of the SC broke off to form the SEC [Southeastern Conference]. Charter members were the universities of Alabama, Auburn, Florida, Georgia, Georgia Tech, Kentucky, Louisiana State [LSU], Mississippi [Ole Miss], Mississippi State, Sewanee, Tennessee, Tulane, and Vanderbilt” (BigOwensboroCard, 2010). With only the departures of Sewanee, Georgia Tech, and Tulane, the SEC remained fairly stable for the next sixty years (Gall, 2012).

Although most major conferences had formed already, two more major conferences, the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) and the Big East formed in the late 1950s and 1970s, respectively. First, many members dropped out of the Southern Conference to create the ACC. ACC members included Clemson University, Duke University, Wake Forest University, North Carolina State University, and the Universities of Maryland, Virginia, and North Carolina. The University of South Carolina joined for the beginnings of the conference, but ultimately left in the 1970s, only to be replaced by Georgia Tech. With only those two changes, the conference remained secure with eight members from the 1950s until the early 1990s, when most conferences shifted (“History of the Atlantic Coast Conference”, 2005).

The last major conference, the Big East, developed in the late 1970s, for reasons much different than most of the prior conferences. Most conferences, although formed for geographical reasons, focused on college football and the importance of growing their programs. The Big East structured itself behind a basketball-first model with the up rise of talent for the sport in the Northeast. Its founding members include Boston College, University of Connecticut (UConn), Georgetown, Providence, St. John's, Seton Hall and Syracuse Universities, with Villanova and the University of Pittsburgh hopping on board shortly after. Sticking to its foundations on basketball, the Big East denied Penn State entry into the conference when they requested to become a member in the early 1980s, which would have brought a heavy influence of football (Gall, 2012). While the conference thrived on its basketball success, this one change proved pivotal to the future of the Big East conference.



### Chapter 3

#### **Penn State Joins Big Ten to Spark 1990s Realignment (1990-2002)**

Despite the creation of a few new conferences, collegiate athletics conferences remained somewhat stable overall for decades leading up to the 1990s. The mid-1980s called for a drastic change in how conferences would negotiate their media deals, which ultimately caused the tectonic plates of college sports conferences to shift. The *NCAA v. the University of Oklahoma Board of Regents* case ignited this movement.

For decades, the NCAA owned the rights to negotiate the media rights deals associated with each conference. The NCAA limited the amount of games to be aired live on television to prevent a decrease in attendance at these games. This rule stayed in place for decades, until two schools decided to take their issues with the NCAA to the Supreme Court. The University of Oklahoma joined with the University of Georgia to demand a change in the media rights negotiations by suing the NCAA. The universities claimed that the NCAA's stranglehold on the universities' media rights violated the Sherman Antitrust Act. "The Sherman Act made agreements 'in restraint of trade' illegal. It also made it a crime to 'monopolize, or attempt to monopolize ... any part of the trade or commerce.' The purpose of the act was to maintain competition in business" ("Sherman Anti-Trust Act"). These universities fought the NCAA so that the schools and conferences would have the ability to negotiate their own rights, instead of the NCAA. The case made its way to the Supreme Court of the United States, and the Court upheld the law, striking down the NCAA, and changing the way college sports ran forever (Jenkins, 2011).

At the time, the Penn State football program experienced great success in the 1980s, winning championships and holding undefeated records. All this success came as an independent

school—one without a conference affiliation in college football (despite being an Atlantic 10 Conference team in some other sports). As a New York Times article dated 1989 says, some believed that Penn State’s Olympic sports suffered and they needed help outside of football revenue (Thomas, 1989). Tim Curley, Associate Athletic Director at the time, stated that scheduling proved to be the real issue at hand. With many other major schools and competitors already a part of a conference, it became increasingly difficult to find a spot to fit in their competitors’ schedules, leaving Penn State as somewhat of an odd man out (Curley, 2013). When it failed to create a conference on its own in years prior, Penn State reached out to the Big Ten in 1990. After much conversation among university presidents, the Big Ten welcomed the land-grant university located in central Pennsylvania into the conference.

Academically, Penn State fit in well with its fellow Big Ten schools. Geographically, the Big Ten invited Penn State’s pull of Pennsylvania and more of the Eastern Coast with open arms. At this time, Penn State would become the eastern-most school in the Big Ten, about 327 miles east of its closest neighbor, Ohio State. Although some other schools expressed concern about travel issues, the Council of Ten (who voted on the acceptance of new schools) assured that this would be a positive addition. On the other side of the coin, Penn State enhanced its image with this move, aligning itself with like institutions; known for good academics and research. In addition, all are members of the Association for American Universities<sup>1</sup>. It also included itself into a schedule, an issue that needed solutions sooner than later. As soon-to-be Athletic Director Tim Curley put it, “The Big Ten was a win-win both academically and athletically for Penn State” (Curley, 2013). Penn State won big, and other schools soon followed suit.

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<sup>1</sup> The Association of American Universities (AAU) is an association of 62 leading public and private research universities in the United States and Canada. Membership is by invitation and is based on the high quality of programs of academic research and scholarship and undergraduate, graduate, and professional education in a number of fields, as well as general recognition that a university is outstanding by reason of the excellence of its research and education programs.  
<https://www.aau.edu/about/default.aspx?id=4020>

Before Penn State could even begin competing athletically in the Big Ten (they would remain in limbo until competition started in 1993), the SEC jumped on the expansion bandwagon less than a year later by adding the Universities of Arkansas and South Carolina. This move rocked the world of college football because this enacted an NCAA rule that had not been put into use. With twelve teams, the SEC could split into two divisions and hold a championship game. This change and new championship game seemed exciting at the time for fans of the sport. However, a championship game meant one thing to Commissioner Ray Kramer: a better television deal and more money to the SEC (Oliva, 2011).

Since no conference or school wanted to be left behind after these two big shifts, seemingly everyone made changes to their affiliations. Because of this, the Southwestern Conference crumbled. In 1994, the powerhouse Texas programs left the Southwestern Conference for what would become the Big Twelve. The University of Texas, Texas A&M, Texas Tech and Baylor all hopped on board with the Big Eight to form the Big Twelve (Gall, 2012). As the Big Eight saw the success of the SEC and its championship game, it quickly wanted to follow suit. With the additions of these programs, the championship game became feasible, which would begin competition in 1996.

The constant realignment of the 1990s sprung mostly from the 1984 media rights ruling, as well as the 12-school rule where the NCAA required 12 schools in a conference in order to hold a conference championship game. These ideas seem known and provide a simple excuse for teams to jump from conference to conference. Underneath it all, money proved to be the factor to move. The money behind championship games and competitive conferences with large fan bases lured in more schools than the contrary. Still, the conferences maintained a fairly regional aspect to their geography, allowing for rivalries to continue growing and for student-athletes to travel, but not too far. This decade of movement proved to be extremely indicative of what would come.

## Chapter 4

### The Big East Raid, the Big Ten Network and More Realignment

As mentioned earlier, the Big East's denial of Penn State in the early '80s would be a decision to regret. Their choice to define their brand as an all-basketball conference ultimately would doom them. Despite a short-lived run with heavier competition in football, and even after the Big Ten accepted Penn State, the Big East refused to wholeheartedly believe it would need to become a basketball *and* football conference in order to compete.

