

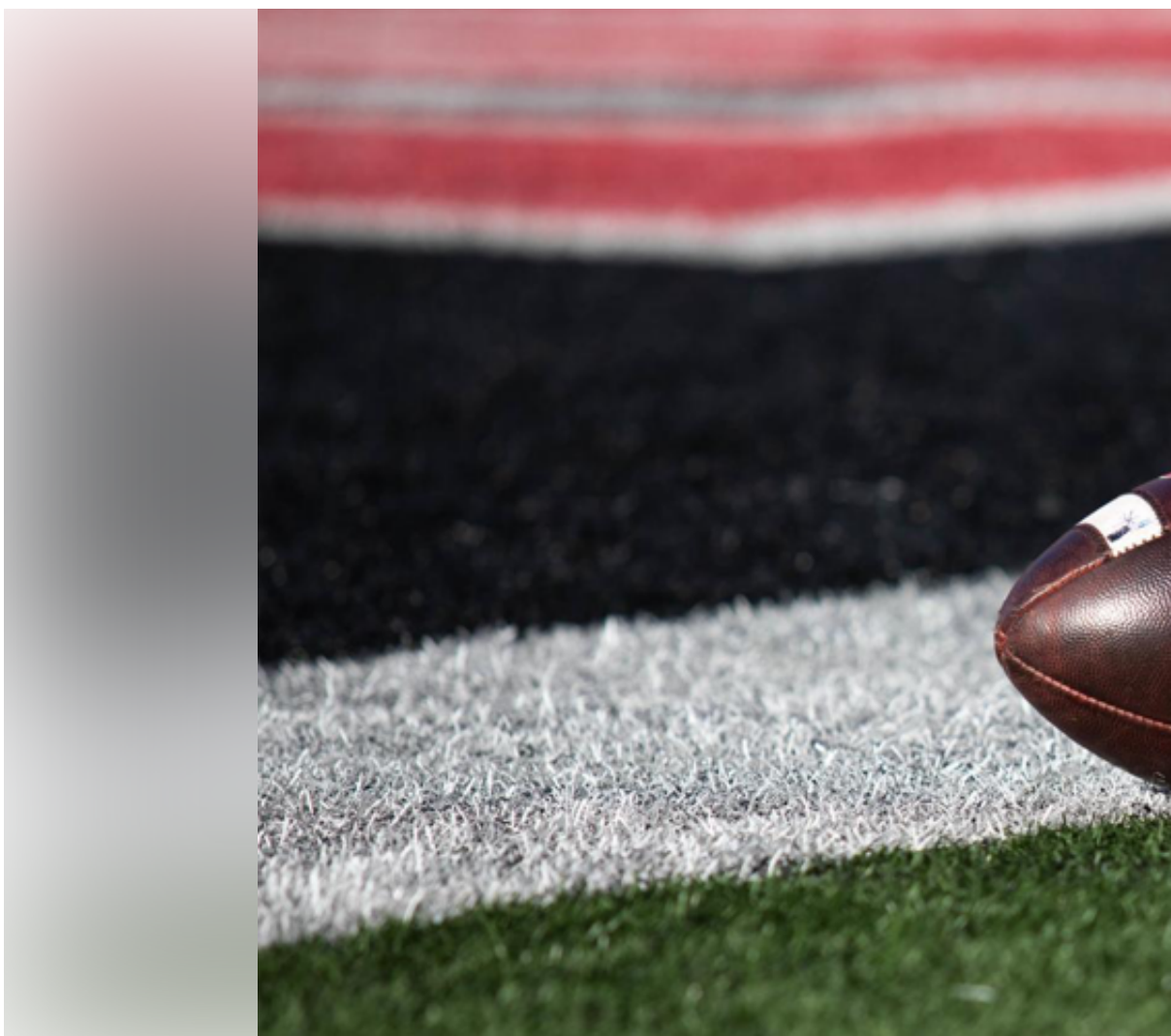
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WKU athletics

'CAROUSEL OF MADNESS': How WKU ended up staying in C-USA and what's ahead for the Hilltoppers

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A football is left in the end zone after Western Kentucky scored a touchdown during the Top Grace Ramey/photo@bgdailynews.com

Western Kentucky's conference home is set – for now.

