

Conference conundrum: Many CU Olympic sports would face tougher teams

Pac-10 strong in golf, running, volleyball, soccer

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Someone might want to stop by Mark Wetmore's office for a chat if the University of Colorado is invited to join the Pac-10 Conference some time in the next year.

Wetmore is head coach of six of Colorado's 16 sports programs, making him the ultimate authority on what is best for more than one-third of the programs in the athletic department.

The Camera spoke in recent weeks with most of the head coaches in the department about how a possible switch in conferences might affect their programs.

Most, including Wetmore, say moving from the Big 12 to the Pac-10 would present challenges and bring changes that would have to be addressed.

But none of CU's coaches said they are against it or believe they won't be able to compete if the school turns its attention west after more than a 60-year association with some of its current conference rivals.

"The decision will be made at much higher pay scales than mine," Wetmore said. "We'll take whatever is handed down to us."

Pac-10 presidents and chancellors are meeting this weekend in Los Angeles at the league's basketball tournaments and are supposed to begin discussing the idea of adding two teams by the start of the 2012 school year.

Conference commissioner Larry Scott said in January the conference would consider expanding in an effort to generate more revenue for its members.

A decision on expansion could come as soon as this summer to allow invited schools plenty of time to execute appropriate separation agreements with their current conferences. The Pac-10 CEO group could wait to study the issue and make a decision early next year when the league will begin negotiating its future television contract.

While the expansion question is driven by football because of the revenue generated by the sport, it would have significant effects on every program and more than 300 student-athletes on the Boulder campus.

Wetmore coaches men's and women's indoor and outdoor track and field teams and the men's and women's cross country programs. He compared the conferences in those sports and painted a picture of where his teams might fit into the Pac-10 today.

"We would be fighting harder against more programs for conference titles in cross country and fighting just as hard, but maybe finish a couple spots higher, in outdoor and indoor track and field," Wetmore said.

Four of Colorado's teams wouldn't even compete in the Pac-10 if the Buffs switched conferences. The Pac-10 doesn't sponsor indoor track or skiing. Colorado's teams in those sports would instead compete in the Mountain Pacific Sports Federation.

It was formed in the early 1990s to provide competition and championship opportunities for sports without conference affiliation. The federation serves members of the Pac-10, Mountain West, Western Athletic, Big West and West Coast Conferences.

Wetmore said not competing in a conference during the indoor track season wouldn't necessarily be bad for CU.

"I guess it could be argued that it could be an advantage to just use the winter to prepare correctly and compete the people who need to but not have to get ready for a conference championship," he said.

Changing conferences would bring plenty of initial expenses, including losing at least \$9 million over two years in Big 12 distributions. Those costs could hit CU's minor sports programs hard. A change would also bring new budgetary challenges moving forward.

CU is able to bus to some conference meets in cross country and track and field in the Big 12. Places such as Nebraska, Kansas and Kansas State, Missouri, Texas Tech and the Oklahoma schools are within workable driving distances. That would be unrealistic within the Pac-10 because none of its members are within 1,000 miles of Boulder. CU could bus to Utah if the Utes also joined the league.

"There would be some additional expense flying," Wetmore said.

Colorado coaches say they already compete in one of the elite conferences in the country, but for many of them a move to the Pac-10 would be another step up in the overall level of competition.

Volleyball coach Liz Kritza, women's soccer coach Bill Hempen, women's tennis coach Nicole Kenneally and golf coaches Roy Edwards and Anne Kelly would all probably find conference competition tougher in the Pac-10.

Hempen came to Colorado from Duke in 2001. He led the Blue Devils to eight appearances in the NCAA Tournament but found it tough to win the Atlantic Coast Conference competing against North Carolina every year. The Tar Heels are the preeminent women's soccer program in America.

Hempen says he would face a similar uphill battle, albeit to a lesser extent, in the Pac-10 where UCLA, Stanford and USC all are traditional powerhouses. Several more programs in the conference are strong, too.

"We're going to have to ratchet is up a couple notches to compete with those programs," he said.

Hempen said it could be somewhat more expensive to play in the Pac-10 than it is for the Buffs in the Big 12, primarily because of travel costs, but the travel also would be easier because many Pac-10 schools are near major airports.

Most of Colorado's coaches believe a move to the Pac-10 either helps their programs in recruiting or have no real effect at all. Hempen said he recruits the best players in Colorado first and then focuses a lot of his attention on California.

Liz Kritza is the newest head coach at CU. She endured a tough first season in Boulder last fall, dealing with turnover in her program and changing the culture while competing against heavyweights such as Nebraska and Texas.

Like Hempen, she said moving to the Pac-10 would be another step up for her program because there is more tradition in women's volleyball from top to bottom in that conference.

Perhaps no one would have as difficult a task as men's golf coach Roy Edwards.

The Pac-10 is so strong in men's golf this year that the conference has a legitimate chance at becoming the first league in history to have every one of its teams qualify for the NCAA tournament.

"I think any time it becomes more difficult, it becomes more rewarding, and I think, in most cases, it's more fun for people who really want to compete," Edwards said.

Edwards' team finished second in the Big 12 last year, but would probably be hard-pressed to do so well in the Pac-10. That could change over time through recruiting, which Edwards believes would be helped by playing in the Pac-10.

"I think that could be enhanced by the Pac-10 because a lot of students CU gets generally, not just student-athletes, but generally, are choosing CU over other Pac-10 schools because we're seen as king of a sister school," Edwards said.

"The thing I'd like to stress is the Big 12 is plenty challenging. I'm looking outside right now and the snow is coming down

again and such is the life of a golfer at CU. That won't change whether we're in the Pac-10 or the Big 12 or the Big Sky."

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