

CU

Conferences' seismic shift a made-for-TV event

By John Henderson*The Denver Post*

The Denver Post

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BOULDER — Colorado president Bruce Benson and athletic director Mike Bohn smiled wider than the glorious Flatirons behind them. A beautiful sunny day under a turquoise sky welcomed Pac-10 Conference commissioner Larry Scott to Boulder for the first time. If the news conference in the east stands of Folsom Field was a marriage, it was the perfect wedding day.

A few hours later in Lincoln, Nebraska athletic director Tom Osborne told wry jokes and Big Ten commissioner Jim Delany lauded what the Cornhuskers bring to the richest conference in the country. In Nebraska and the Big Ten, where change is defined more in eons than days, Friday changed Nebraska athletics like never before.

These celebrations of athletic department rebirths figure to happen all over the country this week. Those tremors of conference realignment everyone has heard since last fall are turning into a major earthquake.

Why now?

Although many factors led to last week's seismic shift, with more to come this week as Texas and other Big 12 schools likely abandon the league for the Pac-10, go back to Aug. 30, 2007. That's when Delany launched the Big Ten Network, the first international TV network dedicated to one conference.

Three years later, it is in 40 million households and available to 70 million fans across North America. Jointly operated by Fox Cable Networks, the creation of the Big Ten Network allowed the conference to give each of its 11 member schools this past year \$20 million to \$22 million.

Then last September, Delany publicly opined that a 12th Big Ten school would fix scheduling quirks and produce a football championship game, the kind that made \$13.7 million for the Southeastern Conference in 2007.

Delany became the most watched money man this side of Jim Cramer. His rhetoric certainly got Nebraska's attention. Bruised by perceived favoritism to the South Division, concerned about Big 12 stability and having received about half the TV revenue his colleagues in the Big Ten got, Osborne started thinking Columbus, Ohio, in November looked real nice.

Soon, other conferences, looking at the Big Ten, began locking in huge television contracts. Last year the SEC signed 15-year deals worth \$2.25 billion with ABC-ESPN and \$825 million with CBS.

Talk about the grass being greener on the other side of the fence.

"It's a more robust marketplace than it was," said Kevin Weiberg, the Pac-10's new deputy commissioner who helped develop the Big Ten Network.

It's no coincidence that Scott, the first-year Pac-10 commissioner, brought in Weiberg during the same year he will negotiate a new TV deal. Fox hopes to re-up, but it will have competition with the likes of ABC-ESPN, DirecTV and Comcast, which has combined with NBC.

The Supreme Court's deregulation of college football television rights in the mid-1980s has led to an exploding marketplace in the 21st century.

When Scott sits down with the TV suits, he could have 16 schools in his conference representing nine of the top 25 television markets in the nation. Suddenly, that flight from Austin, Texas, to Seattle doesn't seem far.

"When you start looking at our efforts to recruit quality coaches, to recruit student-athletes and enhance our facilities, when the SEC and Big Ten are dramatically higher than we are currently in the Big 12," Bohn said, "that becomes a competitive disadvantage."

Expecting more movement

Since the Southwest Conference and the Big Eight Conference merged into the Big 12 in 1996, there have been only two realignments of major conferences. In 2004, Miami and Virginia Tech left the Big East for the Atlantic Coast Conference. Boston College followed in 2005. The Big East replaced them with Cincinnati, Louisville and South Florida.

Yet, if Texas emerges from Tuesday's regents meeting with a decision to join the Pac-10, it could take up to four more Big 12 South Division schools with it. After little activity in 15 years, seven major programs may switch allegiances in a five-day span.

"And we're all expecting further movement," said Karl Benson, commissioner of the Denver area-based Western Athletic Conference.

In light of a college landscape that may soon look like a scattered jigsaw puzzle, the announcement last week that the WAC lost football powerhouse Boise State to the Mountain West Conference barely registered.