In its apparent attempt to create football competition, the Big East added strong football programs from the University of Miami, Virginia Tech, West Virginia, Rutgers, and Temple University to compete in football (Gall, 2012). By including these new football schools to keep up with the other conferences, the Big East strayed from its “northeastern” footprint. The so-called “Big East” now stretched from Boston, Massachusetts to Miami, Florida. This spanned 1,500 miles—not to mention the distance from the University of Miami to its closest conference member, Virginia Tech, spanned 900 miles<sup>2</sup>. The geographic setup of schools in the Big East seemed like a desperate attempt to compete as a football conference. Along the same lines, the conference paid little attention to the academic fit of these schools. Some schools were large, national brands, such as Notre Dame, whereas others were small and little known, such as Seton Hall. Some of the schools in the conference held academic standards much higher than others. West Virginia University especially stuck out as far below the conference's standards when placed alongside schools like Boston College, Villanova, Notre Dame, and Georgetown.

At the same time, the Big East still rode on the highs of its basketball programs, not realizing the potential consequences of ignoring football. Commissioner Tranghese felt so

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<sup>2</sup> All distances taken from Google Maps (<http://maps.google.com>)

strongly that basketball would continue succeeding that he even made the ACC an offer to *take away* its football programs. A Sports Illustrated article speaks to his blindness:

‘Not one day did I not worry about keeping the conference together,’ he says. In the mid-1990s he went to ACC commissioner Gene Corrigan with an offer: Take our football schools, for football only—BC, Syracuse and Pitt, plus Miami, which had begun Big East play in '91—and we'll hunker down and tend to our original mission as a basketball-only conference...It took two decades, but all four of the Big East football schools that Tranghese had once offered to Corrigan wound up in the ACC anyway, in football and basketball. Former BC athletic director Gene DeFilippo had seen it coming. ‘Build a house on a fault line,’ he would say, ‘and that house is going to fall.’ (<http://sportsillustrated.cnn.com/vault/article/magazine/MAG1207115/5/index.htm>)

The conference worked for years, but its late start on football left it continually struggling to keep up. As a New York Times article from 1991 declares, “...with Florida State joining the A.C.C. and Arkansas joining the Southeastern Conference, the attractiveness of those already high-powered leagues has been enhanced” (Rhoden, 1991). Meanwhile, the SEC, known for its dominance in football, cashed in on a media deal in the mid 90’s. “The SEC on CBS deal, which took effect during the 1996 season and initially paid the conference a reported \$17 million per year for five years, became the envy of college sports for the next 10 years” (Staples, 2012). The Big East signed a similar deal in the 90’s for the same network, but for \$30 million less. Looking to the future, Steve Nidetz of the Chicago Tribune wrote in 1994, “What the Tuesday signings represent, however, is the continuing Balkanization of college football. By 1996, all three major broadcast networks will be airing games-some at the same time, as CBS plans to show either an SEC or Big East game at 2:30 p.m., Chicago time, Saturdays.” Around the same time period, the ACC also cashed in on a deal with ABC and ESPN that produced over \$80 million in five years (Nidetz, 1994). Schools began realizing that even if their basketball programs surpassed the success of their football programs, the money available resided in the football stadiums, not the basketball arenas, as the conference that excelled in basketball (Big East) received one of the lowest deals in terms of monetary value.

As the Big East fell behind its competitors in football, the ACC seized the perfect opportunity to throw a lifeboat out to their sinking ship by inviting their members to join—and the ACC would keep tempting members for years to come. In 2003, the ACC invited both Miami and Virginia Tech into the conference and they accepted (“Welcome to the Family”, 2003). The ACC had toyed with the idea of adding Boston College at the same time as (or in place of) Miami and Virginia Tech, but they did not make the final cut. Shortly following this expansion, though, Boston College quickly became the ACC’s newest member. The ACC now qualified for a championship game by having 12 teams (Gall, 2012).

As the Big East’s Commissioner Tranchese scrambled to find ways to keep his conference alive, conference member West Virginia made cuts to its sports programs in order to stay afloat. In 2003, the university cut five Olympic sports in an attempt to save money. This practice became increasingly common as schools needed to spend more on their football programs if they wanted to compete, but would not waste the money on non-revenue sports. For example, universities that celebrate bowl games in football at the end of the season often find themselves not exactly celebrating, but saving up to afford them due to the extravagant costs. “Florida and Ohio State together ran up more than \$5 million in expenses at the 2007 BCS Championship, finishing with a combined deficit of more than \$600,000... ‘Financially it can be pretty painful,’ said Mollie Mayfield, Georgia Tech athletics' chief financial officer. ‘You spend the last six months of the year trying to cut back and say no to things you planned on doing.’ (Reid, 2007). Since football and basketball bring in the money, other sports would instead suffer. As schools in stable, wealthy conferences received more money in media rights deals, schools in weaker conferences found themselves struggling to keep up with the amount spent on revenue sports and therefore cut their non-revenue sports. “For instance, in 2001, the University of Massachusetts football team finished with a record of 3-8 and lost \$2.5 million. The following spring, UMass eliminated seven sports. Football was not among them, but men's indoor track

was” (Cohen, 2003). An argument can be made that the sports that generate the money should get to have the biggest share of the funds. Then again, a scholarship gives a student-athlete an opportunity to attend a university they may have never before been able to afford. This opportunity should not be taken away, as that opportunity may be the one aspect of college sports that stays true to the NCAA’s mission of integrating sports with higher education.

### **The Creation and Influence of the Big Ten Network**

On the opposite end of the spectrum, the Big Ten continued to soar through the 2000s, stable and wealthy, as it always had been. Although stable is a good position to be in, complacent is not. Commissioner Jim Delany persisted on innovation and consistently proved his intelligence of the media. In 2006, he developed the Big Ten Network (BTN), to be launched in the following year. The BTN would only air sports programming from the universities within the Big Ten, with equal airtime for both men and women’s sports (Curley, 2013). The incredible idea and execution would create great brand awareness for the conference and its members. “We wanted to align the values of the schools with the values of the networks,” Commissioner Delany said in regards to the equal split of airtime between men and women’s sports. Most importantly, however, it generated a lot of money. In just two years, the network would draw in an extra \$7 million for each school per year (Staples, 2012). “People forget how hard it was though,” said Delany. “If it were so easy, why hadn’t it been done before?” (Delany, 2014).