After discussions in the Mid-American Conference of possible expansion that would have included the Hilltoppers, the MAC informed WKU on Wednesday it would remain at its current 12 members.

It means WKU will stay in a new-look Conference USA that lost nine of its current members and added four new ones starting in 2023.

“I know that there’s certainly some uncertainty among our fans with how much Conference USA has changed and I know a lot of them – I could tell – became increasingly excited about the opportunity to join the MAC, as were we, but this is just one chapter in the book. It’s not the final chapter in the book. There will be a lot of great reading ahead,” WKU director of athletics Todd Stewart said in an interview with the Daily News. “Stay with us and there will be a lot of exciting times coming up.”

Here’s how WKU ended up staying in C-USA.

THE FIRST DOMINOS TO FALL

On July 30, regents at Texas and Oklahoma unanimously voted to accept invitations to join the Southeastern Conference, and things started to snowball from there.

It meant the Big 12 would be short its two most prominent programs, and the conference came calling for others from the ranks below the Power Five level.

From there, the dominos fell.

It meant stepping into the American Athletic Conference – the most successful Group of Five league in recent years, highlighted by Cincinnati’s climb in the football rankings and hopes of becoming the first non-Power Five program to make the College Football Playoff.

The Big 12 on Sept. 12 announced it would add three programs from the AAC – Cincinnati, Houston and UCF – as well as independent BYU. That left the AAC with holes to fill, but there were questions of how many it would take from other Group of Five conferences to replace what was lost.

Instead of just replacing the three lost, the AAC went to C-USA – WKU's conference – and took six schools, causing a serious dent in the league.

“When (the Big 12) pulled from the American, well then you knew the American was going to backfill from somebody,” Stewart said. “They initially went after Mountain West Conference schools and that didn't work. I think the surprise for us was we fully expected at least two Conference USA schools to go and maybe four – didn't really expect six. That was a little high, but that's what they decided to do and that's what they did.”

C-USA: NO LONGER TOGETHER

A break in the realignment action came from the time the Big 12 added its newest members and the AAC filled its holes.

But Oct. 18 was the day it all changed for C-USA.

“That was kind of interesting because all the presidents of the 14 Conference USA schools were together in Dallas for their fall meetings,” Stewart said. “They were together on Sunday the 17th and on Monday the 18th – in the room together – and then the night of the 18th it's learned that six are leaving, including North Texas, and their president (Dr. Neal J. Smatresk) was the chair of the Conference USA executive committee. That's what happens on Oct. 18, and that therefore sets off a chain reaction and that's where we are now.”

The six, which were announced as future members of the AAC in an Oct. 21 release, were UAB, FAU, Charlotte, North Texas, Rice and UTSA.

The move sent C-USA from 14 member institutions to eight, and left those remaining wondering what would be left of the league.

“It was just a little bit ironic, I think, for everybody to be in the room together on a Sunday and a Monday, and on Monday night it’s learned that six are leaving. It was just tough timing,” Stewart said. “Really what it does is it just causes everybody to kind of wonder who they can trust. That’s not just in Conference USA – I think that’s throughout the industry right now. I think there’s real trust issues among a lot of people.”

The focus then turned to trying to keep the eight remaining C-USA members – WKU, Middle Tennessee, Louisiana Tech, FIU, UTEP, Southern Miss, Old Dominion and Marshall – together, Stewart says. WKU’s director of athletics says there was “a day- or two-day period” where there was confidence the group would stay together, and would add Liberty and FCS James Madison.

“If that had happened, that would’ve been a really strong 10-team league,” Stewart said. “I think you might be able to argue that 10-team league, if it had happened, would have been better than what the new American Conference would have been.”

But that’s not what happened.

On Oct. 26, the official announcement came that Southern Miss would be leaving for the Sun Belt, and Stewart says he thinks “that made Liberty and James Madison a little more cautious,” and caused a chain reaction of Old Dominion and later Marshall announcing moves to the Sun Belt as well.

“James Madison’s reluctance made Old Dominion probably start to look in ways they weren’t and that resulted then in three schools leaving for the Sun Belt,” Stewart said.

