



White Paper

The Big 12 Conference Expansion Plan

Prepared for Tim Weiser, Deputy Commissioner, Big 12 Conference

By Hillary Thornton, Business Development, Big 12 Conference
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Part I: Introduction

The Big Twelve Conference (Big 12) has been through a lot in the past decade. It has lost four schools with longstanding conference memberships and gained only two, one of which makes little geographical or financial sense. It is currently weathering a global pandemic that caused a 7-month void of sports. Only one school has made the College Football Playoff and lost in the semifinals four times. There's been little parity among Big 12 champions in many sports. There's only been four Men's Final Four participants, collectively.

The Big 12 now finds itself as the “Power 5” conference with the least amount of schools and the only major conference without its own television network. From a revenue standpoint, the Big 12 ranks behind the Southeastern Conference (SEC) and the Big Ten Conference, both of which have their own networks (Marcello, 2020).

The setbacks listed above exist because the Big 12 has too few, and geographically un-fit, teams to be consistently respected and competitive on a national stage in men's basketball and football. Financially, competitively, and with the safety of the student-athletes in mind, it is in the best interest of the conference to expand. This paper will further describe these issues in detail and recommend a conference re-alignment proposal.

Men's basketball and football will be the primary sports of focus of this paper, as they are the “revenue sports” of the conference. Studies show that, though 17 sports exist in the Big 12, approximately 58 percent of the average school's athletic department revenue comes directly from only men's basketball and football (Garthwaite, et al., 2020, p. 1). The additional sports only directly account for 15 percent of revenue, while the remaining 27 percent of revenue is obtained through the sale of media rights, which almost entirely concerns the ability to air men's basketball and football events (Garthwaite, et al., 2020, p. 1).

Part II of this paper will provide a brief history of how the Big 12 was formed. This is important because the conference's background is based on anticipating and adapting to challenges when faced with them, as evidenced by expanding or merging when necessary.

Part III outlines the conference's tumultuous start to the decade, including unexpectedly losing long-standing members, removing and then re-adding the Big 12 Football Championship Game, and being snubbed from the inaugural College Football Playoff. Part IV addresses criticisms against modern-day Big 12 expansion and provides rebuttals to those concerns, while Part V acknowledges the potentially lasting impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on future budgets and scheduling.

Finally, Part VI details a recommended proposal that would allow the Big 12 to expand in a geographically sound manner while maintaining the qualities that make the conference great.

II. History

Before the Big 12 was formed, the Texas schools belonged to the Southwest Conference (SWC), which consisted of eight schools in Texas plus the University of Arkansas. Texas Tech joined in 1956 and Houston joined in 1972 but otherwise, the conference had been in place since the 1920s (Burka, 1974).

The conference thrived until the 1960s, when NFL teams invaded Dallas and Houston, which drastically affected attendance for Rice, TCU, and SMU (Burka, 1974). The University of Texas expressed frustration and felt as if their success alone was funding the entire conference. For the two decades that followed, many teams of the SWC found trouble. At one point, seven of the nine schools were faced with penalties and/or sanctions, which damaged the brand of the SWC and hurt recruiting efforts (Fertak, 2013).

In 1991, the dominos started to fall when Arkansas left the Southwest Conference for the richer (literally) pastures of the Southeastern Conference.

Meanwhile, the Big 8 Conference consisted of Colorado, Iowa State, Kansas, Kansas State, Missouri, Nebraska, Oklahoma, and Oklahoma State. As of 1994, when they approached members of the SWC with an invitation to merge, the Big 8 was the only major conference not to undergo any realignment in 30 years (Associated Press, 1994). The Big 8 was interested in adding the highest-revenue Texas schools after the Southeastern Conference cut a revolutionary TV deal with CBS (Associated Press, 1994). It became clear that the television landscape was changing, and an expansion made sense financially, competitively and geographically.

In 1996, Baylor, Texas, Texas A&M, and Texas Tech left the SWC and joined the Big 8 teams to form the initial iteration of The Big 12 Conference. The conference maintained a lot of success and hoped to maintain the status quo, which seemed feasible until the Power 5 conference landscape shifted again, and the Big 12 didn't keep up.

