

Pac-12 Football Championship

Game: USC v Utah

Thursday, December 1, 2022

Las Vegas, Nevada, USA

Allegiant Stadium

George Kliavkoff

Commissioner

Merton Hanks

Associate Commissioner, Football Operations

Press Conference



It turns out that we saw a considerable increase in Pac-12 football viewership across our three largest numbered partners. Compared to last year, our average fan viewership was up 18 percent or more on ABC, ESPN and Fox.

Turning to our Pac-12 Football Championship Game presented by 76, we are excited to announce today that we have reached agreement with the Raiders, the Las Vegas and Veteran Visitors Authority and MGM Resorts International to extend the hosting of our Football Championship Game at Allegiant Stadium through at least 2023.

I want to thank all of our Las Vegas partners for helping us elevate the Pac-12 Football Championship Game. Last year's inaugural event was a huge success for our fans and student-athletes and featured a near sellout crowd and incredible atmosphere to see Utah advance to their first-ever Rose Bowl.

Being in the entertainment capital of the world and in a state-of-the-art NFL stadium is great for the Pac-12, and we are pleased to extend our stay in Las Vegas.

Tomorrow's contest between USC and Utah promises to be a fantastic game. USC is playing to secure their playoff seeding, and Utah is playing for a potential return trip to the Rose Bowl. With USC's lone loss this season coming to Utah, there is everything to play for, and it should be a great culmination to the Pac-12 regular season.

For historic reference, Utah and USC have each played in three of the last seven Pac-12 football championship games but never against each other. We are also really pleased to announce today that tomorrow's first-ever match-up between USC and Utah in the championship game will be played before a sellout crowd with an expected attendance of more than 61,000.

As you all know, the Pac-12 led the way in advocating change for the NCAA rules when it comes to championship game qualification. The Pac-12 was the first among the Power Five to move away from a divisional conference

THE MODERATOR: Thank you for joining us for today's pre-Pac-12 Football Championship Game media videoconference with Pac-12 commissioner George Kliavkoff and executive associate commissioner of football operations Merton Hanks. The commissioner and Merton will make some brief opening remarks and then media members will have an opportunity to ask questions.

I will now turn it over to Commissioner Kliavkoff.

GEORGE KLIAVKOFF: Thank you, Andrew. I want to thank all the members of the media that have joined this 2022 pre-Pac-12 Football Championship Game media availability, and I want to thank Merton for joining me today and for his outstanding leadership of Pac-12 football operations. We decided in this era to do this availability via Zoom instead of on-site on the day of our championship game so that more media would be able to take part and ask questions and to ensure that the focus tomorrow is on what promises to be an incredibly exciting match-up between USC and Utah.

I want to start by focusing on this year's Pac-12 football season. Last year our conference embarked on a multiyear strategic plan to invest in football and return the Pac-12 to national prominence, CFP invitations, and National Championships.

While the conference did everything we could to set the stage for success, the actual work and investments happened on our campuses, and we can already see those investments starting to pay off.

Across the board, the Pac-12 had our best football performance in the CFP era, and in a few moments Merton is doing to detail some of their remarkable statistics this year, but I wanted to share some good news about ratings that came in just yesterday.



model to a qualification system where our two best teams as measured by conference record meet in our championship game.

This change was made in support of our goal to maximize CFP selections and ultimately win football championships. We are very pleased that the new format delivered a game of our two highest ranked teams this year, and we believe the new format will continue to pay dividends in years to come.

Earlier this morning, the CFP board announced that the CFP will be expanding to 12 teams beginning with the 2024 football season. The Pac-12 has been strongly in favor of CFP expansion and strongly in favor of early expansion, so we are thrilled with today's announcement. The additional access, including playoff home games, will generate even more excitement during the regular and postseason and take college football to even greater heights of popularity. It's a great day to be a college football fan.

Finally, before I turn it to Merton for his thoughts on our football season, I want to take a moment to recognize Stanford head football coach David Shaw, who announced this past Saturday that he would be stepping down as head coach after 12 seasons leading the Cardinal.

Coach Shaw has represented everything that we are proud of at the Pac-12. We are proud of his unwavering dedication to his student-athletes, his commitment to excellence on the field and in the classroom, his focus on the health and well-being of our student-athletes, and his incredible class, humility, humanity and leadership.