The announcement of the Monarchs joining the Sun Belt came a day after Southern Miss was announced, while Marshall was officially announced Oct. 30 by the league.

“Marshall really wanted to make Conference USA work – they really did,” Stewart said. “It just became a very different league for them, just like it’s become a very different league for us, and I think when they had that Sun Belt opportunity, it was kind of the known versus the unknown and they felt they had to do that. That left us with five of the original 14 and a very different looking conference.”

WHERE WAS WKU?

So why didn’t WKU just join the AAC or the Sun Belt like the other nine schools that left C-USA?

Well, quite simply, it wasn’t an option.

As C-USA as we knew it fell apart, fans were demanding answers. Stewart and the athletics department released a vague statement Oct. 19 following the departure of the first six programs, and WKU president Timothy Caboni at an Oct. 22 Board of Regents meeting said, “I know individuals in our community would like all the information that we have at hand, but that’s not really a helpful position to take when we’re in the midst of negotiations and conversations.”

Stewart said he and Caboni “talked to everybody we considered to be a decision-maker, and that involves people in multiple conferences, and everyone else does that too,” adding that conversations frequently happen

with people in conferences and schools throughout the year, especially with all the changes across collegiate athletics recently.

Stewart equates it to a city with an underground subway system.

“You’re out on ground level, it might be quiet and it might seem like nothing’s going on, but underneath the surface there’s a whole lot of things going on, and that’s really kind of what this has been like,” he said.

“It may seem quiet, it may seem like we’ve been quiet, it may seem like we haven’t been putting out information, but nothing can be further from the truth in terms of trying to correlate that to a lack of activity – it’s been relentless from our end in terms of engaging and talking to people.”

The AAC’s strategy of adding schools left WKU out of the equation, despite its success.

In the AAC’s statement, it made mention to the media markets it now possesses after its six additions. The AAC now has members in four of the top 10, seven of the top 25 and 12 of the top 51 Nielsen media markets, including four teams in Texas and two each in Florida and North Carolina – all of which provide excellent recruiting grounds as well.

“This is a strategic expansion that accomplishes a number of goals as we take the conference into its second decade,” AAC Commissioner Mike Aresco said in the release. “We are adding excellent institutions that are established in major cities and have invested in competing at the highest level.”

The Hilltoppers, entering the 2021-22 seasons, had won 32 total conference titles, which were eight more than the next-closest school.

“It’s frustrating because, in a weird way, I sort of feel like in our country now, a lot of times facts and logic don’t necessarily drive the decision making. I think that’s permeated college athletics now as well, in that a lot of decisions are made for reason other than the ones that would seem to be logical. One might think that over a seven-year period if you’re the winningest program across the board – we’ve had nine different sport programs win championships – and if you’re the winningest program in a conference, that would mean more than it does.

“Now, it means a lot. Sometimes people say it doesn’t mean anything. I would strongly disagree – it means a lot. Winning championships is great for your brand, it’s great for your alumni, it’s great for national exposure, but it has not been the driving force in conference expansion.”

Stewart points to Texas as an example.

“Texas is going to the Southeastern Conference, and since 2010 they're the sixth-winningest program in the Big 12 in football. If it was a blind resume and the Southeastern Conference was told you can have the sixth-winningest program in the Big 12 Conference, they would say no, but then you find out it’s Texas and they say yes,” he said. “I think that’s a little bit about what’s going on.

“I did have somebody that I respect a lot tell me that if everything about Western Kentucky was the same and you were in Nashville, you would be No. 1 on everybody’s list, but we’re not in Nashville and we’re not going to be in Nashville, and I think what we’ve got to continue to do is just focus on what we can control, be the best versions of ourselves every day that we can be and just continue to work with people and I think good things will happen.”

So why not set out on its own as an independent, at least in football with a different conference for other sports?

Well, that “wouldn’t work for us,” Stewart says.

While it may work for programs like Notre Dame and BYU, from a scheduling standpoint, “there’s no practical way for us to do that,” Stewart says. He also points to the College Football Playoff revenues – over \$1 million each year for the school – and other revenues that come in as part of being in a league.