After adding Nebraska to the Big Ten, Delany said he will take a deep breath and contemplate more expansion. Texas A&M may cut ties and head to the SEC, which likely would move SEC commissioner Mike Slive to snoop around for a 14th school.

In other words . . . ACC? Don't turn your back on your Southern neighbors.

A raid of the Big East could start another feeding frenzy on the East Coast. And don't forget Notre Dame, the most popular girl at a dance full of wandering eyes.

Good morning, college athletic departments. No money to buy tennis balls? You're not alone. According to the NCAA, in 2006 only 19 of 119 Football Bowl Subdivision athletic departments made money.

Richer, yes, but better?

Beyond the ledger sheet, however, how good is this for college football?

In a sport in which scholarship limitations in the 1980s evened the playing field, will the geyser of TV money flooding major conference athletic departments return it to Oklahoma 52, Kansas State 0, circa 1972?

ABC-ESPN isn't breaking down the Sun Belt Conference's door to televise Middle Tennessee vs. Louisiana-Monroe. Conference USA's six-year, \$67.8 million contract provides less than \$1 million to each of its 12 members. Decades-old rivalries have been cast away as schools pursue a better TV deal. Even those who could soon be rich have other worries.

"The University of Colorado has been a long-standing flagship institution in this state and the only BCS representative in the Rocky Mountains," Bohn said, "and it's our priority to ensure that's the case."

Schools jumping conferences have cried wolf. Yet maybe it's too early to cry uncle.

"The competitive gap hasn't grown at the same level as the economic gap," Benson said. "Boise State can spend one-tenth of School A, B or C, and what they've done (in football) shows you don't have to be 'rich' to be successful.

"But how long can that occur?"

He will find out one day. But this month isn't about the haves and have-nots. It's about the wheres. Where will other schools go to join Colorado in the sun?

John Henderson: 303-954-1299 or jhenderson@denverpost.com

The Aftermath

Other aspects of Colorado's move to the Pac-10 conference

Return of baseball program tops CU's wish list

CU's move to the Pac-10 could mean expanding its sports offerings.

"I think CU should be looking at adding sports," CU chancellor Phil DiStefano said.

He recalled being at the university on that dark day 30 years ago when baseball, swimming, wrestling, and gymnastics fell victim to the excesses of Chuck Fairbanks-era spending and Title IX.

For years, CU hasn't had the money to add one men's sport, let alone the balancing women's program for Title IX. Greater revenue opportunities in the Pac-10 could change that picture, provided the conference signs a lucrative TV deal.

CU athletic director Mike Bohn hopes CU can expand by three programs — two women's and one men's. In addition to baseball and softball, he mentioned women's lacrosse as a possibility. The Pac-10 doesn't sanction women's lacrosse. It is part of the Mountain Pacific Sports Federation. CU's strength in men's and women's indoor track won't count for much in the Pac-10 because those are also MPSF offerings.

"We're not going to add sports for the sake of adding sports," Bohn said. He wants CU's current offerings, and that includes the revenue-producing sports, on more competitive ground before launching new programs.

Adding baseball has been at the top of CU's wish list the last three decades. Adding a men's program requires adding a comparable women's program.

CU does not have softball.

The Pac-10 is not requiring CU add sports as a condition to membership. Every Pac-10 school has baseball, and eight offer softball and women's swimming. There are seven Pac-10 men's tennis teams, a sport CU dropped this decade, while only five have women's tennis, an existing Buffs program. Of course, no one in the Pac-10 has skiing, but neither did any school in the Big 12 except CU.

With baseball, there are more problems to solve than the financial roadblocks.

"The weather isn't conducive to baseball," DiStefano said.

Natalie Meisler, The Denver Post

TRAVEL

CU probably won't see big change in expenses

New, more-frequented conference destinations will mean easier travel for CU, but the Buffs aren't expecting much of a change in expenses when they join the Pac-10.

