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Irish Rethinking Football Independence

By PETE THAMEL Published: March 9, 2010

Calling the state of college sports the most unstable he has seen in 29 years, Notre Dame Athletic Director Jack Swarbrick said Tuesday that the Irish were considering giving up their football independence.



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Michael Conroy/Associated Press Notre Dame has long profited from its status as an independent in football, but the Fighting Irish have struggled to keep up competitively with the major conferences.

Although Swarbrick stressed that Notre Dame was "trying like hell" to keep its unique independence, he said the potential for "seismic change" in conference alignments was forcing him to spend 50 percent of his time making sure Notre Dame is prepared.

Swarbrick said that he and Notre Dame's president, the Rev. John I. Jenkins, have been discussing situations that could affect the university.

"I believe we're at a point right now where the changes could be relatively small or they could be seismic," Swarbrick said. "The landscape could look completely different. What I have to do along with Father Jenkins is try and figure out where those pieces are falling and how the landscape is changing."

Notre Dame is the only independent team with an affiliation with the Bowl Championship Series. Most of its other sports are members of the Big East.

Swarbrick said that the decision to look at alternatives, the most likely of which would be joining the Big Ten Conference, stemmed from external factors. He said that the Southeastern Conference and the Big Ten had separated themselves from the other four major conferences — the Pacific-10, Big 12, Big East and Atlantic Coast Conference — because of their lucrative television agreements.

"This is as unstable as I've ever seen it," Swarbrick said. "You add to that a change in N.C.A.A. leadership and the discussion of the expansion of the basketball tournament. Every factor that touches the business of collegiate athletics right now is potentially in flux."

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Whether the landscape of college sports will shift drastically or just simply evolve rests mostly on the Big Ten. The Pac-10 has announced that it is exploring expansion offers, but the Big Ten holds significantly more power because of its television network. If the Big Ten added only one team, and that team was Notre Dame, the shift in college sports would be minimal. But if the Big Ten, which already has 11 teams, were to expand to 14 or 16 members, it could create a radical shift in college sports alignments.

The Big East, which was raided by the A.C.C. in 2005, would be a target and could lose universities like Rutgers, Pittsburgh, Syracuse and West Virginia.

A report last week in The Chicago Tribune said that the Big Ten had hired an investment firm to study Pittsburgh, Rutgers, Syracuse, Missouri and Notre Dame. The study found that if the Big Ten decided to expand, the league's current members would be able to make more money.

"You each could invent a scenario that would force our hand," Swarbrick told a small group of reporters. "It's not hard to do. We just have to pay attention and stay on top of the game and talk to people."

Big East Commissioner John Marinatto said Tuesday in an interview at Madison Square Garden that his conference was always working to improve itself. He cited the creation of three bowl games and the fact that the league was studying its television options, including starting its own network.

"If creating a network is what we need to do in the next several years, we'll create a network," Marinatto said. "We're here today because of the leadership the conference had five years ago when the conference had dramatically changed. That leadership is still the same. We will not allow it to not be successful."

Notre Dame has a standing invitation to join the Big East's eight-team football league, but that is not likely. A more likely move would be for Notre Dame to join the Big Ten, which be financially comparable to the Irish's current television deal with [NBC](#) and also would drastically increase the value of the Big Ten's network.

NBC is paying Notre Dame an estimated \$15 million a year under its current deal, which runs through 2015.

"We've seen a lot of businesses in America change dramatically in the past five years," Swarbrick said. "The automotive industry and the airline industry couldn't look any different than it did five years ago. They are responding to the economic pressures, and college sports is doing the same thing."

The Big Ten's timetable for possible expansion could stretch well over a year. The Big East's television contract expires in 2012-13 and is considered undervalued because it was negotiated in the wake of the A.C.C. invasion, which lured away [Boston College](#), Miami and [Virginia Tech](#), and when much skepticism surrounded the football conference.

"It's all speculation," Marinatto said. "You envision numerous scenarios. You and I can come up with 144 iterations of what seismic change could be. But it's all based on speculation. So it's really not a fruitful exercise to go through. My job is to keep everyone grounded and to improve the conference and insulate it from changing."

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