

Woelk: Expansion waters more turbulent every day

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If you're going to go, go big.

The Pac-10 is apparently subscribing to that thought. If indeed the West Coast-based conference plans to invite six Big 12 teams to join its ranks, one thing is clear: The Pac-10 is swinging for the fences.

The league aims to become the most-powerful conference in the nation, one that will rewrite the terms for television contracts and set the standard for the future of college athletics.

It might not happen today. It might not happen next week. But those clouds of realignment on the horizon aren't going to go away. The Big Ten and Pac-10 have stated their intentions to expand, and the odds of them standing pat aren't good.

The latest in the ever-changing whirlpool of rumors came out of Texas on Saturday. Orangebloods.com reported that some members of the Texas legislature have their underwear bunched up over a Pac-10 proposal that would invite Texas, Texas Tech, Texas A&M, Colorado, Oklahoma and Oklahoma State into the Pac-10 -- and leave Baylor out in the cold.

Those legislators want Baylor to replace Colorado in the plan.

The Web site even quoted a "high-ranking member" of the legislature as saying, "... do you think we're going to allow a school from outside the state of Texas to replace one of our schools in the Big 12 South? I don't think so. We're already at work on this."

Orangebloods also said that Pac-10 commissioner Larry Scott presented a variety of proposals to conference members Saturday at their meeting in San Francisco. The plans ran the gamut of possibilities, ranging from a full-blown merger with the Big 12 to adding six teams to adding two teams and everything in between.

Which means anything can happen.

It's certainly not the first time the Texas legislature has stepped in to interrupt realignment plans. I've been told by more than one person involved in the situation that when Texas received an invitation to join the Pac-10 in 1994 (along with Colorado), Texas lawmakers told UT officials they weren't going anywhere without the majority of their Texas brethren.

Thus, UT followed through with the just-formed Big 12, bringing Tech, A&M and Baylor with them.

(Quick question: If you are Baylor, how does it feel to always be part of a shotgun marriage? Don't you ever get the urge to actually stand on your own? Just wondering ...)

But instead of trying to guess what might happen -- feeling safe saying only that something is likely to happen -- here's what's being written and whispered around the nation about the situation as of Saturday:

Kirk Bohls of the Austin-American Statesman reported that Nebraska and Missouri have been told by the Big 12 that they have until Friday to decide if they want to stay in the conference or pursue an invitation to the Big Ten. They were given the ultimatum at last week's meetings.

But what nobody is saying is what those schools' punishment will be if they don't meet the deadline. What happens if Nebraska's Tom Osborne says nothing? Does he get double-secret probation?

Nebraska is said to be the key to Texas' decision to stay or go. UT athletic director DeLoss Dodds apparently believes the Big 12 can survive without Missouri, but not without the Huskers.

Dodds, by the way, isn't playing coy about what he thinks his school's role in the whole situation will be. He's quoted in a

couple of publications as saying, "We did not start this. If we need to finish this, we'll finish this. We'll be a player in whatever happens."

Translation: "If we have to leave, we'll take our money with us and make another conference very, very rich."

Sources have told me the Pac-10 has studied a "pod system" for a 16-team league in football. The league would be divided into two divisions, with two four-team pods in each division. Teams in each pod would play each other every year in football (three games), and play two teams from the other three pods each year for a total of nine league games. The two division champions would then meet in the league title game.

For the sake of argument, we'll leave Colorado in the Pac-16 for the moment. Here's one scenario of how the pods would break down: 1) Texas, Texas Tech, Texas A&M and Oklahoma; 2) Colorado, Oklahoma State, Arizona and Arizona State; 3) Southern Cal, UCLA, Cal and Stanford; 4) Oregon, Oregon State, Washington and Washington State.

Such a breakdown would preserve all the historic rivalries save one: the "Bedlam Series" between Oklahoma and Oklahoma State.

I've also heard that Fox Sports has indicated a willingness to greatly enhance its TV deal with the Big 12, which expires after the 2011-12 season. The current deal is worth \$48 million over four years; Fox is said to be willing to get close to the \$100 million mark if the Big 12 stays intact.

Of course, that deal would hinge upon Texas and Nebraska still being members of the conference.

Schools that aren't being mentioned in the expansion proposals are very concerned.

KU athletic director Lew Perkins called the Big 12's current state of affairs "serious, serious, serious."

Iowa State athletic director Jamie Pollard and ISU president Dr. Gregory Geoffroy posted a letter on ISU's Web site that said, "we also recognize that the long-term viability of the Big 12 Conference is not in our control ... and recognize that the situation could evolve in directions that are not aligned with our interests."

Of course, if the Saturday's latest reports are true, and Baylor would replace Colorado in the Pac-10 proposal, it would leave the Buffs in the same boat as Iowa State, Kansas State and Kansas.

Would that boat then set sail for the Mountain West?

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