"We haven't really dug that deep into (expenses) — this happened very fast — but it's something that I think will be pretty close to where we're at," said Cory Hilliard, CU's associate athletic director of business operations.

In joining the Pac-10, Colorado teams will have easier travel access to cities such as Los Angeles, Phoenix and Seattle than current Big 12 destinations such as Manhattan, Kan.

It could mean the end of chartered flights, something Hilliard said the Pac-10 didn't allow for basketball travel. Chartering is sometimes necessary to cut back on the amount of classes missed by student-athletes.

"The chartering thing is almost a requirement," Hilliard said. "But if we can catch one of 15 flights out of L.A. or wherever (after a weekday road game) straight back here that next morning, then I think that's going to be a big savings."

That's not to say that there won't be additional costs in joining the Pac-10. Football travel, for example, requires an "advance truck" leaving with equipment a few days before a game.

"Now, that truck's going to be driving over I-70 in the Rocky Mountains three or four times a year now," Hilliard said. "It will probably take a couple extra days' advance."

The Olympic sports won't absorb much of a change, Hilliard said, and skiing will be largely unaffected.

"Our track teams and some of our Olympic sports will still be looking to do a lot of their competitions up and down on the Front Range here with Air Force and CSU and whatnot," Hilliard said. *Ryan Casey, The Denver Post*

RECRUITING

California connections stronger

While the miles to Boulder remain the same for potential California recruits, the distance from home will seem a little shorter. That's the feeling among CU's coaching staffs.

New women's basketball coach Linda Lappe already has two incoming freshman players from California and hired an assistant this past week to recruit out West.

"It helps us now recruit the best California players, and that's huge for us," Lappe said. "It limits our recruiting in the Midwest. And coming from the Midwest, I don't necessarily . . . that's not a plus for me. But you adapt and change."

Lappe said new assistant Jonas Chatterson's history of recruiting in California will help. He spent the past year in San Diego in private business but was an assistant coach at BYU from 2001-09 and knows the Western states.

Being able to tell California players they will be playing closer to home and possibly on a conference television network their parents can watch will help CU close the gap across the Rocky Mountains.

Lappe and men's basketball coach Tad Boyle also see a big benefit in many of the Big 12's Texas schools joining CU in the Pac-10. "Being able to have both those areas (Texas and California), there are some benefits to that," Boyle said. "But we'll just wait and see where this thing shakes out. But certainly California is an area we can go deeper."

David Krause, The Denver Post

FACILITIES

Pac-10 arms race more winnable

Jon Embree, a former Colorado football player and assistant coach, said CU won't be at as big a disadvantage in the so-called facilities "arms race" when compared with current Pac-10 members as it has been in relation to many Big 12 programs.

Embree should know. The current Washington Redskins tight ends coach under Mike Shanahan served as an assistant at UCLA from 2003-05.

"The practice fields at UCLA are average at best," Embree said in a phone interview. "There's one grass practice field and one (artificial) turf field. That's it. They don't have any additional space. There's nowhere to put another field. And at least one of the two was just an 80-yard field, not even regulation 100 yards."

"At UCLA, there isn't a training table facility for athletes, like we have at Colorado. There are a lot of schools in the Pac-10 that don't have that. The academic centers at a lot of Pac-10 schools are very similar in size to CU, whereas a school like Texas might have an academic facility three times the size of ours."

"When I was at UCLA, I thought there were a ton of similarities with Colorado, everything from an administration standpoint to an academic standpoint. . . . It was amazing how similar they are in a lot of things."

Tom Kensler, The Denver Post

BIG 12 FALLOUT

Uninvited facing "a tough time"

If as many as five other Big 12 teams follow Colorado to the Pac-10, Kevin Weiberg, the Pac-10 deputy commissioner, may be looked upon as something of a turncoat by schools that do not get invitations.