After adding only one school to its conference in over 50 years, the Big Ten made an uncharacteristic move. The seemingly most secure conference of them all sprung at an opportunity for expansion in 2010. When Nebraska asked to become a member, the conference quickly approved. The 12<sup>th</sup> team allowed for that critical championship game and, once again,

more media rights with a bigger television market by expanding further west. For the first time, the Big Ten conference broke away slightly from its brand image in this expansion. Nebraska's size, location and origin as a land-grant university do all match the schools within the Big Ten. However, each member of the conference proudly calls itself an AAU member—something that truly solidified and defined the Big Ten brand. Nebraska is the only one non-AAU member (“Member Institutions and Years of Admission”, ). This addition raises a question about the mission of expanding the Big Ten conference. Did the expansion happen because Nebraska was the perfect fit at the perfect time? Or did it happen because Nebraska sat in the right location, with the right audience, at the right time? According to Big Ten Commissioner Delany, “things happen quickly” and he claims even he was surprised with the rapid addition. “If we didn’t have AAU schools in contiguous states, we’re not sure we would have done that [added new schools]. Our goal is to bind our conference together from Colorado to the Atlantic” (Delany, 2014). While the Big Ten certainly expands across the country, with over 30 million homes outside its footprint watching the BTN, he omits that Nebraska is *not* a member of the AAU, a core value that the Big Ten holds close. With only one addition to the conference in over 50 years and the expansion coming on the heels of the booming success of the BTN, it is difficult to think that the conference expanded for reasons other than to grow its network. Nebraska grew the Big Ten’s footprint and provided more viewers to its audience—perhaps not necessarily provided the absolute perfect (or necessary) brand fit. At the same time, the Pac-10 expanded to become the Pac-12, with the additions of the University of Colorado and Utah. Members of the Big 12 and the Big East continued to be picked off in years following (Gall, 2012).

Most controversially, Syracuse and Pittsburgh left for the ACC during this time of realignment. Only eight years prior, these same schools ridiculed Miami, Boston College and Virginia Tech for leaving the Big East. In fact, the Big East had filed a lawsuit in 2003, claiming that Boston College collaborated with the ACC in an attempt to bring down the Big East. The



schools involved included Pittsburgh, University of Connecticut, West Virginia, Virginia Tech and Rutgers. Awkwardly enough, Virginia Tech hopped onto the ACC bandwagon before the lawsuit even took shape, becoming part of the accused downfall. University presidents, athletic directors and commissioners felt betrayed by their former members. As Pittsburgh's Chancellor, Mark Nordenberg, claimed in 2003, "This is a case that involves broken commitments, secret dealings, breaches of fiduciary responsibility, the misappropriations of conference opportunities and predatory attempts to eliminate competition" (Wojciechowski, 2011). When it was Pittsburgh's turn to join the ACC, he had handled the situation with a little more grace: "We were flattered by the ACC's interest in us. We're grateful to receive the invitation to join this very special conference and feel privileged to be moving forward in your company" (Wojciechowski, 2011). These contradictory statements occurred among many of the schools and conferences. Once bitter about being left out of the giant revenue pie of the wealthy conferences, these schools now reveled in their new positions. Additionally, Texas Christian University (TCU) and West Virginia both left the Big East for the Big 12. Finally, the SEC added Texas A&M and Missouri to expand further west (Gall). The era of expansion continued to bring success to the conferences that added new schools, pumping up their revenues to new heights.

## **Chapter 5**

### **The Rich Get Richer: Revenue Breakdown By Conference**

As the conferences realigned, each one that expanded experienced a jump in media rights fees. In the pre-expansion era, the Big Ten generated just about \$22 million per school in 2010 (Taylor, 2010). After the addition of Nebraska, the conference increased to a \$25.8 million payout per school in 2012-2013 (Korman, 2013). This means that even when splitting the total revenue 12 ways instead of 11, the conference still produced more money per school with the Nebraska addition. The following year, the Big Ten grew again to add Rutgers and Maryland, ideally to grow its markets in New York City and Washington D.C. before its contract expires in 2016. The conference also now spans from New Brunswick, New Jersey on the eastern-most side to Lincoln, Nebraska, covering almost 1,300 miles.

Just before the Big East lost Syracuse and the University of Pittsburgh to the ACC, it had a contract extension offer from ESPN awaiting its approval. ESPN offered the conference \$1.2 billion over a nine-year period, with an average annual payout of \$130 million. The conference decided to wait to accept the deal, believing that once the Pac-10 renegotiated their rights, ESPN's offer to the Big East would increase (Wolff, 2013).

Only a little earlier than the Pac-12, the ACC began renegotiating with ESPN as well, as the Big East watched closely. The outcome consisted of a 12-year, \$1.86 billion deal, with a payout of \$155 million or \$12.9 million per school per year, split among the ACC's twelve schools (Teel, 2012). At this time, the ACC covered mostly the Mid-Atlantic region and South, with Boston College being the lone straggler in the Northeast region, pulling in Boston and some

of the Northeastern market. The ACC completed their deal as the Big East sat on theirs, still waiting for the Pac-10's deal to settle.

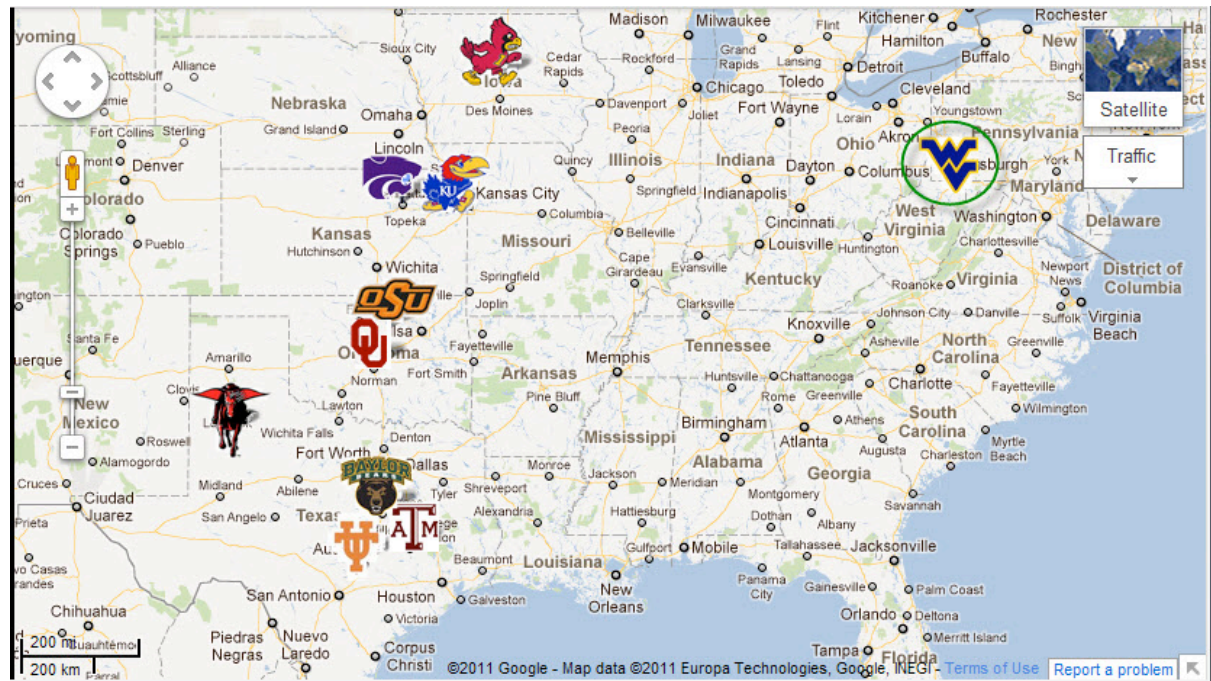
While the Big East waited, the Pac-10 began to renegotiate their rights. Among the six major conferences, the pre-expansion Pac-10 (now Pac-12) garnered the least amount of revenue in the 2009 fiscal year, with a total of \$96.8 million. By 2011, the conference raked in just over \$111 million before adding Utah and Colorado (Wilner, 2013). By expanding to 12 teams, the conference grew both their network and their television audience and experienced a large increase in revenue. The 2011-2012 year brought in over \$175 million in revenue, expectedly from the new conference championship game and the growth in television audiences. The conference also made a new deal with Fox and ESPN to reap in \$3 billion over a 12-year period (\$250 million per year and \$20.8 million per school per year), which would not be reflected in the conference's revenue until 2013 (Wilner, 2013). The conference also launched the "Pac-12 Networks" which, for the first time, combined both national and regional network offerings (regions: Washington, Oregon, Northern California, Southern California, Arizona and Mountain). Larry Scott, Pac-12 Commissioner, looked to continue growing the brand of the conference into a more national brand (AP, 2011). Although the conference had needed to renegotiate their media rights, the perfectly timed growth in audiences and the championship game allowed for an even more attractive and lucrative deal through ESPN and Fox. The conference now spans North to South along the West Coast and stretches eastward over 1,200 miles to the University of Colorado.