Coach Shaw leaves Stanford as the winningest head football coach in school history, with three trips to the Rose Bowl, including two Stanford wins, three Pac-12 football titles and four Pac-12 Head Coach of the Year honors on his resume. Coach Shaw is truly one of the great mentors and leaders in our sport, and we look forward to the next stage of his professional career.

I'm looking forward to answering your questions during the Q & A session of this call, but I first want to turn it over to my partner and friend Merton to brag on our football success this year.

MERTON HANKS: Thank you, Commissioner. I want to keep my comments brief, but I really wanted to first thank the media on this call for being with us today and for your support and promotion of Pac-12 football throughout the season. I also want to join the commissioner in acknowledging what an incredible coach and man David Shaw is. His great success on the field, his leadership,

and above all else, his selfless dedication to the student-athletes at Stanford, it truly is remarkable.

We're going to miss him. I'm personally going to miss him, having him in my meetings with the head coaches, but know he will always be part of the Pac-12 family and no doubt has great things ahead of him, and certainly I would be remiss in not mentioning his father Willie Shaw. The apple didn't fall far from the tree. Two great men. Really Stanford has been blessed with their presence as well as the Pac-12.

Turning to football, we're really excited about tomorrow night's match-up, which has much riding on a conference championship game as one could hope for. More broadly, let me add a few datapoints to the Commissioner's observations on our season, and they are considerable, and we are super proud of them.

Seven of our teams are bowl eligible, and those seven teams, they're combined for a 19-2 non-conference record. Those who follow the Pac-12 understood well over a year ago we had a tough non-conference slate and did not do very well, quite frankly. This year, we turned the tables, 19-2 non-conference. Tremendous record.

Pac-12 teams overall, an impressive 26-10 non-conference record, the most by the Pac-12 in the regular season since 2017.

Going into championship weekend, the Pac-12 leads the nation as the only conference with six teams in the CFP top 20.

When the commissioner and I sat down with our ADs, with our head coaches, with our institutions to talk about how we can bring Pac-12 football back to prominence, this is the type of thing that we are looking at. Making sure that we're well represented in the CFP, which we clearly are.

Despite being a smaller conference, especially in relation to our P5 brethren, we're the only conference with six teams that have nine or more wins. We have six teams with winning records against teams with winning records, the most of any conference, USC at 5-1, UCLA 4-2, Oregon 4-3, Utah 4-2, Washington 3-1 and Oregon State at 5-3. Can't emphasize how important that statistic is. We win versus winning teams, and that is an obvious fact for us.

The Pac-12 has five of the top-10 teams in scoring offense, again, the most of any conference. The Pac-12 has five of the top 10 teams in points per possession, almost the most of any conference. Again, we're going to score points and we're going to score them in bunches. Anybody watching



our games understands that.

USC is already in the top 4 and will undoubtedly be in the playoffs if they win tomorrow. Irrespective of the outcome, we expect to have at least two teams to be considered for New Year's Six bowls. We believe the strength of the conference, the positioning of our teams and CFP rankings really demand that type of outcome.

We have a Heisman Trophy candidate and some of the most talented football student-athletes in the country at the skill and other positions, many of whom will go on to successful NFL careers, and certainly it's been a strength of our conference over the years.

As an example, after last season, the 2021 NFL Draft saw two top-10 picks from the Pac-12 and a total of four Pac-12 players selected in the first round overall, the league's most since 2018.

What does that tell me and certainly our fan base? We don't have a talent issue. We've got great talent and we want to continue to attract the best and brightest student-athletes in that respect.

We're really pleased with how the football season has gone, which is a credit to our student-athletes, certainly once again our coaches and football programs, and a collaboration between our schools and conference when it comes to our football strategic plan and important initiatives like the change to the Football Championship Game qualification which the commissioner referenced.

I do have to stop here. Commissioner Kliavkoff should be absolutely congratulated. He's leading the charge in this area, and I dare say you will see other conferences mimic this approach.

Again, our goal is CFP selections and winning championships. But we will all continue to focus on the fundamentals that will help us build sustainable winning programs. With that, I'd be happy to take your questions.

Q. Just a question on the officiating. It comes up every year, what you guys are focused on this season, what you think you've done better, what you think can be done better maybe in the off-season to help make officiating less of a topic with Pac-12 fans.

GEORGE KLIAVKOFF: Maybe I'll start and then I'll hand it off to Merton for more detail. When we think about officiating, we think complaints about football officiating generally fall into two categories. One is judgment calls and the other is procedural mistakes.

