

## COLLEGE ATHLETICS

# Conference realignment makes another seismic shift

BY JOHN MARSHALL

Associated Press

Conference realignment in college sports has been going on since 1984, when the Supreme Court invalidated the NCAA's national television contract for football.

The conference juggling has gone through ebbs and flows through the years since, from small schools bumping up to bigger leagues to power programs switching to other major conferences.

The latest move, Southern California and UCLA bolting the Pac-12 for the Big Ten, could be part of a tectonic shift. Not just because of the marquee schools involved, but because it happened at a time when the NCAA is looking to take a more decentralized approach to governing college athletics, handing more power to schools and conferences.

"You might think this is more seismic because it's involving wealthier schools — and arguably it is — but also it's seismic because of the underpinnings of the system, the foundations of the system, are being challenged at a time when the financial structure is exploding," Smith College economics professor Andrew Zimbalist said Friday. "It may have larger ramifications, but it is a process that's been ongoing."

The decisions by USC and UCLA to join the Big Ten in 2024 come



Serena Morones for The Oregonian/oregonlive, File

**Oregon State's Champ Flemings (2) goes up for the ball against Oregon's Verone McKinley III (23) as the Beavers visit the No. 11 Ducks in their annual college football rivalry game on Saturday, Nov. 27, 2021, at Autzen Stadium in Eugene.**

roughly a year after Texas and Oklahoma announced they were leaving the Big 12 for the Southeastern Conference.

While surprising, even to Pac-12 officials, the announcement Thursday, June 30 gives the Los Angeles schools stability and exposure in a shifting collegiate sports landscape.

"It's huge for our student athletes, just from a national exposure perspective," UCLA athletic director

Martin Jarmond said. "They're going to compete at the highest level in a major elite conference in different time zones. UCLA is always national, but now we have the ability for student athletes to showcase their talent across the country. That's exciting."

For all the other benefits, the bottom line to the defections is the bottom line.

The SEC has become a college football behemoth that distributed

\$54.6 million to each of its member schools in the 2021 fiscal year. The Big Ten has tried to keep up and had a per-school distribution of \$46.1 million last year.

The Pac-12 had the lowest distribution number among Power Five schools, paying its member institutions \$19.8 million in 2021.

At the core, it's all about the TV. The SEC has a \$3 billion deal with ESPN that's set to kick in in 2024 and the Big Ten is currently negotiating a massive media rights deal. The Pac-12 has floundered when it comes to TV as the conference's network has struggled to gain footing while many of its games are played late at night.

With costs to run college athletic programs have climbed in recent years, exacerbated by the pandemic, moving to an even bigger conference provides more financial stability. For the Big Ten, adding UCLA and USC gives the conference a foothold in the nation's second-largest media market.

"Money talks," said Tom McMullen, President and CEO of Lead1, which represents Football Bowl Subdivision athletic directors and programs. "I was on the board of regents when Maryland jumped in to the Big Ten and there were all kinds of arguments about it was academics and it was this and that, but ultimately it came down to money. I think that's the same case here."

The defections will create two mega conferences that will hold the majority of power and money, leaving the rest of leagues scrambling to keep up.

The tiering could stratify even more if the SEC and the Big Ten continue to expand, which could be the next step.

The future power structure could consist of two, maybe three mega conferences of up to 20 schools at the top, with the Power Five joining the Group of Five conferences in the tier below but still above the Football Championship Subdivision.

More schools in the Pac-12 and Big 12, along with the ACC, could look to bolt for more stability.

Conferences losing members likely will face two options: combining with another league to form a mega conference of their own or expand on the current membership. The Pac-12 it plans to take the expansion route, issuing a statement on Friday that said it is exploring all expansion options.

"You have exploding costs on one end and your revenue sources are being decimated, which is a tremendous pressure," Zimbalist said. "On the other hand, what do you do? Well, something pretty radical I think is going to have to happen."

Uncertainty is the only thing that's certain at this point.

# Branden Grace wins LIV Golf's first US tournament

## Event, which attracted protesters, was played near Portland

BY ANNE M. PETERSON

Associated Press

**NORTH PLAINS** — Branden Grace won LIV Golf's first stop on American soil, an event that drew critics and protesters alike because of the upstart series' funding by Saudi Arabia.

Grace closed with a 7-under 65 on Saturday, July 2 to finish at 13 under in the 54-hole tournament at Pumpkin Ridge Golf Club. The 34-year-old South African won \$4 million.

The fledgling LIV series, fronted by CEO Greg Norman and funded by Saudi Arabia's

sovereign wealth fund, aims to challenge the PGA Tour. It has lured some players, including Dustin Johnson, Brooks Koepka and Phil Mickelson, with the promise of big signing bonuses, hefty prize purses and fewer events.

Grace beat Mexico's Carlos Ortiz by two strokes.

