Even the Big Ten can be too big

A Midwestern thing should stay that way
June 06, 2010, By Steve Chapman

In the Midwest, we don't have damp, blustery fall days: We have Big Ten weather. We don't have mammoth land-grant universities: We have Big Ten schools. You may insult our climate, our politicians or our Miss America contestants, but not the Big Ten.

Right now, people in high positions are talking about expanding the nation's oldest collegiate athletic conference. What they may overlook is that it's not just a sports association. It's an identity in a region that needs one.

New Englanders know where New England starts and ends. Southerners have been sticking together since before the Civil War. The residents of Seattle and the people of San Diego all have the Pacific Ocean in common.

But the Midwest is harder to define. Midwesterners have a vague sense of it, which is reflected in, and validated by, the historic reach of the Big Ten.

There are few things that create a sense of common cause in this part of the country. From Manhattan or Malibu, it may look like an unvarying mass of stolid, overall-wearing meatloaf eaters, but underneath our placid exterior, deep differences abound.

The inhabitants of Madison don't vote like the citizens of Terra Haute. The accents in northern Minnesota bear no resemblance to those heard in southern Illinois. Parts of Michigan get 20 feet of snow in a typical winter, while Cincinnati is lucky to get two.

You will not find many parents in Council Bluffs, Iowa, sending their children to receive a higher education in Columbus, Ohio. But on a fall afternoon, a lot of them can tell you whether Ohio State won or lost.

Other Americans want nothing more than to go to heaven. A Midwesterner is someone who would trade it for a trip to the Rose Bowl.

The advocates of conference realignment, however, are willing to blow up this comfortable, unifying framework. In pursuit of more television exposure and revenue, they are casting their eyes far beyond our region to identify potential new members.

Among the schools mentioned as possible additions are ones where most students couldn't find Minnesota on a map, such as Rutgers, Syracuse, Connecticut and Texas. Any of these additions would be as natural as the tea party nominating Nancy Pelosi. The first three belong to the Eastern Seaboard. The Big Ten is the heartland.

Texas? Why, of course. And while we're at it, let's grant statehood to Guam. Bringing in the Longhorns would be like releasing alligators in Duluth: not comfortable for either party.

The Big Ten already has some experience with trampling over its natural boundaries, from admitting Penn State in 1990. Nothing against the Nittany Lions, but it was a mistake.
Penn State is now and will always be the equivalent of your cousin's ex-husband who keeps on coming to the family reunion 20 years after the divorce. He's greeted politely then but forgotten any other time. But what good could have come from squeezing 11 schools into a conference with "Ten" in its name?

The battle to keep the Big Ten at 10 is lost, but a few rules should guide any expansion. If your students can harvest oysters without leaving the state, you are not a Big Ten school. If they can leave class and be standing in a cornfield within 20 minutes, you are.

Does summer smell like salt water? Out. Is it fragrant with cow manure? In. Mountains and beaches? Let's think about this. Flat vistas that go on longer than the Academy Awards telecast? Now we're talking.

The University of Missouri is located in a state that had slavery, which is not a Midwestern thing, but it stayed in the Union, which is. Lots of people in Iowa and Illinois already feel an affinity because they root for the St. Louis Cardinals and share the Mississippi River.

Nebraska and Iowa State? Their athletes wouldn't need cultural orientation classes to prepare for trips to West Lafayette. Notre Dame, as everyone else knows, is a Big Ten school that just refuses to accept its obvious destiny.

In the end, there is something inseparable between the conference and the region where it grew up, and we tinker with it at our peril. So my advice to university presidents: If your students are happy to be called Midwesterners, you belong in the Big Ten. If they would take it as an affront, look elsewhere.

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MU, Nebraska won't confirm deadline to pledge allegiance to Big 12

By MIKE DeARMOND

Missouri and Nebraska officials neither are confirming nor denying reports from Texas that the Tigers and Cornhuskers face a ultimatum to pledge allegiance to the Big 12 Conference or risk half the league taking a reported expected offer to join the Pacific-10 Conference.

"Right now there’s nothing else we can say than what we’ve told you before,” a University of Missouri news bureau spokesman said, speaking on behalf of MU Chancellor Brady Deaton. “We’re a proud member of the Big 12 Conference.”

That didn't answer the question of whether a deadline of next Friday — or possibly as late as June 15 — had been issued, as was reported by the Austin American-Statesman late Saturday.

"We have nothing further to add on the latest round of speculation," MU athletic director Mike Alden said.

When contacted about the issue, Don Walsworth, the former head of the MU Board of Curators, said he was unaware of any ultimatum but that he couldn’t say whether there was one.

According to the Lincoln Journal Star, Nebraska athletic director Tom Osborne said he was unaware of the supposed deadlines.