Most of the complaints that we receive, you probably won't be surprised, are from fans who disagree with judgment calls, judgment calls where reasonable people can disagree are difficult because obviously they involve humans who can often see the same thing and come to different conclusions, and often our officials in the replay booth see angles that folks at the stadium or who are watching on television don't get to see.

I would say, if I had a vote, I personally would not have agreed with every judgment call in all of our games this year, but we have a process by which these calls are adjudicated in real time, and we stand by all the judgment calls that were made on the field and in the replay booth this year.

That said, we understand why fans are upset if a judgment call goes against their team, particularly when they happen late in the game or on crucial downs.

With respect to procedural mistakes, we had a few this year, and candidly, those are just unacceptable. For example, early in the season in one of our games, one of our crews lost count of downs. These kind of mistakes we're not going to stand for. They're inexcusable.

When these happen, crews are downgraded and they lose further work opportunities, but Merton and I are going to be spending considerable time in the off-season focusing on how to eliminate procedural errors. I'll turn it over to Merton if he has more to share on the details.

MERTON HANKS: Certainly, and thank you for the question. First, let me say this: The commissioner said it as succinctly as possible in that respect. Judgment calls, we certainly believe that we got the majority of those correct, and we will stand behind those.

The procedural issues, we simply can't have that, and we will be aggressive in fixing that. The VP of officiating, David Coleman, and I have termed it an aggressive plan to put in front of the commissioner for consideration on how we move forward from that.

I would take this group back to two years ago. This is my second full year, not even three full seasons. I came in during a COVID year so I've got two and a half seasons of football with the Pac-12 in that respect. We had a great year in my estimation a year ago this year in this area. We need to improve on the procedural piece.

We're going to be very much aggressive about fixing that. As I like to say, there's a difference between having a bad team as opposed to having a good team that had bad moments, and I think we've got good officials that had bad

moments, and we're going to help them eliminate and keep those moments to a minimum as far as procedural and other areas.

Q. George, first of all, Larry Scott often talked about what a stigma it was that the conference kept missing the playoff. USC here has a chance to end that this week or tomorrow, but also they're a school that's leaving the Pac-12. Can you describe what you think will be the impact or not impact for the conference if they do make it?

GEORGE KLIAVKOFF: Well, we're incredibly excited about the fact that USC has put themselves into position to make the CFP. We've been preaching for the year and a half that I've been at the conference about investing in football, and USC leaned into that, and they deserve everything that they're getting in return on that investment.

We're incredibly proud of USC and UCLA's performances this year. Both teams have just as much support from the Pac-12 as any of our other teams. Both teams are benefiting from the conference's strategic football plan, and as I said from the moment that USC and UCLA announced their decisions, our commitment to their student-athletes and to their alumni and to their students is unwavering.

For as long as they're part of the Pac-12, we stand behind them, and we support them.

USC's case for CFP selection I think has been strengthened by the overall strength of the Pac-12 this year. Merton went through some of those details and those associated numbers and quality wins.

Just to put it in perspective, we're rooting hard for UCLA's women's soccer team, who are in the Final Four of the College Cup and have their semifinal match tomorrow afternoon. Additionally, the USC's women's volleyball team is one of five Pac-12 teams in the conference bracket, and they also have a game tomorrow afternoon, and we'll be rooting for them.

These schools have been part of our conference for close to a century, and they remain part of our conference until they're not.

Q. In terms of the media rights deal, obviously a circumstance change with the Big 12 getting theirs done early. How confident are you that you'll be able to make a deal that will allow your schools to make as much or more revenue than the Big 12 schools?

GEORGE KLIAVKOFF: Yeah, I think the first thing I would say is we remain very bullish about the long-term future of

growth and success for the Pac-12, including our media rights deal. We boast some of the strongest school brands and markets in college athletics, even with out USC and UCLA, and we're now in the open market with our media rights, exploring a multitude of opportunities.

It's interesting, with the Big 12's announcement, at this time we're the only Power Five school in the open market with our media rights for the next eight years, and as a result we have significant interest from potential partners, both incumbents and new entrants.

We'll move expeditiously and negotiate those agreements, but there's no rush, particularly with the Big 12's announcement and waiting on the UC Regents meeting that will be coming up week after next, we're committed to taking the time to consider the best possible partnership outcomes in service of our member schools.