III. The brink of collapse

a. 2010-2012 Re-alignment

One decade ago, other Power 5 conferences began to make moves to secure more money. At the time, the NCAA had a rule that a conference must have at least 12 teams in order to conduct a conference football game, and the SEC was making \$3 million per championship game (Whitehair, 2017). The Pac-10 Conference wanted to increase to 12 teams for this reason, so they acquired Utah from the Mountain West conference and poached Colorado from the Big 12, both of which made reasonable geographic sense.

Additionally, the Big Ten Conference extended an invitation to Nebraska, which they accepted.

Losing both Colorado and Nebraska meant the absolution of long-term rivalries against all Big 8 schools they had battled for decades. Nebraska had been a member of the Big 8 since 1907, and losing their football fanbase and reputation dealt a big blow to the Big 12. In 2010, Nebraska chancellor Harvey Perlman acknowledged that moving to the Big Ten would provide "stability that the Big 12 simply cannot offer (Associated Press, 2010)." He also detailed that in the

previous year, all Big Ten schools made double what Nebraska made from the Big 12, which can almost entirely be attributed to the Big Ten's in-house television network (Associated Press, 2010). It was an economic no-brainer for Nebraska, who is located on the outskirts of the Big Ten's geographical territory anyway.

As the Big 12 scrambled to re-gain its footing, rumors buzzed that the Pac 12 was recruiting the University of Texas and other schools to join their conference. Then-Big 12 Commissioner Dan Beebe formed a plan that promised the remaining 10 teams in the Big 12 a significant television revenue increase if they stayed put, which worked for the team being (Associated Press, 2010). Staying in the Big 12 also allowed Texas to form the Longhorn Network (LHN), their own television network, which would not have been possible had they joined the Pac-12, which already had their own network. However, LHN angered Texas A&M. They feared that LHN was an unfair ploy to steal all recruits from the state of Texas. A&M's frustration led them to accept an invitation to join the SEC. The SEC also extended an invitation to Missouri, as well, in order to maintain an even number of teams in the conference.

The Big 12 found themselves with a mere eight teams and quickly added an old SWC ally, Texas Christian University, from the Mountain West. They also took advantage of the Big East's dismantling and acquired West Virginia University, which is located a whopping 1,500 miles from Big 12 member Texas Tech.

b. Lack of Big 12 Football Championship Game

The Big 12 moved forward with just 10 members, but did not change their name, in an odd branding move. Per NCAA rules, they were no longer able to conduct the cash grab that is a conference football championship game. In 2014, the college football landscape shifted again. This time, it was to determine a national championship via a four-team playoff called the College Football Playoff (CFP). In its inaugural year, Big 12 members Baylor and TCU were very successful and ranked in the top-10 in the national rankings for most of the season. Baylor won the head-to-head matchup but lost the next week, and both Baylor and TCU finished the regular season with identical 11-1 records.

When selecting the four teams for the playoff, the CFP committee opted for the four other Power 5 champions, all of whom won their conference championship games and had records of 13-0 or 12-1.

To be left out of the first CFP, while all other Power 5 conferences were represented via their conference championship game winner, sent a signal to the country that Big 12 was not a contender. The following season, in another odd branding move, the Big 12 released a national promotional commercial with the slogan "The Big 12 Conference: One True Champion," which blatantly was not true.

c. Re-Implementation of Big 12 Football Championship Game

Prior to the 2017 season, the NCAA eliminated the rule requiring conferences to have at least 12 teams in order to hold a conference championship game, so the Big 12 reinstated the game in

hopes that the extra game would help ensure that the champion would be selected to participate in the CFP. On the surface, this may appear as a runaway success, as Oklahoma has won every Big 12 Football Championship Game since, and they've gone on to the CFP each year since, as well. However, because the Big 12 only has ten teams, the Big 12 plays a round-robin schedule, in which every team plays each other once, and the two teams with the best records go on to the championship game. Yet in all three seasons after the re-instatement of the Big 12 Championship Game, Oklahoma had already won the conference outright at the completion of the regular season. Playing an additional championship game only jeopardized Oklahoma's chances of making the playoff. Luckily the Big 12's questionable mantra of "One True Champion" rang true and Oklahoma won each Big 12 Championship Game, solidifying their spot in three consecutive CFPs. Had Oklahoma lost, the Big 12 almost certainly would have been snubbed each season.