Weiberg served as Big 12 commissioner for almost 10 years, beginning in December 1998. He hopes there are no hard feelings from the Big 12 office or Big 12 schools left behind — including his alma mater, Kansas State.

"I have a real affinity and still a good relationship with many colleagues in the Big 12,"

Weiberg said Friday while attending the news conference in Boulder. "I'm ecstatic about the Pac-10, and that's where I work, but I still have feelings that I want those (Big 12) institutions to succeed. I have a great fondness for the folks that work in the Big 12 office. Many of those people I hired.

"I worry about them. I know it has to be a tough time. But I hope things will sort out for them in a positive way ultimately."

CU men's basketball coach Tad Boyle is a Kansas graduate, as is CU athletic director Mike Bohn. Boyle said "there will be some nostalgia" that Colorado likely will no longer compete regularly against the Jayhawks. But things change, he said. "We live in some interesting times, and we're at the hub of it," he said.

Tom Kensler, The Denver Post

Money matters

A look at the TV contracts of the Bowl Championship Series conferences:

Conference Dollars Network Terms

Atlantic Coast \$1.86 billion ABC-ESPN 12 years, through 2022-23

Big East \$200 million ABC-ESPN 6 years, through 2013

Big Ten \$2.8 billion Big Ten Network 25 years, through 2031-32 \$1 billion ABC-ESPN 10 years, through 2016 \$20 million CBS (basketball) 10 years, through 2018-19

Big 12 \$125 million ABC-ESPN 5 years, through 2011-12 \$97 million Fox Sports Net 5 years, through 2011-12 \$525 million ABC-ESPN (basketball) 6 years, through 2011-12

Pac-10 \$125 million ABC-ESPN 5 years, through 2011-12 \$97 million Fox Sports Net 5 years, through 2011-12 \$52.5 million ABC-ESPN (basketball) 6 years, through 2011-12

Southeastern \$2.25 billion ABC-ESPN 15 years, through 2023-24

\$825 million CBS 15 years, through 2023-24

Source: [SI.com](http://www.sportsworld.com)

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Woelk: Kansas or Utah would be nice finishing touch

Neill Woelk Camera Sports Writer
Boulder Daily Camera

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For the first time in seemingly forever -- well, at least days -- the whirlwind surrounding conference expansion calmed just a little on Saturday.

Oh, there were still tidbits of news trickling in from different corners of what is -- at least for today -- still officially the Big 12.

Texas athletic director DeLoss Dodds said UT is still "looking at all the options" before it decides to go to the Pac-10 or stay in the Big 12 (wink, wink).

Texas A&M president Bowen Loftin, whose school is rumored to be on the fence between choosing a jump to the SEC or Pac-10, said, "We were very happy to stay in the Big 12 the way it was. ... (But) The Big 12 is not what it was, and we have to think about its future, and ours."

Nebraska A.D. Tom Osborne expressed some sadness at leaving old foes behind for the Big Ten, but added, "We're going to miss them, and we feel bad about that, but we're looking forward to some other competition. Life goes on."

And, Pac-10 commish Larry Scott met with Oklahoma and Oklahoma State officials Saturday and said to be headed to Texas to make the final pitch for his conference.

But overall, things seem to be in a holding pattern for the weekend, with the situation guaranteed to heat up again on Monday.

Bank on this: Texas is headed to the Pac-10. Oklahoma, Oklahoma State and Texas Tech are almost certainly to follow.

My druthers?

If the Pac-10 is indeed going to be Pac-16, give me Texas, Texas Tech, Oklahoma, Oklahoma State and either Kansas or Utah. It's a preference I've voiced a couple of times the past week, and nothing has changed my mind in that regard.

Nothing against Texas A&M. A football game at Kyle Field is a sight to behold. But if the Aggies indeed have an urge to head to the SEC, that would be a bonus for Colorado.