After the conclusion of the Pac-12 deal, the Big East sat with its hands tied. ESPN did not budge from its initial offer even after the ACC and Pac-12 both agreed to more money in their media rights' deals. When looking at the geography of the conferences, both the ACC and the Pac-12 contain major markets (most with football influence), which draws a lot of viewership. The ACC had the pull of Boston, Washington D.C. (between University of Virginia, Maryland and arguably Virginia Tech), most of Florida (due to Miami and Florida State) and the loyalty of

the University of North Carolina and Duke fan bases. The Pac-12 controlled California (among University of Southern California, UCLA, Stanford and Cal), the Northwest (Oregon and both University of Washington and Washington State), and captured the Denver (CU Boulder) and Arizona (Arizona State and University of Arizona) markets. The Big East had potential to draw major markets due to St. John's, Villanova, Pittsburgh, and Georgetown, but these schools focused on basketball, with little football influence. The lack of football influence, in the end, sealed their fate. Unfortunately for the Big East too, ESPN also had the power to change their offers if schools were to leave or enter the conference. During this waiting period, Syracuse and Pittsburgh both left for the ACC, which allowed ESPN and the ACC to renegotiate their deal one year later. This resulted in a major decrease for the Big East—\$18.6 million per year for seven years, just 15% of the original offer and about \$2.5 million per school (Wolff). The Big East scrambled to add new schools to their conference, and even more schools left in the meantime. Even though Syracuse and Pittsburgh spoke poorly about the schools that left just eight years prior, their exit from the conference seemed to leave West Virginia in the dust this time. When they left, WVU Athletic Director Oliver Luck admittedly scrambled to find a conference to join, eventually landing on the Big 12. “Once the two schools left, we knew it [Big East] was doomed” (Luck, 2013).

The Big 12 consisted mostly of schools in the Midwest, far from WVU. The map below shows awkward placement of the schools within the Big 12 and WVU—874 miles away from its closest competitor, Iowa State. Shortly after WVU's entrance, the Big 12 conveniently landed a solid deal with ESPN to really lock in its members. The signed deal shelled out \$2.6 billion over 13 years or \$200 million per year and \$20 million per school per year. If any school attempted to leave the conference, their media rights would remain with the Big 12 (McMurphy, 2012).

Figure 5-1: Source (<http://beta.costtodrive.com/2011/10/who-are-the-biggest-losers-in-college-football-conference-realignments/>)



The last major conference left to renegotiate their media rights in the same time period was the stable SEC. A conference driven by football, with programs keeping the national title within the SEC for a seven-season span from 2006-2012, knew a new media deal could generate an immense amount of money—their deal to expire in 2009 only amounted to \$70 million total per year (Ourand & Smith, 2008). In 2010, their deal with ESPN and CBS accounted for \$3 billion (\$250 million per year or \$20.8 million per school per year) over 15 years. However, in 2012, the SEC grew into the Midwest by adding the University of Missouri and Texas A&M. The growth into the Midwest market and to a 14-school conference allowed Commissioner Mike Silve to renegotiate its original 2008 terms with ESPN and CBS and develop another moneymaker—the SEC Network. The result of the network is yet to be known, as it begins airing August 2014, but some projections look at a nearly \$10 million increase per school between the SEC Network and the new playoff system to be put in place in the 2014-2015 season:

“Assuming the conference maintains its current lineup of 14 members, the combination of new deals with ESPN and CBS, along with the formation of a 100% SEC-owned network, would bring the SEC schools nearly \$23 million apiece in 2014-15, according to an estimate prepared for USA TODAY Sports by a college sports rights-valuation firm. The SEC's postseason football revenues with the playoff, combined with money the conference is likely to get from its men's basketball tournament and from the NCAA, would provide at least another \$11 million, according to past SEC revenue-distribution announcements, NCAA revenue-distribution reports and financial documents and a person with direct knowledge of the playoff's revenue distribution plan.” (Berkowitz)

(Berkowitz, 2013).

The trial and success of the Big Ten Network allowed other conferences and even schools to see the potential money to be made from their own networks. In early 2013, the ACC created a panel to explore the possible benefits and implications of its own network. The draw of increased revenue from a conference network lured schools into different conferences or kept them locked into their own positions. After the Big Ten consistently generated the highest payout at \$24 million per school per year (while the ACC paid just \$13 million), the University of Maryland admittedly pointed to money as its reason for bolting to the Big Ten (Ourand & Smith, 2013). The ACC launched the ACC Digital Network on AppleTV in March of 2014, but has yet to seal a deal with its rights holder—ESPN—on a conference-owned network (ACC, 2014). Still looking for a way to lock in its members, the ACC imposed a Grant of Rights deal in the spring of 2013, which ensured that if a school were to leave the ACC, their media rights would remain with the ACC until the end of the deal—in 2027 (McMurphy, 2013). This deal both prevents other conferences from picking off its members and dissuades conference members from leaving, as it would be a detrimental choice financially.

The final media deal stems from a college, rather than a conference. The Texas Longhorns leveraged their loyal fan base, particularly in football, to seal this deal. The Longhorns finished number one in college merchandise sold through the Collegiate Licensing Company for eight consecutive years, dating back to 2006 (“Collegiate”, 2013). Their power enticed ESPN to offer nearly \$11 million a year (with a 3% increase annually) for 20 years to establish the

Longhorn Network (Duffy, 2011). This lucrative deal made the University of Texas' *football team* specifically the “most valuable team in the nation” in 2013, according to Forbes (Smith, 2013). The network has not experienced success equivalent to that of the BTN, but still maintains the revenue from its deal with ESPN. With media rights deals continuing to soar and universities so heavily focused on money, the market may become saturated with college sports programming—still, viewers seem okay with that.

In summary, the media deals are broken down in table 5-1 (by conference) and 5-2 (by school) below, not including revenue generated by bowl games or the NCAA tournament. The significant increase in media rights fees after each renegotiation displays the nonexistent ceiling and poses a focus on money instead of the student-athletes themselves.