IV. Criticisms against expansion and rebuttals in favor of adding additional schools

Bob Bowlsby, Big 12 Commissioner since 2012, has made it clear that he has no intention to expand the conference, despite sending invitations to 11 schools in 2016 (Thamel, 2016). Some schools were interested in joining four years ago, but the conference ultimately chose to stay at 10 teams. Part IV will detail the most widespread of these reasons and provide rebuttals.

a. Maintaining loyalty with cable TV partners

In 2016, it was said that the Big 12 chose to remain at 10 schools as to not frustrate their television partners and break existing contracts. However, in 2019, Bowlsby admitted that "a lot of the motivation for moving around leagues was derived from capture of cable households. That environment is now changing and it's much less of a motivation than it once was (Straka, 2019)."

If Bowlsby truly believe this, he no longer has valid logic to remain at 10 teams. Additionally, as previously mentioned, the Big 12 is the only Power 5 conference without their own television network. The Big 12 absolutely has leverage to launch their own network and provide an opportunity for more money and exposure when inviting teams to join the conference.

Bowlsby is not incorrect in asserting that the world of cable television is changing. A significant percentage of Big 12 athletic event viewership now takes place over streaming. The Big 12 has an opportunity to take advantage of a changing media atmosphere and be the first conference to add innovative streaming initiatives to their media plans.

b. Adding teams that provide competitive value

A major issue with the current iteration of the Big 12 is that many sports have been dominated by one program, winning a majority of recent conference championships and often becoming the sole representative on a national stage. There has been a concerningly little amount of parity among Big 12 conference championships in many sports. The following programs have won at least seven conference championships since 2010 (the parentheticals note the number of conference championships they have won in the past decade):

- Oklahoma Football (7)
- Baylor Women's Basketball (9)
- Kansas Men's Basketball (10)
- Oklahoma Softball (8)
- Oklahoma State Men's Cross Country (7)
- Iowa State Women's Cross Country (7)
- Texas Rowing (8)
- Oklahoma Men's Gymnastics (9)
- Oklahoma Women's Gymnastics (9)
- Texas Volleyball (7)
- Oklahoma State Wrestling (9)

(“List of Big 12 Conference champions,” n.d.)

When considering expansion, it is important to choose schools that will be competitive in many sports and have the potential to represent the conference on a larger stage. Though all of the programs listed above have represented the conference marvelously, there is little drama as to who will win Big 12 championships. Adding more competition can only help improve parity

A common fear is that the only teams not currently in Power 5 conferences aren't in a major conference for a reason. Critics say that any teams available for the Big 12 to add wouldn't bring any competitive value, and the teams that would be competitive have no reason to leave their current conferences. Conversely, the Big 12 should re-add schools who have recently transitioned to other Power 5 conferences. The teams suggested in Part VI provided a myriad competitive and financial value, as well as storied rivalries and national relevance.

c. Round robin/double-round robin schedules

In football, the Big 12 plays a round-robin schedule, in which each team plays each other during the regular season, and the home team alternates each season. In basketball, the Big 12 plays a double round-robin schedule, in which each team plays each other twice (once at home, once on the road) during the regular season. Athletes, fans, and postseason selection committees appreciate this schedule setup because it guarantees that every team plays one other. This is particularly key when comparing the Big 12 to other major conferences, such as the SEC, where teams in different divisions frequently go years without playing each other at all.

Bowlsby addressed this in 2020, arguing, “In the end, our board decided that we want to stay at 10 teams. We really like the double round-robin in basketball and the single round-robin in football. I think that's the right way to contest championships. You're never going to win our league by who you don't play (Marcello, 2020).”

Again, Bowlsby is not necessarily wrong in asserting that this is an ideal way to determine championships. He just does not consider that the round- and double round- robin schedules can be maintained with 12 teams.

If the Big 12 were to expand to 12 teams, each football team can add two additional conference games to maintain the round-robin and only play one non-conference game against a Power 5

team. In basketball, each Big 12 team can add four additional games, eliminate four non-conference games (including the mid-conference “Big 12/SEC Challenge” that currently occupies a would-be bye week for each team), and start conference play prior to winter break.

With the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and how it has impacted football and basketball scheduling for the 2020-2021 athletic season, it is reasonable to assume that college athletics may face a future with less non-conference competition in the regular season. Many conferences eliminated non-conference football games entirely, while others only allowed one. It will lessen travel and increase athlete safety if we play more geographically-confined conference games and less non-conference games in every sport.

