

Mountain West seeks recognition

By SAMUEL MCKEWN
Senior staff writer

The new Mountain West Conference is a classic case of the big boys taking their ball and staying much, much closer to home — and making much, much more money doing it.

The members of the newly formed conference — Air Force, Brigham Young, Colorado State, New Mexico, Nevada-Las Vegas, San Diego State, Utah and Wyoming — broke away from the Western Athletic Conference in search of respect, competition and bigger bank accounts. And they did it all with less pain than it took to stay in the existing 16-team, 2,000-mile wide conglomerate.

Whatever traditions the WAC had were more or less glossed over when the league went to 16 teams. Rivalries seemed to disappear. Teams like Texas

El-Paso and San Jose State just weren't as strong as the others, and there was still that costly and time-consuming trip to doormat Hawaii that no one wanted to make.

Hence, the new league was born, and it promises no red-eye flights and a still-reasonable pile of money to spread amongst eight fewer teams.

Now the new league is working to gain respect, which some Mountain West coaches feel they already possess.

"For us to get too frantic over respect would be wrong," San Diego State Coach Ted Tollner said. "You have to measure the strength of the eight schools by what they've done in the past."

That might be more than some think. Six of the eight teams have winning percentages above .500 in the 1990s. BYU is annually ranked in the top 25 and went 14-1 in 1996. Last season, it was Air Force that went 12-1 and

whipped Washington 45-25 in the Oahu Bowl.

Still, Tollner concedes the respect given to major conferences has eluded the WAC and now the Mountain West. And to join them, Tollner said, the Aztecs have to beat them.

There's a healthy slate of upsets in the making for the Mountain West. BYU gets its chances against Virginia and Washington. SDSU travels to Southern California. CSU Coach Sonny Lubick points to these games, along with his team's in-state battle with Colorado, as early chances to establish Mountain West as a power.

"In terms of media and the public, those games would be a shot in the arm if we won them," Lubick said. "But then again, we might win a bunch of games and still not get too much respect."

Even without the respect, there's still bound to be more money, by way of a smaller travel budget and more attrac-

tive games, which should raise attendance throughout the conference.

"When we had 16 teams, I don't think anybody knew who the heck was who," Lubick said. "Now the Mountain West is the old WAC conference as you and I remember it. From a financial standpoint, it'll have a little larger impact at the gate."

Tollner said he expects a tougher conference to emerge with higher gate returns.

BYU is an annual favorite, and although they must replace their quarterback, the Falcons remain dangerous in the wingbone offense. San Diego State returns the most starters (15), while Utah boasts the best backfield. CSU and Wyoming could compete for a league crown, too.

"BYU is the favorite," Tollner said, "but I really think there's five teams that have a legitimate chance at winning this thing."

Big 12 Notebook

The Big 12 Conference will be represented on the 1999 U.S. Ryder Cup team by three alumni. Team captain Ben Crenshaw and Justin Leonard are former Texas Longhorns, while Jeff Maggert played for Texas A&M in his college days. The Ryder Cup will be played at The Country Club in Brookline, Mass., on Sept. 24-26.

Texas Head Coach Mack Brown will be facing one of his good friends and a former colleague in the ACC when his Longhorns play host to Mike O' Cain and North Carolina State on Aug. 28. Brown and O' Cain became good friends while Brown was the head coach at North Carolina.

Despite the reunion, Brown is wary of facing his old friend.

"It is just not something that I like to do," Brown said. "Mike will have them well prepared, and you can't forget that they beat Florida State last year."

The game will mark the first meeting ever between the two schools.

The Big 12 was represented by five teams in the preseason AP Top-25 Poll. Nebraska is ranked sixth, Texas A&M is No. 7, Colorado follows at 15, Texas at 17, and Kansas State is ranked 20th. Oklahoma St., Texas Tech and Missouri all received votes.

Four running backs from the Big 12 have been listed as candidates for the Doak Walker Award, given to the nation's best running back.

Dwayne Cherrington of Colorado, Darren Davis of Iowa State, Dante Hall of Texas A&M and Ricky Williams of Texas Tech all made the preseason cut. Davis, Hall and Williams all are returning 1,000-yard rushers. Ricky Williams of Texas won the award last year for the Longhorns.