I would not expect an announcement on media rights from the conference the balance of this calendar year, but we'll be back at it next year and ready for an announcement, and we are bullish on where we're going to end up. Thanks for the question.

Q. George, if there's no rush to do a media rights deal, I wonder how you put that in perspective with recruiting because coaches go out one, two, three years in advance, what they're recruiting to. Coaches' security and their contracts, stuff like that, I wonder, January 1st, you'll be about a year and a half away from the 2024 season. Why is there no rush particularly right now?

GEORGE KLIAVKOFF: Yeah, I think if you think about what the natural course of doing a media rights deal looks like, we would have started to be in the market in the first quarter of next year. The announcements from UCLA and USC and the particular instability over the summer related to conference realignment led us to accelerate the process of getting through our exclusive negotiating periods with our existing media partners and getting to the open market.

Then I would say the instability concern is no longer there. Our 10 schools remain committed to each other. We understand what the market looks like. The UC Regents have not yet made their final decision.

We have had issues outside of our conference trying to dictate to us to slow the pace on the media rights conversation, but when we go back into the market in the new year, it will be consistent with when we would have gone into the market but for the UCLA and USC decision. So the timing is perfect. We're happy to be in the market at the beginning of next year, and we'll take our time and we'll



do great deals. I'm not worried about it.

Q. George, I'm curious, you've obviously been very supportive and pushing for the best interests of the Rose Bowl going forward in the College Football Playoff. A lot of publicity came in the last week about them being the last holdout in deciding to amend the contract to do early expansion. I'm curious from you, are you feeling good about where the Rose Bowl sits going forward? And were you nervous at any point that they weren't going to be able to get there?

GEORGE KLIAVKOFF: No, I was not nervous that they weren't going to be able to get there, and candidly I think we could have gotten there if we would have started these discussions in the framework they've been undertaking in the last month a year ago.

But yeah, listen, as I mentioned in my remarks, the Pac-12 has been a strong supporter of CFP expansion, and today's announcement is just great for college football fans. Before I'm a college football administrator or a college sports administrator, I'm a fan. This is just great, to go to 12 teams beginning in the '24 season. It's great news for our student-athletes, for the universities and for all of the fans across the country.

The additional access including those playoff home games I think will generate even more excitement during the regular season, great for our media rights, and postseason.

Listen, all of the issues behind the scenes about what it took to get the concessions that were necessary between the two parties, for all of the bowl games to be really happy where they sit in the mix, those were private conversations and should have happened in private. You go through the last couple of days of media reports, you can see who was on the record and who was off the record. That should tell you something about how those negotiations have been going.

I'm really, really happy with the outcome. The Rose Bowl has and will continue to be one of the great cornerstone traditions of college football. There's a reason they're called the "Granddaddy of Them All." We're going to continue our relationship with them into the host year 12 world, and I'm just happy that we're able to announce the expansion. I wish we could have done it a year ago. I wish we could have done the work before we made the announcement a year and a half ago, but the outcome is great and the outcome didn't change from what we originally wanted to do, which was to expand the College Football Playoffs and to expand it early.

Q. George, I was wondering, I asked Bill Hancock

earlier about the possibility of there being home playoff games for the quarterfinals in 2026, and he said in no uncertain terms that the door is open. They'll see in the next two years how this comes to be. What is your stance on that? Do you want home games to be in the quarterfinals for campus sites, as well, and what do you think the first two years of this expanded playoff will show us?

GEORGE KLIAVKOFF: Well, the format that has been approved and all of the hurdles have been cleared for years 11 and 12 are that the first-round games are going to be played at home sites with the higher seeded teams hosting lower seeded teams, and those four games will be played sometime in December.

The four quarterfinals are going to be played in four of the New Year's Six bowl games over New Year's weekend, and that was one of the hurdles that we needed to clear was making sure that all of those bowls could host those games and were willing to give up their existing contractual relationships to be able to host those quarterfinal games. Semifinal games in those two years will also be played in the New Year's Six bowls later in January, and then we're going to have the championship game later in January than it otherwise would have been. But that's the approved format, and that's what I expect for years 11 and 12.

Years 13 and beyond is wide open. As you all have reported on, there's been discussions about moving the regular season to a week earlier, starting in week zero and starting the playoffs earlier. All of that is up in the air, but we have several years to figure that out.