<u>Conference</u>	<u>2004 Yearly Media Rights Fees (by conference)</u>	<u>Current (2014)</u>	<u>Percentage Increase</u>
ACC	\$63 Million	\$226 Million	259%
Big Ten	\$66 Million	\$230 Million	248%
Big Twelve	\$51 Million	\$160 Million	214%
Pac-12	\$43 Million	\$205 Million	377%
SEC	\$57 Million	\$225 Million	295%

**Table 5-1:** Media Rights Fees Broken Down by Conference<sup>3</sup>

<u>Conference</u>	<u>2004 Yearly Media Rights Fees (By School)</u>	<u>Current (2014)</u>	<u>Percentage Increase</u>
ACC	\$7 Million	\$16.14 Million	131%
Big Ten	\$6 Million	\$19.17 Million	220%
Big Twelve	\$4.25 Million	\$16 Million	276%
Pac-12	\$4.3 Million	\$17.08 Million	297%
SEC	\$4.75 Million	\$16.07 Million	238%

**Table 5-2:** Media Rights Fees Broken Down by School

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<sup>3</sup> Data taken from Sports Business Journal reports

## Chapter 6

### The Expansion Effect on Brand and Olympic Sports

By expanding each conference, the commissioners risk diluting their respective conference's brand in favor of money. As mentioned earlier, the Big Ten built its brand on a strong foundation through a balance of academics and athletics. The alumni of schools within the Big Ten often pride themselves on not only the school they attended, but also the conference they joined. "The Big Ten represents quality, hard work, tradition and innovation. Most graduates from other conferences don't describe themselves by their conference like those in the Big Ten do," said Commissioner Delany when asked about the Big Ten brand. His stress on tradition and innovation describes the Big Ten accurately, as member institutions root themselves in tradition, but still strive for change through risks such as the Big Ten Network. Some risks, on the other hand, do not fit the brand quite as well. Upon looking at the U.S. News and World Report Rankings of the top universities in 2011, the Big Ten had an average ranking of 56—the leader among the six major conferences. The lowest ranking school came in at number 75 and the highest at 12. Rutgers and Maryland ranked 68<sup>th</sup> and 55<sup>th</sup>, respectively, providing a sound fit for the Big Ten brand. Nebraska, the only non-AAU member, ranked far below the conference low and made the list at 101, on par with averages for conferences like the SEC and Big 12, which are not as well known for academics (Helliker, 2011). The SEC and Big 12's average rankings turn out to be both around 99 and 100, respectively.

Conversely, rankings among schools in the Big East further revealed the conference's struggle to define itself outside of basketball. In 2011, its member institutions included: the Universities of Cincinnati, Louisville, Connecticut, Pittsburgh, South Florida, Rutgers, Syracuse and West Virginia. Among these eight schools, Pittsburgh and Syracuse ranked highest at 58<sup>th</sup>. On the other end of the spectrum, the University of South Florida ranked 181<sup>st</sup>. The other schools



were sporadically dispersed throughout the range, providing little consistency in terms of the brand.

### **The Effect on Olympic Sports**

As mentioned earlier, oftentimes Olympic sports suffer when the schools put so much money and effort into improving their football and basketball programs. Instead of allowing all different types of athletes to receive the opportunity to attend college on a scholarship, the schools narrow the focus by cutting various Olympic sports teams. West Virginia finally added some teams back when they moved to the Big 12 and the conference required them to. Due to the conference bylaws, universities are required to “sponsor six men's sports and six women's sports from a list the league created that includes sports being sponsored by 10 or more league members” (Hickman, 2012). Not too long ago, WVU revealed that they look to spend \$50 million on renovations of their athletics’ facilities, most of it focused on the football stadium and basketball arena. Even though they will fix up the baseball stadium and natatorium too, it seems as if actually adding back other Olympic sports teams is not really on their minds. When Athletic Director Oliver Luck was asked about the effect expansion had on Olympic sports, he pointed to the money that allowed the teams to make a comeback. He said that once the schools became financially stable, they would be able to add the teams back, which they did. The spending is largely due to the long distances to each university within the conference (WVU’s closest conference member is 874 miles away). When asked about the effect the traveling distances may have on student-athletes of Olympic sports at WVU, since those sports compete much more frequently than football, Oliver Luck evaded a straightforward answer and relied on the numbers and exposure behind their athletics. “We’re spending more on travel, but with the increase in revenue, it’s miniscule...Our student-athletes appreciate the bigger venues and the appeal of a full

stadium” (Luck). While Luck claimed there were no complaints from the student-athletes about balancing traveling with their classes and his statements may be true, he speaks little about their education and the class time they may be missing.

Recently, Temple also cut seven sports in an effort to save money. All together, the school will save \$3 million annually by cutting baseball, softball, men’s gymnastics, men’s crew, women’s rowing and men’s indoor and outdoor track and field (Flynn, 2013). The Vice President and Director of Athletics, Kevin Clark, denied building an on-campus football stadium being in Temple’s plan when confronted about it. Just a month earlier though, the university president had confirmed that Temple is looking into an on-campus football stadium (Cranney, 2013). It became very apparent that the university’s focus is solely on making money through football—not the educational possibilities of *all* student-athletes. This dangerous practice creates a scary environment for student-athletes. If schools continue to spend more and more money on football and/or basketball only to cut other sports as a result, the spending limit will be endless. From there, when will schools be “ready” to offer Olympic sport scholarships again? This could pose a huge issue moving forward in college sports if athletic directors and university officials continue to look at money instead of their students. Likewise, academics of student-athletes will likely suffer from the effects of increased travel and time away from the classroom.

## Chapter 7

### The Current Conferences

After all the moving around among schools and conferences, there are currently five major conferences: the ACC, Big Ten, Big Twelve, Pac-12, and the SEC. The conference members are as follows (effective June 30, 2014)<sup>4</sup>:

- ACC: Boston College, Clemson, Duke, Florida State, Georgia Tech, Miami, UNC, NC State, Notre Dame\*, Pittsburgh, Syracuse, Virginia, Virginia Tech, and Wake Forest
- Big Ten: Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Maryland, Michigan, Michigan State, Minnesota, Nebraska, Northwestern, Ohio State, Penn State, Purdue, Rutgers, and Wisconsin
- Big Twelve: Baylor, Iowa State, Kansas, Oklahoma, Oklahoma State, TCU, Texas, Texas Tech and West Virginia
- Pac-12: Arizona, Arizona State, California, Colorado (Boulder), Oregon, Oregon State, Stanford, UCLA, USC, Utah, Washington and Washington State
- SEC: Alabama, Arkansas, Auburn, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, LSU, Mississippi (Ole Miss), Mississippi State, Missouri, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas A&M and Vanderbilt

\*Indicates remaining independent in football

Some other conferences including schools with notable sports programs include the American Athletic Conference (Central Florida, Cincinnati, UConn, East Carolina, Houston, Memphis, Navy [2015], South Florida, Southern Methodist, Temple, Tulane and Tulsa) and the Catholic Seven (DePaul, Georgetown, Marquette, Providence, Seton Hall, St. John's and Villanova). The fallout of the Big East split most members into these two conferences and made the Catholic

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<sup>4</sup> Note: All conference members taken from official conference websites

Seven a basketball conference. As one can see, the downfall created a convoluted conference in the American Athletic Conference. Stretching from Storrs, Connecticut, to Houston, Texas, the conference covers almost 1,800 miles.