Kansas will travel to South Bend, Ind., to face Notre Dame in the Eddie Robinson Football Classic on Aug. 28. Head Coach Terry Allen is optimistic going into the match-up.

"Obviously we are going up and running pretty quickly with the Notre Dame game come Saturday," Allen said. "We feel that it is a great opportunity for us and great preparation for games to come for us in the Big 12."

Texas sophomore golfer David Gossett won the U.S. Amateur on Sunday. Gossett beat Sung Yoon Kim at Pebble Beach, securing a spot on the U.S. Walker Cup team. Gossett was the 1999 Big 12 Champion.

Big 12 football schedule: (all p.m. unless noted)

Saturday, Aug. 28
Kansas at Notre Dame, 2:30
North Carolina St. at Texas, 7:30

Thursday, Sept. 2
Indiana State at Iowa State, 7 p.m.

Saturday, Sept. 4
Baylor at Boston College, 11 a.m.
Nebraska at Iowa, 11 a.m.
Stanford at Texas, 11 a.m.
UAB at Missouri, 2:30
Colorado vs. Colorado State, 5
Texas A&M vs. La. Tech, 7
SW Louisiana at Oklahoma State 7

Notebook compiled by staff reporter Joshua Camenzind.

Big 12 looks to replace proven running backs

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ing its leading rusher in Marlon Barnes. Cherrington carried the ball 103 times last season for 350 yards. The Buffaloes also return junior Damion Barton, who rushed for 195 yards a year ago. Coach Gary Barnett also will benefit from an experienced offensive line, which he calls "the great strength of the offense."

Nebraska will benefit from a year of turmoil at the running back position that enabled three players to gain starting experience. DeAngelo Evans, Correll Buckhalter and Dan Alexander all saw starting action for the Cornhuskers last fall.

"It is a real strong position for us," coach Frank Solich said. "We have three guys that are really coming on for us, along with Dahrnan Diedrick."

Oklahoma finds itself in the same predicament as Texas. Coach Bob Stoops enters his first year at Norman, Okla., with the task of

revamping an offense that lost 1,000-yard rusher De'Mond Parker a year ago. Seth Littrell is the leading returning rusher for the Sooners after racking up 205 yards last season.

"De'Mond was an excellent player here," Stoops said. "But we really feel that with the guys we have running the ball right now we will be fine."

Kansas returns junior David Winbush from a season just 26 yards shy of the 1,000-yard mark.

"We do have some running backs that will cause people to miss," Coach Terry Allen said. "The real concern though is in the offensive line with a couple of new starters."

"We are just extremely excited about David. He has gotten bigger and stronger, and we are just anxious to see what he can do."

Kansas State watched Eric Hickson leave Manhattan, Kan., and welcomed two talented backs to take his place. Frank Murphy and David Allen are both juniors with speed and great moves. Allen led the nation in return yardage per punt at 22.1 yards last season.

Oklahoma State Coach Bob Simmons need look no further than his bloodlines to find his leading rusher. Nathan Simmons, his son, is the Cowboys top returning rusher, with 937 yards a year ago.

Teamed with Tony Lindsay, this could prove to be one of the most explosive offensive duos in the league.

Texas A&M returns senior Dante Hall, who is looking to better his 1,024-yard effort of a year ago. Hall also has a knack for finding the endzone with eight touchdowns last year.

Iowa State back Darren Davis is looking to fill his brother's shoes in his senior season as well. Davis averaged 106 yards per game a year ago along with seven touchdowns on the ground.

Baylor and Coach Kevin Steele are looking to blow open some sort of a ground game after a season in which not one back recorded more than 360 yards rushing. Darrell Bush and Derek Lagway will be the main rushers for the Bears.

"I don't know what the focus of the offense was last year, and I was not involved in the play calling," Steele said.

"So it does not concern me that we did not have anyone rush over 400 yards last season. We have backs that are capable of running for a lot of yards if we block well."

Missouri lost Devin West, who rushed for 1,578 yards and 17 touchdowns a year ago. The Tigers' second-leading rusher was Corby Jones, who has also moved on after graduating. Senior Rob West will take over after gaining 165 yards last season on 32 carries.

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