With A&M in the Pac-16, Colorado would have no clear rival. When it came time for rivalry games around the conference (Arizona vs. Arizona State, USC vs. UCLA, Texas vs. A&M, etc.), Colorado and Texas Tech would be the odd teams out -- and would thus be paired.

I'd much rather see Colorado be able to continue its relationship with Kansas, or renew what was once upon a time a fierce rivalry with Utah.

No doubt, Kansas would be a nice finishing touch to the Pac-16. The Jayhawks would bring their tradition of great basketball, and new football coach Turner Gill will likely keep the Jayhawks competitive in that arena.

KU would also bring a decent number of TV sets from the Midwest.

And, I'll be honest -- I always look forward to that January or February evening every year when KU fans invade Boulder for the Kansas-Colorado basketball game. It's a great atmosphere, and one I wouldn't mind still seeing on an annual basis.

Utah would also be a nice fit, for many of the same reasons as Kansas. The Utes have very good football and basketball programs, and the Salt Lake TV market couldn't hurt upcoming network contract negotiations.

As for the rivalry aspect, I'm certain it wouldn't take long for that to heat up. CU and the Utes haven't had much contact in recent years (they haven't played in football since 1962), but given the relative proximity of the two schools, you can bet there would be plenty of chirping from both sides once they started playing again.

Meanwhile, it will also be interesting to see what happens to the Big 12 leftovers once dissolution becomes a reality.

The Mountain West is said to be ready to invite Kansas and Missouri to bump its numbers to 12.

That's not what the Tigers wanted. When expansion chatter began, the Tigers were the most vocal of any of the Big 12 schools about their intentions to make a possible move.

But now that it seems the Tigers are going to be rebuffed by the Big Ten, A.D. Mike Alden is claiming the Tigers have been nothing but the most faithful of Big 12 members. In an open letter to MU fans on Friday, Alden also included this gem:

"Many will look at this time as a challenge, but we will look at it as an unbelievable opportunity."

Um, opportunity for what? I'm guessing a move to the MWC isn't the opportunity Tiger fans were exactly hoping for.

Then there's Baylor. The Bears are still pressing the Texas legislature and the other Texas schools to be included in the exodus West. But as one Big 12 official told the Austin American-Statesman's Kirk Bohls earlier this week, "The schools on the West Coast just don't see the benefit of Baylor. ... Baylor's been lobbying everybody around Texas. They need to be lobbying California."

Don't count on the Bears getting an MWC bid as a consolation prize. Folks at TCU are said to be dead-set against including Baylor in that equation.

It's proof that old grudges die hard. TCU still remembers being left behind in favor of Baylor when the Big 12 was formed. That banished the Horned Frogs first to the WAC, then the Mountain West.

Now, TCU has a chance to return the favor.

As they say, payback's a (fill in the blank).

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Will Pac-10 shift mark CU baseball's return to Boulder?

DiStefano favors adding team to competitive conference down the road

By Ryan Thorburn Camera Sports Writer
Boulder Daily Camera

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Colorado will be the dominant team in one sport when it moves to the Pac-10.

"We're adding a new sport, skiing, for the first time," Pac-10 commissioner Larry Scott noted during Friday's news conference at Folsom Field.

The Buffs will bring at least 22 national championships to the "conference of champions" when they leave the Big 12. Twelve of those banners are skiing titles.

CU athletic director Mike Bohn said increased revenue the athletic department is expecting to receive in the Pac-10 could lead to the return of baseball and the addition of women's sports such as softball and lacrosse down the road.

Ironically, CU cut baseball -- along with wrestling, men's and women's gymnastics, men's swimming, and women's swimming and diving -- on June 11, 1980.

"My sports information director, Dave Plati, informed me that it was 30 years ago to the day that we dropped baseball at the University of Colorado," Bohn said during Friday's festivities. "I believe the challenge and the opportunity to associate with this conference is going to give us the opportunity to look at growing and expanding."

