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College Conferences Ponder Expansion, and Their Extinction

By [PETE THAMEL](#)
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With the 11 Football Bowl Subdivision conference commissioners gathering in Scottsdale, Ariz., on Tuesday for the annual [Bowl Championship Series](#) meetings, the prospect of significant change in the collegiate conference landscape is becoming increasingly likely.

The central player is the Big Ten, which, as [The Chicago Tribune reported](#) over the weekend, has moved up its timetable for expanding. Prominent conference and university officials met on Sunday in Washington to discuss the subject.

The scope of that expansion, along with [Notre Dame's](#) decision whether to keep its football independence, will determine just how much the landscape shifts in college sports. This comes on top of the likelihood of [a 96-team N.C.A.A. basketball tournament](#).

For universities, the talk is driven by a never-ending search for more revenue. For fans, a new alignment could mean not only the end of some longtime rivalries but also the creation of new annual matchups, some appealing and some not.

One thing is clear this week: the subject will dominate the B.C.S. meetings.

"I don't know what else we'd be talking about," said Louisville's athletic director, Tom Jurich, who will attend on behalf of the Big East.

Jake Crouthamel, Syracuse's former athletic director, articulated in a telephone interview Sunday night a dire future for the Big East. Crouthamel, who helped form the Big East as Syracuse's athletic director from 1978 to 2005, said he did not see the conference's surviving.

He predicted that Syracuse would be in a different conference within five years and that there would be "utter turmoil" in college sports.

"I've been thinking about this for quite a while," Crouthamel said. "I don't see a whole lot of alternatives for anyone. You only control what your conference has. You don't control what the Big Ten or the Pac-10 or the SEC does. What do you do? I don't know what you do."

The best chance for the Big East to survive, he said, would be if the Big Ten, with 11 teams, adds only Notre Dame.

That would increase the Big Ten to the 12 teams necessary to have a postseason championship game and increase the league's national profile.

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What it would not do is significantly increase the Big Ten's television footprint for its successful new network, which is really the driving force behind its proposed expansion.

That is why the Big Ten is toying with the idea of a 16-team league that could include colleges like Missouri, Rutgers, Syracuse, Pittsburgh and Connecticut. If that happens, Crouthamel predicted other conferences would catch up by adding teams.

The counterintuitive aspect of the Big Ten expansion talk is that it is not always the quality of the program, but the television market that it would deliver, that is the most important factor. Though probably not pining to watch Rutgers or Syracuse football, Big Ten officials like all the television sets in New Jersey and upstate New York.

Eventually, Crouthamel said he saw the Big Ten, the Atlantic Coast Conference, the Southeastern Conference and the Pacific-10 forming four 16-team superconferences and leaving the umbrella of the [N.C.A.A.](#) (Just imagine the fight between the SEC and the Pac-10 for Texas.) He said that those leagues would form their own basketball tournament to rival the N.C.A.A. tournament.

"If you look at the history of what's been going on for the last decade, I think it's leading in that direction," he said.

Like the Big East, the Big 12 is also vulnerable, but not as much because Texas does not appear a realistic candidate to go to the Big Ten. The Big 12 could afford to lose a program like Missouri. But in the Big East, which has eight teams that play football, the loss of multiple teams would be hard to overcome.

Jim Boeheim, the Syracuse men's basketball coach, did not share what he called Crouthamel's bleak outlook. Neither did John Marinatto, the Big East commissioner.

"Although I admire and respect Jake very much, he also predicted the Big East could not survive the challenges of 2005, and we are actually stronger today than we have been in our history," Marinatto said.

In the aftermath of [the A.C.C.'s plucking of Virginia Tech, Miami and Boston College](#) in 2003, the Big East put in place what would appear to be some prohibitive measures for conferences swiping universities. One is a \$5 million penalty for a university to leave. The other is a minimum 27-month waiting period — an eternity in college football — for a Big East university to join a new league.

But the financial bounty awaiting teams going to the Big Ten is more than double what they receive from the Big East now.

The estimated Big Ten payouts are more than \$20 million a team, compared with the Big East payouts of around \$7 million.

"I'd love to see the Big East stay intact as much as possible, as there's a lot of positives and it serves as a great home," Jurich said. "But if they start gobbling people up. ..."

The Big East built its reputation as a basketball power, but the recent talk has only highlighted how little basketball is considered in expansion.

Football, as the old saying goes, drives the bus in college athletic departments.

Boeheim protested the potential of Syracuse's moving to the A.C.C. seven years ago. Crouthamel said that Syracuse was invited and then uninvited after the Virginia governor stepped in to help [Virginia Tech](#) be invited.

Boeheim said that [Boston College's](#) move to the A.C.C. had not worked well for that college and said that Syracuse would be an odd fit in the Big Ten for basketball, much like Miami is in the A.C.C. and [Penn State](#) in the Big Ten. He did not necessarily disagree with Crouthamel's statement that Syracuse would be in a different league in five years, only predicting that he would be "off fishing" when it happened.

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"How that all works out down the road someday, I can't figure it out," he said.

Until the Big Ten makes a decision, few will be able to figure it out. Until then, the college sports world will remain in flux, braced for change.

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