"Played flawless golf, played really, really well when I needed to do something special and came up and managed to pull it out," Grace said. "But just what a great day, it was amazing to come here, this new format, this new everything is amazing and everybody here is having a blast."

Ortiz, ranked No. 119 in the world, shot a 69. Johnson (71) finished four back with Patrick Reed (67).

The 48-man field in Oregon competed for a \$20 million purse, with an additional

\$5 million prize fund for a team competition. There was no cut and even the last-place finisher earned a payday of \$120,000. Charl Schwartzel won the tour's inaugural event outside of London (and the team portion) and pocketed \$4.75 million.

The Four Aces team, led by Johnson, won the team competition at Pumpkin Ridge.

LIV Golf also announced Saturday that English player Pat Casey has joined the series. Casey, 44, has won three times on the PGA Tour and 15 times on the European Tour, and is ranked No. 26 in the world. He has not played a tournament round since March because of injuries.

The PGA Tour has responded to the upstart tour by suspending every active member who competed in the first LIV event. Those who

played in Oregon were also suspended unless they resign their tour memberships.

LIV Golf has been dogged by criticism since its inception, well before it came to tiny North Plains, about 20 miles west of downtown Portland.

The city's mayor and 10 fellow mayors from nearby communities wrote the course's Texas-based owner weeks ago, objecting that the event did not align with community values because of Saudi Arabia's human rights abuses, including the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi.

A group of families whose loved ones were killed by the terrorist attack on Sept. 11 came to North Plains on the tournament's opening day to protest the event. Fifteen of

the 19 hijackers on that day in 2001 were Saudi citizens. The group plans a more sizeable demonstration for the next stop at Bedminster in New Jersey.

U.S. Sen. Ron Wyden of Oregon called out the tour for "sportswashing" to detract from Saudi Arabia's human rights record. Wyden pointed to the 2016 hit-and-run death of 15-year-old Fallon Smart in Portland. A Saudi national was accused in the case but vanished before trial, and U.S. officials believe he was spirited out of the country with the help of the Saudi government. A protestor at the entrance on Friday held a sign that read "Fallon Smart, 2000-2016."

The players faced tough questions before the tourna-

ment about their involvement, with most reciting pat answers and maintaining that golf can be a "force for good." Others complained about the structure and grind of the PGA Tour.

LIV Golf touts that it's "golf, but louder." In addition to the simultaneous team competition, the tournaments feature shotgun starts, interactive fan activities and hip-hop blaring on the driving range.

Crowds on Saturday were better than Thursday and Friday. LIV Golf said it was a sell-out, but would not reveal the number of tickets sold.

The tour's next event is set for July 29-31 at Trump National Golf Club Bedminster. Casey is expected to join at that time.

## WIMBLEDON TENNIS

## Djokovic advances to quarterfinals

BY HOWARD FENDRICH

AP Tennis Writer

**WIMBLEDON, England** — Even knowing what an unusual Wimbledon this has been, what with so many unexpected results and new faces popping up, and so few top seeds — and major champions — remaining, surely Novak Djokovic would not lose to a wild-card entry making his Grand Slam debut, would he?

If it did not quite seem plausible, it did at least become vaguely possible a tad past 9:30 p.m. on Sunday night, July 3 under the closed roof at Centre Court, when 25-year-old Dutchman Tim van Rijthoven — ranking: 104th; lifetime tour-level victories: eight, all in the past month — had the temerity to smack a 133 mph ace past Djokovic and tie their fourth-round match at a set apiece.

All of nine minutes later, the time it took Djokovic to grab 12 of the next 15 points, and the next three games, both plausibility and possibility took a hike. Soon enough, the third set was his, and not much later, so was the fourth, and the match, a 6-2, 4-6, 6-1, 6-2 result that gave the tournament's No. 1 seed a 25th consecutive grass-court victory at the All England Club and a place in his 13th Wimbledon quarterfinal.

"Novak did his Novak thing," van Rijthoven said, "and played very, very well. He had all the answers."

Beforehand, van Rijthoven had said: "I'll go into that match thinking I can win." Might have still had that sense Sunday evening. If only briefly.

Eventually, the only true question was whether Djokovic would wrap this one up in time, because there is an

11 p.m. curfew. Running up against that would have required them to resume Monday, July 4.

"Whew. I am lucky," Djokovic said after closing the deal with 20 minutes to spare. "It's never really pleasant if you can't finish the match in the same day. Glad I did."

They did not begin playing until 8 p.m., in part due to a delay of roughly an hour at the start of this special afternoon — the first time in history the tournament's middle Sunday held scheduled play — while a ceremony was held to honor the 100 years of Centre Court.

Djokovic, who questioned after his victory why matches generally begin so late in the main stadium, was among the many past champions who took part, joking to the crowd when it was his turn to speak, "Gosh, I feel more nervous than when I'm playing."



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