V. The impact of Covid-19

It is impossible to discuss the future of the Big 12 Conference, and the future of college athletics in general, without mentioning the harrowing presence of COVID-19. Even if a preventative vaccine arrives tomorrow, college athletics will be wildly different because of the pandemic. We must re-consider nearly all aspects of scheduling and play with a mindset that protects both the health of student athletes as well as the budgets of athletic departments. The pandemic has affected only eight months so far, and these eight months will influence professional drafts, recruiting, rosters, and scholarship limits for years to come.

Robert Giovannetti, Texas Tech’s Senior Associate Athletics Director, is very concerned about pay cuts amidst this global pandemic. Fearing how Big 12 teams can tolerate another potential year playing in front of limited fans, he said, “College athletics may never be the same. We could maybe withstand what we’re withstanding now, but like we saw recently... Clemson cancelled their track and field program. Other schools are going to follow suit and drop programs. If we have to do that [have another academic year impacted by Covid], we’d lose 80 percent of our staff. That could be insurmountable. You’re looking at a seismic shift of what college athletics is about.”

All Big 12 schools are expected to report massive revenue losses this year, and the conference must take all necessary precautions to avoid further losses, including entire athletic programs, as Giovannetti mentioned. A simple way to do this is limit travel, which will be cheaper and protect the health of student athletes.

Making the conference more geographically based will save money, particularly for non-revenue sports who often travel long distances on weekdays. Travelling to closer schools will allow athletes and staff to take busses instead of planes – safer, cheaper, and better for the environment.

Giovannetti elaborates, “We’re looking at our basketball team bussing to some places this year that they traditionally would always just fly. Part of that is economics. We’ve taken about a 30 million dollar pay cut as an athletic department, and you have to make that up in some places. The other part of it is, look, we don’t want to be in an airport.”

Texas Tech Basketball obviously cannot rely on a bus for a 3,000 mile roundtrip to West Virginia, which is why it is imperative to consider re-aligning the Big 12 to only include schools that are within a reasonable proximity.

VI. Recommended Proposal

This proposal recommends the following Big 12 re-alignment, which will also allow the conference to expand from 10 schools to 12 schools:

Current Big 12 Schools (2020)	Proposed Schools*
Baylor	Arkansas
Iowa State	Baylor
Kansas	Iowa State
Kansas State	Kansas
Oklahoma	Kansas State
Oklahoma State	Nebraska
TCU	Oklahoma
Texas	Oklahoma State
Texas Tech	TCU
West Virginia	Texas
	Texas A&M
	Texas Tech

*The SEC would add Central Florida and Southern Florida to replace Arkansas and Texas A&M

*The Big Ten could trade either trade Nebraska for West Virginia, or add Cincinnati as a replacement

This proposed re-alignment would cut back on long travel for all teams while still allowing the conference to exist in six different states. This would provide a crucial, widespread footprint that would allow the conference to move forward with a Big 12 TV network (sorry, LHN). A television network, and/or an innovative streaming contract with a media network, is the only way to stay competitive with the other Power 5 conferences.

Having 12 teams would also allow the Big 12 to eliminate some early season, non-competitive conference games with programs located far away, and instead focus the schedule on an extended round robin format.

Lastly, by re-adding former SWC/Big 12 schools, the Big 12 will reignite storied rivalries, which will lead to greater competitive value, more interest from casual and diehard fans alike, increased ticket sales, and higher ratings. Frankly, it isn't as appealing for fans to watch Texas play West Virginia in football. The programs have only faced off nine times (University of Texas at Austin, 2020). The history isn't there. Meanwhile, Texas and Texas A&M have played football 118 times. In fact, last year, 97% of Texas students responded "Yes" when asked if they supported reviving the Texas-Texas A&M rivalry (Miller, 2019). Attendance for college sports has been decreasing nationwide, but reinstating major rivalries can help to revive it.

Considering fan demand, school budgets, athletes' safety, competition, TV networks, scheduling formats, and the legendary history of the Big 12 Conference in mind, it is a no-brainer to eliminate the distant West Virginia and reunite with Arkansas, Nebraska, and Texas A&M.

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