The current alignment of conferences provides both strengths and weaknesses for its members. The largest appeal of the conferences lies in their ability to capture so many major television markets across the country, generating more and more money in media rights fees. Additionally, the conferences allow the schools to grow their brands more nationally. The conference networks help the schools receive more exposure as well. On the other hand, the long distances between member institutions drive up the travel costs and could potentially take students from their classes more frequently. According to NCAA research done in 2011, of the 158,876 college athletes in baseball, basketball (men's and women's), football, men's soccer and men's ice hockey, just 1,201 make it to the professional level--that's .008% of the student-athletes in those sports (NCAA). These students' educational careers hold much more importance than their athletic careers. The travel costs will likely deter fans from traveling to away games as well, resulting in decreases in ticket revenue. Another weakness of the current alignment is the loss of rivalries. Rivalry games are often the pinnacle point of the respective schools' seasons. Alumni and fans alike look forward to these games all year and networks pump the games up as much as the schools do. Rivalries of nearly 100 years have been lost due to the current realignment. Some notable lost rivalries include Texas and Texas A&M, Nebraska and Oklahoma, Kansas and Missouri, and Pittsburgh and West Virginia. If realignment continues at this rapid pace, the schools will not even have time to establish new rivalries, lessening the hype around matchups.

Furthermore, opportunities and threats come from the current alignment. The biggest opportunity would be the money that can be generated from new media rights deals. When the Big Ten renegotiates its new deal in the upcoming years, the additions of the Nebraska, Rutgers

and Maryland markets give them more leverage. If the conferences continue to realign, the long reach of each conference gives it the opportunity to add more markets, too. For example, Penn State's place in the Big Ten allowed Commissioner Delany to viably add Rutgers and Maryland, naming Penn State the "bridge" to those two schools. "If we didn't have AAU schools in contiguous states, I'm not sure we would have done that [added Rutgers and Maryland]," Jim Delany said in explanation of the expansion (Delany, 2014). Of course not all conferences can say the same thing about adding schools in contiguous states. Finally, some threats exist as well. The biggest threat is to the educational opportunities of the student-athletes. As mentioned before, the nonexistent ceiling to how much a school will spend on its football and basketball programs threatens the Olympic sports. As a result, students lose the opportunity to receive an education if they cannot afford it otherwise. Scholarships for athletes were created to benefit all student-athletes. Now, they are being taken away to benefit two sports and their coaches. Another threat arises from strong universities (athletically) potentially losing out on finding a conference home. For example, UConn, a powerful basketball school, sits in the American Athletic Conference. By being in a conference without a giant media deal, the school will fall behind the major programs, which threatens the strength of their basketball program. This becomes a threat to other schools if another conference quickly falls apart.

### **Looking Into the Future of College Sports Conferences**

When looking at the five major conferences, three seem specifically stable: the SEC, the Pac-12 and the Big Ten. While they may add more schools in the future, no school has left any of these conferences since the mid-1960s (SEC and Pac-12) and 1940s (Big Ten). Until the ACC locked in a Grant of Rights deal last year, the conference experienced much instability. Following this, however, the cost of leaving is likely too high for any member to leave. Because of the

money generated by the SEC Network, Big Ten Network, and Pac-12 Networks, schools within those conferences are unlikely to leave either. That leaves the Big 12 left to be picked off if the other conferences looked to grow their television markets even further. As well, West Virginia's awkward geographical placement within the conference makes it easier to believe they would look elsewhere if an opportunity arose. When questioned about future realignment, Athletic Director Luck responded with, "We'll see after the football playoff plays out, but probably yes" (Luck, 2013). However, the Big 12 also has a Grant of Rights deal in place until its television contract ends in 2025. The conferences have changed a lot over the years since organized college sports began. Since 1990, though, there have been moves only towards decreasing numbers of major conferences. Although the Big East had been in danger for years, it was not until recently that its fate was sealed, keeping in line with the movement and leaving only five major conferences. On a panel among conference commissioners at the IMG Intercollegiate Athletics Forum in December 2013, West Coast Conference Commissioner Jamie Zaninovich said he thinks there will be more consolidation among conferences at some point since that has been the trend (Zaninovich, 2013).

Since Commissioners and Athletic Directors remain fairly hush-hush about their future plans, no sources completely know what the future holds. Many sources speak to a theory of "super conferences." A super conference would be a conference consisting of 14-16 teams generating insane amounts of revenue. If this were to happen, predictably five conferences would have 14 universities or four conferences would grow to 16 universities. Since the inception of the four-team playoff, rumors swirled, as using the winners of each of the four major conferences would work perfectly with the four-team playoff model. Additionally, the Big 12 and SEC came to an agreement to hold a guaranteed bowl game between the two conferences on January 1<sup>st</sup> each year. Much like the Big Ten and Pac-12, the Big 12 and SEC champions will match up if they are

not in the BCS championship game (Barnhart, 2012). This format weakens the ACC, as they become the odd-man out.

However, after following many sources, I do not believe that the conferences will consolidate into only four conferences in the upcoming years, due to the high costs of leaving. Rather, I believe the schools will wait as long as they can to jump conferences and avoid the hefty exit fees. Once the media contracts and Grant of Rights deals begin to expire in the 2020s, then I think the conferences may race to pick off one another. With the millions of dollars schools will collect over the next decade, their sports programs (specifically football) will likely grow tremendously. Through this success, their markets, and a stronger national brand, their appeal to other conferences will increase.

When the Grant of Rights deals expire (or come close to expiring), I believe the Big 12 will be picked off first. In 2011, rumors circulated that both the SEC and ACC denied WVU entrance into their conferences. While the SEC rumors never received a concrete confirmation, it came from a reliable source within CBS Sports (Coltognone, 2011). The SEC, at that time, had better options to expand with Texas A&M and Missouri, due to their geographical locations (who both eventually joined). In ten years, the story will change a little bit. WVU would pull in a northern market and provide something new for the conference, as all conferences will look to expand their geographical reach. Additionally, the school's subpar academics (and obsession with football) fit well with the brand of the SEC. Some argue that WVU also captures some of the Pittsburgh market, which is the 23<sup>rd</sup> largest market in the U.S.<sup>5</sup>, but that market is mostly drawn to Pitt and Penn State. Along with this addition, I think the SEC will add Oklahoma University. Its acceptance rate of 80% is a little high, but still in line with that of other schools within the SEC. With WVU joining, it will not matter much ("Oklahoma", 2014). Its strong football program will

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<sup>5</sup> Television market rankings taken from the Nielsen 2013-2014 DMA Rankings, accessible at [http://www.tvb.org/media/file/TVB\\_Market\\_Profiles\\_Nielsen\\_TVHH\\_DMA\\_Ranks\\_2013-2014.pdf](http://www.tvb.org/media/file/TVB_Market_Profiles_Nielsen_TVHH_DMA_Ranks_2013-2014.pdf)

really draw the SEC in, as the conference continues to revolve around football. Oklahoma Head Coach Bob Stoops has been very accepting of the possibility of super conferences. “It seems that’s the direction the world’s going. If it is, so be it,” he said on a Big 12 conference call (Kercheval, 2011). While he may not be the head coach a decade down the line, he may be setting the university up for a move in the future. The only drawback is the university’s reluctance to dilute its own brand by becoming associated with the SEC. In the end, I think the SEC money will rule. The last addition will be Oklahoma State. Since Missouri will likely leave (to be addressed further), the conference will need another western team. By keeping a rivalry together in Oklahoma State and Oklahoma, the conference can draw the whole state into the SEC market, including the 41<sup>st</sup> ranked Oklahoma City market. Finally, by inviting WVU, OSU and OU, the SEC could keep their divisions the same. The SEC East would simply add WVU and the SEC West, Oklahoma and OSU.

