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Thursday, February 17, 2011

Spring transforms conference into Pac-12

By Ted Miller

The Pac-10 doesn't become the Pac-12 officially until July 1, but with the advent of spring practices -- Stanford gets an early jump on Feb. 21 -- the reality sets in: It's going to be different this fall.

It's not just about Utah and Colorado joining the "old" Pac-10, which has been stable since adding Arizona and Arizona State in 1978. It's about a massive transformation.

For one, there will be two divisions: North (California, Oregon, Oregon State, Stanford, Washington and Washington State) and South (Arizona, Arizona State, Colorado, UCLA, USC and Utah). Teams will still play nine conference games, but the round-robin format adopted in 2006 is over. With 12 teams, every team can't play every other on an annual basis, which affects not only rivalries but also recruiting.

Divisions also bring a conference championship game, which will be played at the home stadium of the team with the best conference record on Dec. 3. The winner of that game, even if it's just, say, 8-5, will be crowned Pac-12 champion and go to the Rose Bowl, if it's not selected for the national title game.

Divisions change the dynamic. In Pac-10 play, every game mattered. In Pac-12 play, divisional games matter a little more.

While some Pac-10 coaches, particularly in the Northwest, weren't terribly excited about expansion and North and South divisions -- Oregon State's always-pleasant Mike Riley was on record as being slightly sour on the idea -- there's no turning back. For the lack of a better phrase, it is what it is.

"It's not really a focal point for us as we head into spring practice," Washington coach Steve Sarkisian said. "Our focus for us is on us, trying to get better."

Said Oregon coach Chip Kelly, "Whether there are eight teams in the conference or 18 teams in the conference, it has no effect on us ... I don't care how they split the divisions -- I don't get caught up in that. I don't know why anyone would They don't ask us our opinion on that. And it's not that I want that. I don't worry about things I don't have control over."

For Utah, coming from the Mountain West Conference -- a solid league but a non-automatic qualifying one -- the move was a no-brainer. For Colorado, leaving the Big 12 was a more complicated proposition. But new Buffaloes coach Jon Embree admits he has a West Coast bias.

"When they were forming the Big 12 [in 1994], it looked like we might go to the Pac-10 at the time, and I was really hoping that would happen for the university as opposed to the Big 12 conference," he said. "I always felt like that conference was a better fit for us."

Embree played high school football in Colorado, went to Colorado and coached there for 10 seasons under Bill McCartney (1993-94), Rick Neuheisel (1995-98) and Gary Barnett (1999-2002). He's a Colorado guy. But his parents are from Los Angeles, he was born in L.A., he spent plenty of time in Southern California growing up and he coached at UCLA. He even played for the L.A. Rams for two seasons (1987-88).

He's got plenty of West Coast in him, just as Colorado's and Utah's rosters are already laden with players from California, as well as a smattering from other Pac-10 states. The transition for both probably will be fairly easy.

And, of course, none of this has much to do with spring practices, which for all 12 programs will be business as usual: Filling voids, fostering competition, breaking in new coaches and tweaking schemes.



New Colorado coach Jon Embree believes the Pac-12 is a better conference for Colorado than the Big 12.

On the football side of things, Embree is the only new coach who arrived after a termination. His predecessor, Dan Hawkins, never posted a winning season in five years. At Stanford, Jim Harbaugh bolted for the San Francisco 49ers after leading the Cardinal to their best season of the modern era. David Shaw was promoted from offensive coordinator to replace Harbaugh.

That's it for coaching transitions, though it's fair to say that a number of coaches enter spring practices facing win-or-else seasons, particularly UCLA coach Rick Neuheisel, Washington State's Paul Wulff and Arizona State's Dennis Erickson.

Seven teams enter spring with stability at quarterback, including four with legitimate All-America candidates behind center: Stanford's [Andrew Luck](#), Oregon's [Darron Thomas](#), USC's [Matt Barkley](#) and Arizona's [Nick Foles](#). Conversely, three teams appear to have wide-open competitions at the position: California, UCLA and Washington.

UCLA replaced both coordinators, which notably ended up landing Norm Chow at Utah. California and Arizona also had some significant staff turnover, with Bears coach Jeff Tedford stating he planned to work extensively with his quarterbacks this spring.

At Oregon, the Ducks begin earnest preparations to defend their consecutive conference titles needing to rebuild their offensive line and defensive front seven. Arizona, California, Stanford and USC also have questions on their offensive lines, while Oregon State must address the early departure of running back [Jacquizz Rodgers](#) and issues on its defensive line. Arizona State, with a conference-high 19 starters back, needs to square things away at quarterback and prepare for being the favorite in the Pac-12 South. Newbies Colorado and Utah have vacancies in the secondary, which should be worrisome in a conference of quarterbacks.

