

Pac-12 Conference Football Media Day

Friday, July 21, 2023
Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

Commissioner George Kliavkoff

Merton Hanks

Mark Harlan

Commissioner Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: We now welcome Merton Hanks and Mark Harlan to join Commissioner Kliavkoff.

We'll take questions.

Q. In regards to let's say the Jimmy Kimmel Bowl, the Mountain West has dominated. Any thoughts to changing the seeding or adding an at-large to swing the game back in the favor of the Pac-12?

MERTON HANKS: I'll answer that question. The Mountain West sends their champion, and the Mountain West Conference, all congratulations to them in that respect. They've played well in that game.

We're certainly confident in our bowl seeding order to date, and whoever represents the Pac-12 in that game moving forward I feel very confident will put forward an excellent effort and get us back on the winning track.

Q. Mark, George was saying about how he was concerned at first by the narrative over the last year in the recruitment, recruiting. What have you seen from any impact that this narrative has caused over the last year? If you would like to engage in the narrative now, we're giving you this opportunity.

MARK HARLAN: I think two things come to mind for me. I think last year when there was a lot of drama why we were here, it was not remarkable, it was somewhat expected, but the kind of season that we had where our coaches and student-athletes just tuned it all out, as George I thought explained extremely well, we had one of the greatest seasons we've seen in ear league. I think that was a real sign that all the noise around doesn't matter because the coaches and student-athletes we have here.

As mentioned, our recruiting. Our recruiting really is at an all-time high across all our campuses. If you look at reality, reality is the narrative doesn't mean much, right? The narrative doesn't mean anything when it comes to our incredible athletes and coaches.

The athletic directors have been working hard with George and his team to get the off-the-field stuff accomplished, in the meantime really enjoying the success of all our student-athletes.

Q. Few of the other power conferences, despite expansion, have opted to stay at playing eight conference games during the regular season. Has there been any talks in the Pac-12 to moving potentially at eight or staying at nine conference games?

MERTON HANKS: We at the conference office work collaboratively with our athletic directors. We have a newly formed scheduling subcommittee of select athletic directors to address this particular issue. Quite frankly, we're in a place where we can really reshape how we move forward as a conference as far as the scheduling piece.

For us on the West Coast, going to eight games, quite frankly, from my personal opinion, is a little more difficult than our friends that are east of the Mississippi. There are just more institutions closer to those institutions, you're able to do a few more things.

We'll continue to look at that, whether it's going to eight, staying at nine. Whatever we do in that respect we want to do ultimately what's in the best interest of making sure that our institutions are properly positioned to going into a championship game in the CFP in that respect.

COMMISSIONER GEORGE KLIAVKOFF: If we choose to expand, we'll have to reevaluate, of course.

Q. Mark, over the last year the narrative about the corner schools, their impending departure, depending on who you listen to. You are one of the few athletic directors to come out publicly via social media and

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shoot down those speculations. Do you maintain the position that Utah is committed to this conference going forward?

MARK HARLAN: We are a proud member of this conference and look forward to its future success.

Q. There's recently been a change, one of the university's presidents. In general, could you talk about what the process is when a new president comes in, given the importance of the presidents in everything that you do. What is the process of bringing someone up to speed in that group?

COMMISSIONER GEORGE KLIAVKOFF: In normal times we would distribute to a new president a briefing book, a very substantive book that tells them everything about the conference. We schedule time, many hours, where our entire senior staff walks the new president through the conference, what we do and what each division and group does within the conference.

I would say just recently, this week, because we have a new president at the University of Oregon, we actually accelerated that process so that he would be ready to participate fully in the board meetings that we had this week and next week.

Q. Merton, are you pleased with the tiebreaker procedure you came up with? Is there looking to be modification? As you addressed about the number of conference games going forward, expansion, how that plays in, there is the possibility that the league could have 11 teams, which might mean 10 conference games in only a couple of years, which would also mean breaking a lot of contracts or changing contracts on relatively short notice. Where do things stand in that conversation and planning process?

MERTON HANKS: Let me make sure I heard you right. With respect to the tiebreaker piece, we'll have the same tiebreakers as previous years. Moving forward we're at 10 teams. Tiebreakers actually fit a 10-team conference perfectly in that respect. As Commissioner noted, any potential expansion, we will review all of our rules and bylaws in that respect.