Next, the Big Ten will make moves as well. Missouri already expressed interest in the Big Ten prior to joining the SEC, so I believe they would be the first to jump the SEC ship to a conference that better fits their university’s brand. Missouri is an AAU member, which is important to the Big Ten brand. Also, Missouri geographical placement as a contiguous state to the conference makes them of high priority to the leaders of the Big Ten. The school’s success in football would enhance the Big Ten’s football brand, making it a win-win for both parties. The second school the Big Ten invites will be the University of Virginia. This starts the first step into reaching further into the South for the conference, also bettering their football brand by invading SEC territory. By inviting UVA, an AAU member, the conference can better solidify the Washington, D.C. market, which ranks 9<sup>th</sup> in the country. Then, Commissioner Delany can continue moving southward if he chooses to continue expanding in the future. If the university’s basketball program follows its current trend and experiences growing success, it would fit in



perfectly with the high rates of success among Big Ten basketball programs. The divisions could remain the same as well, adding UVA to the East and Missouri to the West.

In light of the Big Ten snagging the UVA, the ACC would need to replace it. The ACC made it apparent that they would do whatever it took to get Notre Dame, by allowing them to remain independent in football. They do require the school to play a few games per season in conference, however. Their willingness to sacrifice for Notre Dame leads me to believe that they would next add Texas. The ACC has spent little time paying attention to geography, besides lining the entire East Coast. If Texas could have football independence, but ACC affiliation to require a certain number of games per season, the ACC just may invite them to join. The academics are on par with the other schools in the conference, with a 2011 U.S. News and World Ranking of 45<sup>th</sup> (Helliker, 2011). By adding an enormous football school with so many loyal fans, the ACC could strengthen its football brand. The addition would provide leverage for a better media rights deal as well, as many markets in Texas rank within the top 50. Second and third, the ACC will add two schools not currently a part of the major five conferences: UConn and Temple. UConn provides a pull of the New York market. In combination with Syracuse, the ACC can capture more of the large New York market—number one in the United States. UConn's success in basketball creates an even stronger basketball conference. Finally, the ACC currently only occupies part of the Pennsylvania market (Pittsburgh). Temple has not experienced success lately with their sports programs due to their position without a home in a strong conference. By coming to the ACC, they have the opportunity to come off life support and provide a new market for the conference. This advantage could help the ACC leverage a better media rights deal, too, as Philadelphia ranks as the 4<sup>th</sup> largest market. Another possibility would be Cincinnati. Despite Ohio's loyalty to Ohio State, there are many markets that lie in the U.S. top 50.

The last major conference that would play a part in expansion is the Pac-12. The conference already spreads all over the West Coast. A few of their main options come from the

Mountain West Conference or the Big 12, albeit limited options. Some choices include University of Nevada-Las Vegas, Boise State, San Diego State and Brigham Young. These four schools would bring in the Nevada and Idaho markets, and then more of the California and Utah markets, respectively. Unfortunately, the lack of densely populated areas in the West (outside of schools already occupied by the Pac-12) gives little room for growth. The San Jose (6<sup>th</sup>) and San Diego (28<sup>th</sup>) markets are already somewhat taken by Stanford and UCLA, respectively, but can be completely solidified. If the conference were to grow into Texas, the major question that the Pac-12 leaders (and really all conference leaders) need to ask themselves is: Will adding these schools' markets contribute enough financially to first break even and then make the conference more money?

## Chapter 8

### What the Future of College Sports Should Look Like

In the beginning, colleges created sports conferences for geographical scheduling reasons and to regulate player eligibility requirements. The conferences revolved around two things: geography and the student-athletes. Over the past 20 years, this has changed especially drastically as athletic directors and university presidents fled from conference to conference in constant pursuit of more money through media rights fees. Their pursuit changes the brand of college athletics and takes away from the model once centered on the student part of student-athlete. Instead of worrying about the brand of each respective school and conference fit, the concern lies in if the expansion market will generate more money. While this needs to be a concern among the universities, it should not be the *number one* concern by itself. Alongside it should be the university brand fit and geographical fit (in terms of distance to other member institutions).

First, the brand of the university and of the conference should complement one another. Obviously, each school maintains its own brand. Whether it is a large, research-based institution, or a smaller, Ivy League school, each school has a brand that fits better with certain conferences over other ones. Take the Big Ten, for example. As discussed in the beginning, the Big Ten began establishing its brand by inviting all large, research-based institutions. By ensuring that all invitees obtained AAU status, the brand strengthened. On the other hand, the Big East fell apart due partially to their lack of a strong brand. Instead of sticking with mostly strong academic programs in close proximity in the Northeast, the school lost its identity in the arms race for stronger football schools. The conference headed South (both literally and figuratively) and never gained its traction again.

Next, the schools also need to be the correct fit geographically. College sports started on a regional basis, so members could compete and not travel too far. Unfortunately, with the race to grab new, huge markets for television purposes, the conferences strayed from their beginnings. This becomes dangerous to the student half of the student-athletes, as traveling across the country all the time does not bode well for attending classes—the primary reason the student-athletes are enrolled in the first place. The Big Ten has done a good job in maintaining their status with contiguous states across the board. However, as a once somewhat Midwestern conference, the recent additions of Maryland and Rutgers make the geographical configuration a little harder to understand. The economic costs of traveling to universities over 1,000 miles away are extremely high as well with the eternally rising price of fuel. The gas price in 1990 (when the heavy realignment began) equals about \$2.00 adjusted for inflation today (McMahon, 2013). Today, the price of gas averages at \$3.56 (AAA, Inc.). Although the media rights have skyrocketed as the gas prices rose 56%, remaining in regional conferences could save so much valuable time and money.

First, subtracting Rutgers, Maryland and Nebraska and adding Notre Dame, Missouri, the University of Virginia and Vanderbilt could reconfigure the Big Ten. Penn State garners the support of the Pennsylvania market, as well as some of New York and New Jersey. Currently, over 49,000 Penn State alumni live in New York and New Jersey combined (Penn State Alumni Association, 2013). In addition, another 22,114 live in Virginia. With UVA and Penn State combined, the reach of the Big Ten could extend more strongly to the 8<sup>th</sup> largest market in D.C. Maryland and Rutgers simply dilute the brand of the Big Ten, especially in football. According to Dean Jordan, the Managing Executive of Global Media at Wasserman Media Group, who has negotiated many groundbreaking media rights deals, “Rutgers and Maryland absolutely kill the Big Ten brand. The Big Ten already has those markets” (Jordan, 2014). The only downfall to UVA is its distance to Minnesota. However, I believe the strong academic brand fit outweighs the

distance, as the school and the conference complement each other well. Also, Missouri and Vanderbilt both extend the Big Ten brand southward. Missouri captures the St. Louis market (21<sup>st</sup>), but stays in the Midwest. Vanderbilt's location in Tennessee creates a bridge between Missouri and Virginia, keeping the states contiguous. Vanderbilt never really fit the brand of the SEC outside of geography, as it ranks far above the other schools within the conference academically. Nashville's market would come with Vanderbilt, giving the Big Ten another top-50-sized market (29<sup>th</sup>). Ultimately, Notre Dame needs to sacrifice their independence. Their brand would remain national in the Big Ten—as Commissioner Delany says, “It’s the reach of our universities, not our geography, that makes us a national brand” (Delany, 2014). Notre Dame's national brand and quality of academics are a perfect fit for this conference. The school would give the Big Ten a better media rights deal, and in turn, make more money for themselves, than they would independently.

