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WKU athletics Stewart: C-USA 'in a better place now than it was'

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Western Kentucky University Director of Athletics Todd Stewart speaks at the Softball Complex on Creason Street on Tuesday, Aug. 30, 2022. (Grace Ramey)

The present iteration of Conference USA is in its final month.

With current C-USA members Charlotte, Florida Atlantic, North Texas, Rice, UAB and UTSA all set to exit the league July 1 to join the American Athletic Conference and newcomers Jacksonville State, Liberty, New Mexico State and Sam Houston State all coming aboard that same day, the 2023-24 league schedule will look vastly different for Western Kentucky and the other remaining members.

This new-look C-USA is a nine-team league for next season with current members WKU, FIU, Louisiana Tech, MTSU and UTEP joined by the four newcomers. Dallas Baptist, a traditional baseball power which came on as an affiliate member in that sport only, also returns next year.

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Change comes again the following year, with Kennesaw State slated to join the conference on July 1, 2024, to bring C-USA back up to 10 schools.

C-USA membership has long been somewhat volatile, with the latest round of changes starting two years ago with the defections of Marshall, Old Dominion and Southern Miss to the Sun Belt Conference – all early exits that led to this past season’s non-division schedule in C-USA.

WKU seriously pursued its own possible departure from C-USA during that initial conference realignment in 2021, potentially in partnership with MTSU or even solo as prospective new members of the Mid-American Conference.

Ultimately, MTSU declined to move to the MAC and the conference opted to maintain its current membership and not expand.

“The best thing about the MAC was just stability,” WKU director of athletics Todd Stewart said. “I mean, that’s the one conference of the 10 FBS conferences that really has not been effected by realignment at all. Their membership today is essentially the same as it was in 1998 and no other league can say that. So when things were kind of fast and furious in the fall of ‘21, there was a lot of uncertainty in terms of who was leaving, who was coming in. You just didn’t want to be on the wrong side of the fence, so to speak, when that realignment wheel stopped spinning.”

Just which side of the fence – right or wrong – that WKU did end up on remains to be seen, but Stewart has seen C-USA take positive steps to address some of the concerns that led Western Kentucky to explore other conference options – namely, an improved TV deal and a long-desired

change in venue for the C-USA basketball tournaments from the Dallas Cowboys' multi-purpose training facility in Frisco, Texas, to Propst Arena in Huntsville, Ala., for the next two years.

“They had a better television arrangement than we did, but ours is better now,” Stewart said of the MAC. “I think their basketball tournament’s at the Cleveland Cavaliers arena – that’s a really nice setup. Now ours is changing, it’s going to Huntsville – which I think our fans will like a lot better from a proximity standpoint than Frisco. Although I think once you were at Frisco, those who went down there had a good time. It was a good setup, but it wasn’t an easy trip and it was certainly an unusual configuration in a football practice facility with basketball arenas constructed.

“The MAC had an NBA arena where they had their tournament, their football championship game is at the Detroit Lions’ stadium, so all those things just kind of were a sense of stability and professionalism that at that time was really appealing.”

The shift to Huntsville – a three-hour drive from Bowling Green, as opposed to the more than 10-hour trek to Frisco – provides a much more favorable venue for the eastern contingent of C-USA after six years at the Star in Texas.



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“This is much more of a traditional setup,” Stewart said. “It’s around a 7,000-seat arena in Huntsville, plenty of hotel options and I think for our fans just a very easy commute. It’s hard sometimes for people to commit to go somewhere for a whole week. I don’t think people are going to wake up in the morning and all of a sudden just decide to drive to Dallas. But I think now if they wake up in the morning and we’re in a championship game, it will be, ‘Well, we can get to Huntsville and come back and we

don't even have to spend the night.' The deeper we advance in the tournament, I think it will definitely help our turnout."

The new multi-year agreement with partners CBS Sports and ESPN starting in 2023-24 replaces C-USA's previous somewhat haphazard broadcast partnerships spanning several networks and streaming options. CBS Sports Network has tier one selection status for C-USA football (18 games annually) and men's basketball (18 games annually) over the length of the partnership, while also televising the football championship, men's basketball semifinal and championship games, the women's basketball championship game and baseball and softball championship games.

C-USA membership approved a linear television-friendly scheduling format for football that sees all October league matchups played on midweek evenings. The broadcast partners will share C-USA's October weeknight football games on linear television across CBS Sports Network, ESPN, ESPN2 or ESPNU.

WKU's non-traditional portion of the football schedule actually starts Sept. 28 with a Thursday night home matchup against MTSU at Houchens-Smith Stadium, then a Thursday night road game at Louisiana Tech (Oct. 5), a Tuesday road game at Jacksonville State (Oct. 17) before wrapping up with another Tuesday night matchup against Liberty (Oct. 24).

“It’s certainly different, nobody would deny that,” Stewart said. “I do think if you’re in a Group of Five conference and you’re only maintaining, then you’re falling behind. So you always have to look at new ways, different ways to do things if it makes sense. Certainly the mid-week football games are a different thing. I don’t think so much so on a Thursday night – I think Thursday night has kind of become an established college football night, we’ve previously played games on Thursday night. But the Tuesday and Wednesday games are a little bit different.

“To me, there’s a lot more positives than negatives ... again, going back to the exposure standpoint. If you think about it, being on TV anytime is a good thing. But if you’re on TV on a Saturday, there’s 50 other games over the course of a day that people have an option to watch. If you’re playing on a Tuesday or a Wednesday night, we are some of these nights the only college football game in the country going on. So if you want to watch college football, every sports bar in America is going to have the WKU game on. And on ESPN that night, we’re the only game that will have a highlight. Then all day the next day, we’re the only football game that will have highlights. So the value of that exposure will be enormous.”

Stewart said the goal is to make those mid-week games exciting and a unique experience for students and fans. A concert is planned for one of the home dates, with other options still under consideration. In terms of attendance,

Stewart said week-night games at WKU have traditionally drawn more students than Saturday day or night games regardless of opponent.

The new broadcast partnership will have a less dramatic effect on basketball and WKU's other sports including baseball, softball and volleyball. Under the new setup, it should simply be easier to find those game broadcasts for WKU fans.

"It was confusing, that's the feedback that I would hear," Stewart said. "Just because the outlet varied so much, it was just confusing. Now it literally will be CBS or ESPN, every single game that's on whether it's streamed or linear – that's where it will be."

As to where WKU might be in terms of conference affiliation beyond the next potential conference realignment, that as always remains uncertain.

"We'll focus on what we can control, and that's continuing to win at a high level," Stewart said. "That being said, I think you'd be naive if you didn't open your eyes and pay attention to what's out there. That's something we have always done and we'll continue to do. As everybody in the country does, we're having conversations which are normal conversations to see how everything unfolds."
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