Your second question?

Q. With the possibility of expansion, there is a possibility of an 11-team league, which might lead to 10 conference games. The ripple effect of that would lead to breaking of non-conference game contracts only a couple years from now. What is the conversation and planning process with league

members for that contingency, possibility?

MERTON HANKS: I'll follow the lead of my commissioner; that we'll keep internal deliberations in regard to our scheduling internal at this point. Certainly we will adjust accordingly in concert with our ADs and scheduling committee to answer those things at the appropriate time.

Q. Merton, do you have an update on officiating and the status of it after the officials that left the conference earlier this summer?

MERTON HANKS: We are excited. We have a wonderful group of officials. Moving forward I think this group, to address the elephant in the room, so to speak, we had a number of officials as independent contractors decide to take their opportunities elsewhere.

We took that opportunity, quite frankly, to reposition our great talent. We've had a number of quality officials that we've been looking for opportunities to promote and put them in positions to lead moving forward. We've been able to do that.

We've been working collaboratively with our athletic director group. We have a specific committee amongst athletic directors regarding the officiating piece. We've been in lockstep on what we need to do there. We're in great shape. Really looking forward to the season. For us, the season has begun in that respect, so we're excited about it.

Q. Seeing a team like Utah come into this conference from the Mountain West, and Mark you got here in 2018, but seeing a team like that come through, how encouraging is that when you're looking for potential expansion teams, not just in the Mountain West?

COMMISSIONER GEORGE KLIAVKOFF: It's really exciting when you find a team that can come in the conference and invest the way Utah invested and have the success they've had. What a blessing. It's terrific.

Q. Do you have any universities off the top of your head that are capable of employing a similar change?

COMMISSIONER GEORGE KLIAVKOFF: Yes.

Q. Mark, I know federal preemption is the ultimate goal for the NCAA. Failing that on a national level, have there been discussions among the conference members of unifying NIL laws across the states that are member institutions?

MARK HARLAN: I can certainly defer to the

commissioner. I know from my point of view, I think having a national standard would be ideal, right? Just in our conference footprint alone, there are some states restricted, where Utah is not, without a stay law. That's not a way to run competition.

At the same time I don't think any kind of national standard would hinder the ability to maximize NIL. So I just think it would be helpful to have that in place. I think there's been progress in that area.

At the same time, two years in, third year upcoming with NIL, it's been exciting to see so many Pac-12 athletes succeed in this space. As a matter of fact, I think it's the kind of cities that we have in this conference, the kind of support we have in this conference, I think it's contributed also to people wanting to stay in the footprint along with all the great institutions.

I do think a platform on a national standard would certainly help in many regards.

Q. Colorado and Deion Sanders' hire has garnered national attention. What kind of lucrative opportunities come with that that the conference is working on?

COMMISSIONER GEORGE KLIAVKOFF: I think that's better directed to Rick George who is in the back of the room, athletic director there.

I think they've seen incredible success in ticket sales, merchandise sales, new sponsors coming in. They've been able to elevate the program through that hire and pay back that investment.

I look across our entire league and how all of our teams are investing in football, particularly in the last couple of years. I was not expecting it to pay back dividends as quickly as it has.

We've seen the dividends come back starting last year. We'll see it again this year. But that investment is paying off for all of our schools.

Before we go, I want to ask Merton, what was it like to play with Deion Sanders? What is he like as a player?

MERTON HANKS: Congratulations to Colorado, our athletic director Rick George, in hiring him.

I call him a young man because he was my teammate in San Francisco, helped me win a ring with San Francisco in that respect.

Being able to watch him go about his craft every day as far

as striving for excellence, we are able to visit Colorado recently, sat down with Deion and his staff, you'll meet with Coach Kelly, the defensive coordinator at certain points today, you can see the quality of individuals that he's brought into the program.

Basically I call him a young man, a young man that basically has not failed at anything that he's done. He's always been the guy. So people who understand being the guy, there is a pressure that comes with being the guy that stays with you. He's been able to achieve all along the way, whether it's been as an athlete, as a coach, as a business individual.

I'm excited that he's in the Pac-12. He's going to raise the bar and, quite frankly, bring out the best in all of our coaches because you know you're competing against a winner on the other side. Make no mistake about that.

I'm excited. It's going to be a great season. Looking forward to it.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you all for your time.

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