“I really don’t know what the final parameters are,” Osborne told the Nebraska newspaper. “I really can’t comment. The agreement when I left (the Big 12 meetings) Thursday was that (conference commissioner) Dan Beebe and (Texas president) William Powers would do the speaking.”

The Texas newspaper cited “two highly placed officials of two Big 12 schools” who said Nebraska was told at the Big 12 meetings in Kansas City that it has until 5 p.m. this Friday to disavow interest in joining the Big Ten Conference.

One official told The American-Statesman that deadline could be extended to June 15.

Missouri supposedly was given the same ultimatum.
Beebe on Friday told reporters that a process to determine conference loyalty was in place but that he was not going to reveal any details.

“It’s firm,” Beebe said, “but I’m not going to engage in what that is.”

OrangeBloods.com, a Rivals.com network site that is devoted to University of Texas athletics, is reporting that Nebraska is seen as critical to holding the Big 12 together, although it identified Nebraska, Missouri and Colorado as three schools that are threatening that unity in the face of speculation that cites the Pac-10 and Big Ten as being interested in picking off current Big 12 members.

The sentiment being leaked to Texas media sources is that Nebraska is the trigger to whether a reported six-team bolt to the Pac-10 might occur, the teams involved being Texas, Texas A&M, Texas Tech, Oklahoma, Oklahoma State and Colorado.

Since Colorado was named in the initial report, Baylor has been suggested in some quarters as a substitute for Colorado, heightening what many schools in the North believe is a prime concern: State of Texas control of a Big 12 Conference that was formed when the Big Eight Conference merged with Texas, Texas A&M, Texas Tech and Baylor.

Big Ten Commissioner Jim Delany and conference chancellors and presidents met Sunday in Park Ridge, Ill. Big Ten officials said the conference's s timeline on expansion moves, if any, could accelerate, but it also could remain unchanged.

The supposed deadline handed Nebraska and Missouri would seem to apply no pressure to a Big Ten that seems not — if sources at Nebraska and Missouri are to be believed — to have made an expansion offer to either Big 12 school at this point.
Big 12 hush-hush on realignment

Game plan confidential, Beebe says.

By Dave Matter

Saturday, June 5, 2010

KANSAS CITY — The Big 12 Conference’s quest for self preservation has turned into a family car trip — and Dad just instituted the quiet game: First one to talk loses.

As Commissioner Dan Beebe explained yesterday at the conclusion of the Big 12 meetings in Kansas City, the conference is entering the summer in stealth mode. With conference realignment continuing to threaten the Big 12’s future, whatever game plan the league’s board of directors drew up during its final gathering yesterday will stay confidential, Beebe said.

The board has decided on a process to manage the alignment issue, but it will be handled privately, as will the undisclosed timetable established by the board, which does not meet again until October.

“The process that’s been set is firm,” Beebe said at the InterContinental hotel. “I’m not going to engage in what that is.

“I’m encouraged by the meetings that we’ve had. I’m encouraged by the process that has been set forth from the board. I understand your need to know what that is, but I’m not going to reveal that.”

Asked several times about the latest expansion bombshell — media reports that the Pac-10 Conference is prepared to invite half the Big 12 into its fold — Beebe was not surprised by the interest.

“I don’t blame those other conferences for looking at our institutions,” he said. “They’re valuable institutions with a lot of great history and tradition. ... But I think we have a compelling case about why these 12 should stay together.”

Beebe used the opportunity to question a 16-team league’s feasibility, citing travel costs and the academic impact longer road trips would have on athletes. Beebe said that he and Southeastern Conference Commissioner Mike Slive and Atlantic Coast Conference Commissioner John Swofford have discussed that 12-member conferences are the best model for college sports. Both the SEC and ACC also have 12 members.
"To tinker with it would be a risk," Beebe said.

Shortly after Beebe wrapped up the four-day session, Iowa State took the unconventional path of posting a letter on its website, signed by ISU President Gregory Geoffroy and Athletic Director Jamie Pollard, pledging its commitment to the Big 12.

"We are committed to our membership in the Big 12, and we are optimistic that the conference will remain intact. However, we also recognize that the long-term viability of the Big 12 Conference is not in our control — it is in the hands of just a few of our fellow member institutions," the letter read, likely referring to probable Big Ten targets Missouri and Nebraska, as well as Texas, the power broker in all realignment talks.

"Iowa State and several other members of the Big 12 Conference are especially vulnerable under some of the realignment scenarios currently circulating," the letter continued, "particularly one involving expansion of the Pac-10."

Meeting with reporters as Beebe spoke yesterday, Missouri Chancellor Brady Deaton shed little light on the tone of those discussions or MU’s role in the alignment talks.