Second, the SEC realignment would consist of taking away Arkansas, Texas A&M, and obviously the Missouri/Vanderbilt duo (Big Ten) and inviting Miami, Florida State, and NC State. Losing Texas A&M would be large for the SEC (since it draws in Austin and Houston), but Miami and Florida State put a stranglehold on the entire state of Florida. Florida contains five markets in the top 50, totaling to over 6.4 million television homes. The regional aspect remains intact with these changes, too, since the distance from Miami to Arkansas and Texas are both a little far out to be regionally based. NC State provides a bit of a northern pull, expanding the conference into North Carolina and the 24<sup>th</sup> ranked Raleigh market. The brand of the SEC, albeit a bit tainted by Miami and Florida State's scandalous histories, enhances academically with these additions. NC State would likely become the “punching bag” of the conference in football, but with more money, could build up its program.

Third, the ACC shifts would entail adding UConn, Villanova, Cincinnati and Georgetown and subtracting Miami, Florida State, UVA, and Notre Dame. In losing the Florida market, the

ACC would need to gain markets back. UConn would draw in the New York City market (1<sup>st</sup>); Villanova, the Philadelphia market (4<sup>th</sup>); Cincinnati, the Ohio/Midwest market; and Georgetown, the D.C. market (8<sup>th</sup>). The biggest issue with these shifts is the loss of major football programs. The ACC is a dominant basketball conference currently, with some big football contenders. With the rise of Duke and the strength of Clemson and Virginia Tech, the conference's new network deal could provide more money to help out with the weaker football programs. In a big money conference, Temple could once again become a bigger player on the football field and basketball court. Overall, though, I would rank the ACC as the weakest of the five conferences financially.

Fourth, the Big Twelve could thrive again by adding Texas A&M, Arkansas, University of New Mexico, Nebraska, Colorado State and University of Colorado and losing Iowa State and West Virginia. Although the Texas market would be very saturated by the Big 12, there would be no other competitors. As well, the rivalries could stay in Texas and between Oklahoma and Texas. This keeps the conference in the Midwest and South. With the pride of Texas, including all schools in one conference creates a stronger conference brand among loyal fans. Each state would have an intrastate rivalry, minus the outliers in New Mexico and Nebraska. The Colorado schools capture the Denver market (and a rivalry already exists between the two schools). New Mexico, although not a huge market, could bring in more of a Southwestern influence to the conference. After parting from the Big Ten, Nebraska's football and basketball programs would bring a lot to the Big 12. Sadly, I would see West Virginia as a school left out of my conference realignment. Its poor brand and little market bring little to the conference table.

Lastly, moving the farthest west, I see the Pac-12 inviting Boise State, San Diego State, and UNLV while losing only Colorado. As mentioned earlier, the Pac-12 has little room for growth in markets if it remains regional, which I see as the best fit for college sports. Boise State has potential to grow into an even more successful football program, if it were to be part of a major conference. According to Dean Jordan, "85% of conference television rights value is

football” (Jordan, 2014). With more football influence, the conference could become stronger. The addition of San Diego strengthens the California (LA) market and UNLV ranks in the top 50. By grabbing two more California and Colorado schools each, the conference would have even less television competition from the Midwestern Conference, leading to better negotiation leverage.

## **Chapter 9**

### **Conclusion**

While no realignment can be perfect in a world revolving around money, this alignment better suits the needs of the student-athletes and maintains a balance of strong markets. The regional aspect of college sports needs to hold together for both the brand of college sports and the integrity of the student-athlete model. Sacrificing that could lead to student-athletes (who do not go pro) attending a university for mere exposure nationwide, instead of its academics. By keeping the conferences at five instead of four, the power among schools spreads out a little more. No matter what, media rights deals will continue to increase with the popularity of college football and basketball, but that can happen without spreading a conference halfway across the country. Hopefully the commissioners and university presidents can refocus the direction of college sports back to what made them successful in the first place—the regional aspect, rivalries, and the student-athletes themselves.



## **Appendix A**

### **Interview with Tim Curley**

In an interview with Tim Curley, we discussed Penn State joining the Big Ten, college realignment in the 1990s, the effect of expansion on conference brand, the Big Ten Network, and the long-term success of college sports. He stated that scheduling was a main reason for Penn State to join the Big Ten, along with the financial reasons of revenue sharing. He knew that conference realignment would come, but not in such a rapid way with such magnitude that it has now.

Next, the Big Ten Network was a “bold, aggressive” move in his terms, but he was extremely confident that it would be a success. He spoke highly about the equal opportunities among men and women’s sports in the Big Ten, as they receive equal airtime on the BTN. The network helped with national exposure for recruiting purposes, too.

Finally, the long-term success remains unknown. Overall, he thinks realignment has had a positive effect on college sports. He thinks the long travel needs to be looked into and the regional aspect should be maintained. He believes that super conferences will come in time, but raises the question: then who gets left out among the major conferences?

## **Appendix B**

### **Interview with Commissioner Jim Delany**

In my interview with Big Ten Commissioner Jim Delany, we spoke a lot about the creation of the Big Ten Network and its influence on college sports conference realignment. Additionally, we discussed the Big Ten brand and the effect of expansion on Olympic sports.

First, Commissioner Delany described the Big Ten brand by, “pride, the representation of academics and athletics, quality, hard work, tradition and innovation.” He highlighted the changes related to expansion within the Big Ten and the balance the conference has kept between innovation and tradition. In terms of Rutgers, Maryland, and Nebraska “fitting” the Big Ten brand, he believes they all do, but for different reasons. He spoke to the Penn State expansion in the 1990s, which was a great brand fit, and how many regarded that expansion as the first effort to reach beyond the Big Ten footprint. He thinks that they are successful schools with great academics and broad based programs, as well as in contiguous states to the conference. He did admit to the challenge of building the brand without diluting it. He also mentioned that the Big Ten’s national brand actually carries more homes outside of the region than inside—20 million homes in present footprint, with 30 million outside.

Next, he spoke very little about the effect of traveling in Olympic sports on student-athletes. He said that it might have a negative effect, but he did not seem very convinced that it did due to the fact that the sports do not have single or double round robin in a season.

Third, when confronted with the idea of super conferences, Commissioner Delany immediately shut it down by saying, “I have no idea” what the future holds. He discussed the expansion with Nebraska, Rutgers, and Maryland, and he expressed that those changes happened

very suddenly. He spoke about the special time and effort that is needed to keep the conference together psychologically and culturally, as the conference grows larger.

Finally, I asked if he believes that media rights deals are driving conference realignment and if he thinks the BTN was a catalyst of it. He evaded that answer by saying that I would have to ask other people why they changed conferences. Then, he discussed the BTN aligning its values with its member institutions by having equality among men and women's sports.

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