

Regionalized schedules on the rise?

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The Oklahoman

College football scheduling is more standard than John Rockefeller's oil. With few exceptions, each conference has a model.

The Big 12's three-game nonconference schedules consist of a fellow Power 5 school, a mid-major and a Division I-AA foe.

The Big Ten's three-game schedules are the same as the Big 12's, only with fewer I-AA opponents and more Mid-American Conference foes.

The Pac-12's three-game schedules are similar to the Big 12's and Big Ten's, only the Pac teams venture onto the road more often.

The SEC's four-game schedules are virtually the same as the Big 12's, except with an extra mid-major.

Only the ACC's four-game schedules are the least bit eclectic, with many schools signing up for a tougher journey, since their conference schedule is often lighter.

But a year ago, we saw movement in college football scheduling. Some schools stepped out in faith. Georgia, particularly, but also the likes of West Virginia and Alabama, in scheduling much tougher in the future.

And now we're living through the pandemic, which is shaking the foundation of collegiate athletics, with a financial crisis already hitting a variety of programs and promising to strike the rest.

Does that mean college football scheduling will change?

Will more regional games become the norm?

Will more marquee matchups result, since that's what television desires and some of the TV contracts come up for renewal in the next few years?

Will some schools drop football, making the cost of scheduling the remaining mid-majors skyrocket even more?

Will the College Football Playoff expand, which likely would make tougher schedules more appealing to influence the committee?

Too early to tell, of course.

But regionalization already was becoming more popular.



Oklahoma State running back LD Brown carries for a touchdown against Tulsa during the teams' 2017 game in Stillwater, Okla. ROB FERGUSON/USA TODAY SPORTS

North Texas has home-and-home series scheduled with Baylor, Texas Tech and Missouri, quite a coup for a Conference USA program.

And the OSU-Tulsa series, announced last year, extends from 2024 through 2031, alternating between Stillwater and Tulsa.

"We feel pretty good about where we are with our model," said OSU associate athletic director Chad Weiberg. "We've got a good regional matchup. There may be others that start to look at things like that."

Baylor, in addition to the North Texas

series, has a two-for-one series with Texas State starting next year, with the Bears playing in San Marcos in 2021.

Baylor has the same deal with Louisiana Tech starting this year, with the Bears playing in Ruston, Louisiana, in 2024.

Texas Tech, in addition to the North Texas series, finishes off a home-and-home series with Texas-El Paso this season.

TCU already has its Metroplex series with SMU.

West Virginia has scheduled regional games against Maryland, Virginia Tech

and Pittsburgh.

Arkansas, a notorious homebody, has scheduled road games at OSU, Tulsa and Memphis in the next seven years.

Clearly, there is a movement for more constrained budgets.

So the OSU-Tulsa series, which once was a staple but went largely dormant for almost 20 years, is part of a bigger trend.

"It's a good opponent," Weiberg said, "70 miles from our campus in Stillwater, so it's easier for our fans to go to games in Tulsa, easy for their fans to come to here. Much better on both of our travel budgets. For all of those reasons, it made more sense even before all this. Going to make even more sense after this."

Big 12 commissioner Bob Bowlsby said recently that it's too early to know the ramifications of the pandemic on future scheduling.

Weiberg agreed.

"It's hard at this point to predict what's going to happen in September, much less 5-10 years down the road," Weiberg said. "Obviously, there's going to be some factors that could be at play. What does the playoff picture look like? All those kinds of things."

Weiberg pointed out that contracts are made so far in advance – some series are scheduled as far out as 2035 – that it might take a few years to truly gauge the impact of the pandemic.

For now, OSU has future schedules that check all the boxes.

- A marquee opponent – Boise State in 2021 and 2024, Arizona State in 2022 and 2023, Arkansas in 2024 and 2027, Oregon in 2025-26, Arkansas again in 2032-33 and Nebraska in 2034-35.

- A mid-major in Tulsa (with Central Michigan and South Alabama filling the void in 2022 and 2023).

- And seven home games per season in '20, '21, '22, '23, '25 and '27. That was the counter to scheduling Tulsa; in the years the Cowboys play at Chapman Stadium, they will have just six home games.

But that was a decision the OSU administration believed was worth such a cost, since it provides scheduling security and regionalization, the latter more important than ever as we enter a new financial reality in college football.



"I wish that I was more involved sooner than I was. I wish that it didn't take me this long to get behind it in a meaningful way," Jets forward Blake Wheeler said. "But what I guess you can do is try to be better going forward. That's kind of been my position on it." PERRY NELSON/USA TODAY SPORTS

Wheeler has strong words on becoming better allies

Hemal Jhaveri For The Win
USA TODAY Network

There's something of a sea change happening in the NHL at the moment, as players who have been notoriously apolitical come forward to talk about issues of race and social injustice.

Over the past few days, many white players have shared statements on social media over the death of George Floyd. They've candidly admitted their shortcomings on issues of race and vowed to learn more. Black players, especially Evander Kane, have stepped up consistently in the wake of this tragedy and done the hard work of advocating for their sport to address racial and social inequality.

Still, there's a long way to go and if white NHL players are committed to real change, they'll read and learn from the words of Winnipeg Jets captain Blake Wheeler.

After posting his own thoughts about Floyd's killing on his Twitter feed, Wheeler spoke to reporters over Zoom on Tuesday afternoon and went more in depth on his commitment to

being a better ally to black communities.

"We have to. We have to be as involved in this as black athletes. It can't just be their fight. ... I look in the mirror about this before I look out at anyone else. I wish that I was more involved sooner than I was. I wish that it didn't take me this long to get behind it in a meaningful way," Wheeler said. "But what I guess you can do is try to be better going forward. That's kind of been my position on it."

"I want to be part of the change going forward. Whether that resonates with everyone, is clearly, I'm only one person, but I do have a small platform to try to promote this and promote change."

Wheeler's comments may or may not strike a chord with others, but make no mistake, this is a massive step forward in a league that, as little as two weeks ago, could barely muster up a response to Akim Aliu's essay about the racial abuse.

"I can only speak for myself," Wheeler said. "I haven't done a good enough job in the past."

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