"I’ve never had anything but optimism about the conference," he said. "It’s a continuing discussion that we’re engaged in."

As chairman of the Big 12 Board of Directors, Texas President Bill Powers was expected to address reporters Thursday and yesterday but skipped both media sessions. But Powers still managed to find his way into the news.

Through a public records request, The Columbus Dispatch discovered an e-mail sent by Ohio State President E. Gordon Gee to Big Ten Commissioner Jim Delany on April 20, saying Gee had spoken with Powers, "who would welcome a call to say they have a ‘Tech’ problem," the e-mail read, perhaps a reference to fellow Big 12 South member Texas Tech.

Gee also expressed urgency in the expansion process, telling Delany, The Dispatch reported, he was "of the mind that we control our destiny at the moment, but the window will soon close on us. Agility and swiftness of foot is our friend."

"We are fast-tracking it but need to know the $ and observe contracts," Delany wrote in a reply that readers have no doubt been trying to decipher the last two days. "Also need to make sure we leverage this to increase chances of hr additions. Finally double chess # of moving parts including not harming brand as we execute."

In less cryptic news, Beebe wrapped up the Big 12 meetings announcing the conference members will split a record $139 million in league-generated revenue for 2009-10, approximately $9 million more than the league made the previous year.

Also, the board granted permission for the Big 12 to negotiate with several cities to host future championship games, including a three-year run at Cowboys Stadium in Arlington, Texas, for
the football title game from 2011-13. The game was played there last fall for the first time and is scheduled to be there again this year.

The board also authorized the league to reach an agreement to keep the men’s and women’s basketball tournaments in Kansas City, with the men playing at the Sprint Center through 2014 and the women at Municipal Auditorium through 2013. Also, the baseball tournament will stay in Oklahoma City and the soccer tournament in San Antonio.

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DEAR READER

Big Ten e-mails odd for what they don't reveal

It's no surprise that there's a lot of interest out there surrounding the question of whether MU might join the ranks of the Big Ten. It's a move that could mean millions of dollars in new revenue for MU athletics and a host of new academic opportunities. But it's also a question that stirs the emotions of fans rapt by the traditions and rivalries of the Big 12 and its predecessors, the Big Eight and the Big Six.

Given the level of public interest, it's also no surprise that the news media is hot for the story. So hot, in fact, that it becomes tempting to set aside the usual journalistic standards and venture into the realm of conjecture, speculation and anonymous sources.

At your Missourian, we're resisting that urge. We like our reporting to be based in fact and on knowledgeable sources.

That's why Chris Canipe wrote a story exploring the reasons — mostly financial — why MU might be motivated to make the switch. It's why Dieter Kuntenbach wrote a piece examining whether MU would be a good fit for the Big Ten. It's why Dieter and Len Goldman penned another report that showed the move, in terms of athletic competition, probably would be a wash for the Tigers.

The quest for facts also drove the Missourian to use the Sunshine Law to get beyond idle speculation and to determine whether actual talks of any kind regarding a move to the Big 10 were going on behind the scenes. A few weeks ago, we asked for any and all written or electronic correspondence since Dec. 1 between or among MU's heavy hitters — MU System President Gary Forsee, MU Chancellor Brady Deaton, MU Provost Brian Foster and MU Athletics Director Mike Alden — that mentioned the Big Ten in any way. And for good measure, we tossed in a request for any correspondence between those folks and Big Ten Commissioner Jim Delany since Dec. 1.

Earlier this week, UM System Associate Vice President David Russell, the university's custodian of records, provided 29 pages of e-mails that matched our request. The documents are as interesting for what they don't contain as for what they do.

Is there any evidence of talks behind the scenes? No. Is there any written correspondence whatsoever between the MU/UM foursome and Delany? No. Is there any confirmation that Missouri has received an invitation, or even a hint of interest, from the Big Ten? No.

What the documents do show, however, is that Forsee, Deaton, Foster and Alden are at least as interested as you and I in the possibilities of a move to the Big Ten. Several e-mails show them forwarding news stories about the issue to one another. Others show Alden and the MU News Bureau trying to ensure everyone is on the same page about what to say when the media inquires, which essentially is nothing. Others show faculty and fans offering Alden their opinions.

Some favor the move. Most oppose it. One exchange has former UM System curator Woody Cozad seeking guidance from current curator Warren Erdman about what he should or shouldn't say.

The records — at least the batch we obtained this time — offer no blockbuster scoops, no smoking gun, no "gotcha" news leads. Still, we're happy we paid the $219 bill to get them. The Sunshine Law exists to help shed light on matters of public interest, even when the record is devoid of big headlines.

Take a look for yourself. The documents belong to you.

Scott Swafford