BUILDING BACK C-USA

When North Texas announced it was leaving C-USA, Smatresk resigned his position as the Chair of the C-USA Board of Directors, and Caboni was moved into the position, after being appointed Vice Chair in June.

With C-USA going from 14 members to five – “I don’t think anybody would try to spin that and say that’s a good thing because it wasn’t,” Stewart says – the process began on rebuilding.

C-USA had to get to eight full-time members, and announced Nov. 5 it would add four new members – Jacksonville State and Sam Houston State from the FCS ranks, as well as Liberty and New Mexico State – and Stewart credits Caboni for much of that.

“It’s almost like a baseball analogy of the bases are loaded, it’s a 3-0 count on the batter and there’s nobody out and then you’re pulled out of the bullpen and they say, ‘OK, get us out of the inning.’ That’s really what he got thrown into at that point,” Stewart said.

“ ... I think that needs to be noted, but at the same time he was doing that, we had to be looking at what would we do if Conference USA didn’t work out the way we wanted it to, and during that time the Mid-American Conference – it became something that was an option and there was mutual interest there.”

CONFERENCE REALIGNMENT MACTION

After all the uncertainty surrounding WKU's place in conference realignment, the possibility of joining the MAC brought something extremely appealing – stability.

“It's like riding this carousel of madness right now, in terms of just all the movement and the constant change and knowing that there will be another wave of this,” Stewart said. “ ... The MAC would've enabled us to get off this carousel of madness and enjoy the rest of the theme park because there's a lot of great things about college athletics.”

Around the time C-USA was adding its four new members, officials within the MAC were discussing possible expansion, according to reports from multiple outlets, and that included a Nov. 5 meeting about possible expansion that included WKU and Middle Tennessee as options.

Stewart describes the process with the MAC as “very thorough,” and not rushing to a decision was actually more appealing to WKU – the league currently sits at 12 members who have been together since 1998, Stewart points out.

But besides stability, the MAC offered other benefits.

Currently, C-USA ranges from El Paso, Texas, to Norfolk, Va., down to Miami. The average distance to other C-USA schools is about 660 miles, but, on average, MAC schools were roughly 430 miles from WKU. The furthest MAC member from WKU would have been Buffalo at roughly 650 miles, and seven current teams in C-USA are over 700 miles away from WKU. With the losses of schools like UAB and Marshall from the conference schedule, plus the addition of schools like New Mexico State, the average travel in the new C-USA is even further.

As a whole, Stewart says the MAC “over the last five years, has performed across the board, top to bottom, better than Conference USA in football and men’s and women’s basketball.”

It also would’ve meant a better television deal, highlighted by mid-week “MAcTion” football games on ESPN.

Financially, the MAC is in line with WKU’s budget, which is the 13th-smallest of the 14 schools currently competing in C-USA. In other conferences, like the AAC, WKU would have had one of the smallest, if not the smallest, budgets.

Stewart believes there was “mutual agreement” across the board the MAC was comfortable moving to 14 schools with the addition of WKU and Middle Tennessee, but on Wednesday morning, Middle Tennessee announced it would be staying in C-USA.

“Over the past several weeks, as we have watched the landscape for Division I athletics evolve, MTSU has been proactive and diligent in evaluating our opportunities, always with the best interests of the University as the singular guiding principle,” Middle Tennessee president Sidney A. McPhee said in the statement. “We greatly appreciate the interest other conferences have shown in our athletics program and in our university, as they are a testament to the overall excellence of our institution, both athletically and academically. However, after careful consideration and due diligence, I am pleased to reaffirm our commitment to Conference USA.”

And then things changed.

“We got into the process a little bit and then all of a sudden one wasn’t interested as much, so I think that changed things from the standpoint of all of a sudden now they’re not adding an even number, they’re adding an

odd number, and 14 for scheduling purposes and divisional purposes is more appealing than 13 is," Stewart said. "That changing, going from two to one, which made it go from 14 to 13, really was a game changer, and I think were it not for that, I think that we both would be in the Mid-American Conference today."