So it's really about football this spring, not transformation. Because you know what every coach will tell you when asked for his thoughts on heading into the first year of Pac-12 play?

"It's just line 'em up and tell me who to play," Embree said.

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- Published: February 17th, 2011
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Scott Porter: What do you feel are your biggest strengths?

Jalil Brown: I feel my overall athletic ability is one of my biggest strengths. I also feel that you don't find many cornerbacks that have the size and speed combination that I have. There aren't many 6'0/200 lbs. CB's that can run and be effective in press coverage like I am. I have been blessed to be coached by a DB coach who produced two Jim Thorpe award winners in Deon Figures and Chris Hudson while at Colorado. I feel I have been well coached and understand the game very well. I am good at throwing the timing off of WR's and QB's and disrupting route running.

Scott Porter: What are your goals for the NFL?

Jalil Brown: My main goals are just to make an impact right away wherever I end up. A goal of mine is to make an impact playing either the CB position or the nickel but if not I want to make an immediate impact on special teams. Wherever I go I just want to make that impact. I don't want to wait around for playing time. I want to learn and go in there and get a feel for the NFL early on.

Scott Porter: What player in the NFL most reminds you of yourself or is there one you model your game after?

Jalil Brown: That is a good question. I don't really have one that comes to mind. I feel I am an interesting player because of my style for being a bigger CB and the things I am able to do as a bigger CB. I do like to watch the Jets cornerback.

Darrell Revis is a big press guy and I like to mimic what he does on the field. He is one of the best in the game so to pick up on things that he does and learn by watching him is something I find myself doing a lot of. I try to pull things out of his game and plug them into mine to be a complete CB like he is.

Scott Porter: What do you feel are your biggest football accomplishments?

Jalil Brown: One that really stands out to me is my first ever interception at Colorado. It came vs. Colt McCoy while playing Texas. He threw the ball and I made a good play by reading it and stepping in front and making the interception. I ran 50 some yards down to the 17. It happened so fast and it was a great feeling. I feel my overall career is a great accomplishment. I am very happy and satisfied with how I played while at Colorado. I had great coaches in Greg Brown and Ashley Ambrose and feel I am well prepared.

Scott Porter: What type of a person is an NFL team getting in Jalil Brown?

Jalil Brown: They will be getting a person who has a great character and makes good decisions. I am always up beat and I am a leader. When people start complaining I often remind them of the big picture. That is success comes with sacrifice. To be successful you work hard at it and the sacrifice you make will be worth it in the end. I always give 100% effort. I am very respectful. I am the type of person that I accomplish whatever I put my mind to. I am very determined and work hard for success.

Scott Porter: Who has been your biggest influence throughout your playing time at Colorado?

Jalil Brown: I would say it is a combination of people. My dad has always been a great support to me. He is my biggest fan and my biggest critic. When I lose focus he makes sure I get the focus back. He is always there to encouragement and helps me grow as a person and player. My position coach Greg Brown has been a major influence to me as well. I didn't play cornerback when I came to Colorado. He helped develop me and he has developed me into the player I am today. I am very thankful for him. He is a big reason why I have been so successful and he has been a big reason why I am in the position I am today.

Scott Porter: What do you feel will be the toughest transition from the college level to the NFL level?

Jalil Brown: That is a good question. I feel I have been blessed and fortunate to have the physical characteristics that a lot of players do not have. I guess I would say perhaps the biggest transition will be getting the mental aspect of the game and the technique down in the NFL. I will have to adjust to the technique needed to be at the top level in the NFL. Everything has to be on point, the technique and the mental aspect of the game. I have to work on getting my mind right and just work hard and be prepared that all of this is on point with each other to be the best player I can get at the next level.

Scott Porter: What hobbies do you have off the field?

Jalil Brown: I enjoy reading. My family, my aunts, uncles, cousins, grandparents etc. were always big into camping so that is something I have always enjoyed doing. I like snowboarding out here in Colorado when I get the chance. I like hiking and watching and playing a lot of different sports. It allows me to see the hard work that goes into each sport and helps me with my football skills.

Scott Porter: Do you have any pre-game rituals?

Jalil Brown: Yes, I do. My mom always sends me a text before every game. It is of a bible verse so I read that and I pray before each game. I put my headphones on and listen to a game day tape to get myself ready for the game. I always visualize the game before I go out on the field. Whatever team we are playing I visualize that color in the stands, and I always visualize a positive outcome to keep myself positive and ready. I go everything in my head to get ready for the game mentally.

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