CU currently sponsors 16 varsity sports. Bohn wants to focus on improving the results of the breadwinner, football -- which is 16-33 on the field under coach Dan Hawkins -- and making the basketball and volleyball programs more competitive before considering growing the department.

"We're not going to add sports just to add sports," Bohn said. "We're going to (support) the ones we have and build them to a competitive level, which we believe we are making progress with, before we add more sports."

Scott made it clear that CU does not have to sponsor additional athletic programs as a member of the Pac-10.

"There is no requirement that they add any sports, but we had a discussion about the profile of sports that are sponsored, which is very compatible," Scott said. "We have had discussions about baseball and softball, but there is no condition or requirement as part of this."

Of all the programs axed by CU on "Black Wednesday" 30 years ago, baseball is the one most pined over by alumni and fans.

Count CU Chancellor Phil DiStefano among those who want to see Division I baseball return to Boulder.

"Certainly I think CU should look at adding sports in the future," DiStefano said. "Baseball is one I would like to see (added), although as you know the weather here in the spring isn't always conducive to playing with 36 inches of snow."

Prep baseball players in Colorado are used to the unfavorable spring conditions.

There are many quality high school baseball programs in the state that have been sending Division I players all over the country. Bob Bote, a former CU baseball player who coached Niwot High School to five state titles, was cautiously optimistic when told about Bohn's talk of bringing America's pastime back to the university.

"I think it would be a huge deal. I don't think they're talking about the near future though," Bote said. "But if they ever did bring it back, a lot of Colorado kids would stay. Right now there are so many good players in the state who have to go somewhere else to play. I think they could be competitive in a short time."

Colorado State, Denver and Wyoming have also dropped baseball. Air Force fields a team that struggles to compete in the Mountain West Conference, and only a select number of student-athletes can handle the demanding academic and military requirements of the academy.

Irv Brown, a former CU baseball coach and the host of a sports-talk show on AM 1600, has been lobbying for the return of the program for years.

"(Bohn) is a baseball guy. I believe they could do it," Brown said. "I'd really like to see it for two reasons. One, our kids need a place to go. We have a lot of good players in this state. Secondly, I believe you're going to lose a top football player every year if you don't have baseball."

Brown pointed out that John Stearns -- the NCAA's home run leader in 1973, who was the second overall pick in the Major League Baseball draft to the Philadelphia Phillies -- attended CU on a football scholarship.

Northern Colorado, which always had the best baseball tradition along the Front Range, is coming off a 34-24 campaign. The Bears had seven players from Boulder County on their roster last season, including Joe Sawicki, a former Monarch High School standout.

"We talk about that a lot. What if CU had a baseball team? How amazing would that be with the mountains as a backdrop to a baseball stadium?" Sawicki, who was the Great West pitcher of the year, said during a recent interview with the Camera. "But UNC has been working out for us. CU and CSU are missing out on some good baseball."

CU and Iowa State are the only members of the Big 12 that do not field a baseball team. Texas has won the College World Series six times, Oklahoma has two national titles, and Oklahoma State and Missouri each have one national title.

That strong history pales in comparison to the Pac-10's baseball tradition.

USC (11), Arizona State (5), Arizona (3), Cal (2), Oregon State (2) and Stanford (2) have all won the World Series multiple times. During the recent MLB draft, 54 Pac-10 players were selected.

And if CU were to bring baseball back, the athletic department would also likely add women's softball to meet Title IX requirements.

The Pac-10 dominates that sport as well. UCLA recently beat Arizona for the Bruins' 12th women's College World Series title. The Wildcats have eight national championships. Arizona State, Cal and Washington each have one.

"I want to be clear that we understand the challenge of joining this league. The competitiveness in the Big 12 was no walk in the park either, and we have to enhance the support of our current teams and build them," Bohn said. "As resources and investments from our alumni and our enterprise grows, we will certainly look at trying to add baseball, softball, and perhaps women's lacrosse as a member of the Pac-10."

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