The focus of the last month or so of work has been making sure that we could expand the playoffs in years 11 and 12 consistent with the format that I just ran through.

Q. I know the conference has to take a neutral stance on tomorrow's game, but how important would it be for USC to make the playoffs?

GEORGE KLIAVKOFF: I think it's incredibly important that one of our teams makes the playoff. It's been one of our goals, and we've been building a multiyear football strategic plan to make that happen. That said, I don't have a rooting interest tomorrow. We love all of our teams, and we think there's a great opportunity for multiple of our teams to be in New Year's Six bowls.

We're taking a step forward compared to where we were a year ago, and we'll take a step forward again next year.

Q. Kind of following up on your answer earlier on the media rights, you talked about you're not in a hurry for



this, but for programs like Utah, for example, so many conversations out there about where they're going to stand in the new look of whatever this conference is going to look like. What do you think it's going to be for a program like Utah as you move forward here with these media rights and on into the future with this conference?

GEORGE KLIAVKOFF: I think Utah is one of the 10 members that are committed to each other past the next season, and they'll be part of our conference. As we talked about previously, at the right time we'll think about expanding our conference, but Utah is one of our core 10 members and they're going to benefit from the media rights deal that we'll be able to do in the new year.

Q. George, is there a worth either now or in the future to seek a grant of rights from the 10?

GEORGE KLIAVKOFF: Yeah, for us the process is we do a media rights deal first. We take that media rights deal to our membership. The membership grants us the rights to do that deal, so the deal is contingent on the grant of rights. After the grant of rights is done is when we'll start talking about possible expansion. That's kind of the sequencing of things. That's consistent with how it's always been done, and I think that's the right sequence.

We have already started the conversation with all of our 10 schools about that grant of rights. Documents have been circulated among the general counsels. We're ahead of that, so when the time comes we'll be ready. But we don't anticipate any issues there, but we have to get the media rights deal done first.

Appreciate the question.

Q. Commissioner, there are hundreds of radio stations in the Pac-12 footprint, and all of the discussions on media rights, at least publicly, have been about the video and the streaming. Radio stations on the West Coast have easier access to SEC, Big 12 and ACC syndicated games than they do Pac-12 games in our own footprint. What is going to be done to address this and make Pac-12 content like radio calls of games on a syndicated level available to more stations across our footprint?

GEORGE KLIAVKOFF: Yeah, the radio rights are part of the package that we're going to be selling as part of our media rights. We have a list of interested buyers for those radio rights the same way we have a list related to the video rights. We're I think for the first time thinking about a third category of data rights, and we're going to be thinking about all three of those categories of our media rights

separately and selling them separately, and it'll all be part of the aggregated media rights bundle that we'll bring back to our membership. Thank you for asking about that because I think that's hugely important, and we're excited about the radio rights.

Q. Commissioner, there's been a lot of conversations out there with regards to the proliferation of gambling nationwide and conversations about conferences potentially pooling that to go with gambling companies, especially when it comes to injury reports. Have there been any conversations between the member schools about potentially going to more of an NFL model where they actually have to report on injury statuses throughout the week?

GEORGE KLIAVKOFF: Yeah, I think when we think about sports gaming, we think about it in two different issues. One is aggregation of data for sale to sports betting companies, and as you know, we're the first Power Five conference to do a deal. We did it last year to aggregate our data rights. We have not yet sold those to sports betting companies, but I anticipate that that might be part of our next media rights deal, thinking about how we sell those data rights, and we've done the kind of footwork over the last year to make sure we're in a position to do that, and we're excited about that.

The decision about how to approach the dissemination of information related to injuries is something that is on Merton's list to talk to our football coaches and our athletic directors in the off-season about. We'll have a consistent approach to that across the conference. I'm hoping that that approach will be replicated across the FBS conferences, not just the A5 conferences, so that we're all doing the same thing. I think that's the appropriate way to approach it.

That's going to be a hot topic of conversation in the off-season, but until we get to the off-season, we haven't really leaned into that conversation.

Anything you want to add, Merton?

MERTON HANKS: No, you hit it right on the head, Commissioner.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, Commissioner, thank you, Merton, and thank all the members of the media for joining today's videoconference. As I mentioned, we'll make sure that a recording is available for anyone to desires to listen to the recording. Thank you, and have a great rest of the day, and we all look forward to our Football Championship Game tomorrow night. Have a good day.