WKU was still prepared to accept an invitation from the MAC if one had come, but Wednesday evening word came from the MAC that it would not be seeking expansion, with the caveat at the end of the release that "the Mid-American Conference will continue to monitor the membership landscape."

"Following analysis and evaluation by the membership, it has been determined our best interests are served in the Conference remaining at 12 full member institutions," MAC Commissioner Jon Steinbrecher said in the release. "For some time we have been examining the FBS landscape, and certainly our discussions have been more focused over the past several months as our Conference was contacted by other institutions. While a number of institutions have expressed interest, we never requested any institution to apply for membership nor did we have a formal or informal vote concerning any institutions."

The MAC's decision meant WKU would be staying in a new-look C-USA.

"If we had been invited to join the MAC, we would have said yes. If we're invited to join the MAC down the line, then I think the answer to that would probably be yes, because if it makes sense today, then I think it's safe to assume it would make sense down the line," Stewart said. "But all that being said, we're in Conference USA right now, Conference USA's been good to us for the seven-plus years we've been in it and that's what we have to focus on."

WHAT'S NEXT?

WKU remains in C-USA with current members Middle Tennessee, Louisiana Tech, UTEP and FIU, as well as incoming members Jacksonville State, Sam Houston State, Liberty and New Mexico State.

“Western Kentucky remains a tremendous fit culturally, geographically, academically and competitively,” C-USA Commissioner Judy MacLeod said in a statement following the MAC’s decision. “We look forward to their continued membership in Conference USA. At nine institutions strong, we are excited for our future and will continue to evaluate the national landscape moving forward.”

Stewart says, for now at least, he doesn’t believe C-USA will add more members, pointing to discussions about scheduling – with nine, you have eight conference games and in other sports, like basketball, you get 16 conference games – and revenue sharing.

“Right now in Conference USA, all the revenues that come in are shared 14 different ways because there are 14 members,” he says. “If you have nine, that’s less pieces of the pie so your piece of the pie is a bit bigger.”

An area many people look at is television deals. C-USA’s TV deal is divided through CBS Sports Network, Stadium and ESPN+, and brings in around \$400,000 per school annually. The current deal runs through 2023.

“There’s been frequent discussions about how it needs to improve that predated even all of this happening, and there is universal agreement on that. I think everybody agrees that we need a better TV deal,” Stewart said. “There’s a bit of an unknown because the membership has changed dramatically, so it’s hard to predict right now what that means for the future TV deal. I know there will be a huge emphasis on that.”

WKU will also receive some of the exit fees from the nine programs leaving C-USA, which it plans to directly put back into its programs. When a team leaves C-USA, it has to forego the revenues of the last two years it is in the league, and that is shared in part by those who remain.

Stewart is hopeful the four new programs in C-USA can bring their own strengths. He points to things like Liberty being “an FBS-ready program, and they have been for a long time,” with a “Power Five budget” and “outstanding facilities.” Sam Houston State is the defending FCS national champion and currently is No. 1 in the FCS rankings. Jacksonville State “has had good football,” and Stewart points to its win over Florida State this season, and “New Mexico State has had really good basketball.”

While it may take some time to get used to, Stewart is hopeful the fans will get behind WKU in its new, old conference.

“What we really need, is we need our fans to get behind us more than ever because it’s very easy to be a fan of a team when you’re winning and you’re in a great conference and everything is going well – that’s easy to be a fan,” he said. “When you really need your true fans are when there’s something they might not like or might be frustrated about. If they’re a true Western Kentucky fan, we need them more than ever now as we remain in the same league, but a very different league, and help us navigate this. Let’s navigate this together and we’ll all end up in a very special place.”

Even though nine teams left C-USA, there’s a possibility they could still appear on WKU’s schedules. Stewart said he’s had conversations with Marshall interim athletic director Jeff O’Malley and UAB director of athletics Mark Ingram about future nonconference matchups in multiple sports, for example.

So, for now, the “carousel of madness” that started with Texas and Oklahoma making the move to the SEC has stopped spinning.

But is it over for good?

“I think it’s going to keep spinning. I really do,” Stewart said. “I just think it may not be as much, it may not involve as many teams, but I don’t think it’s done.”

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