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ACC adding Big East's Syracuse, Pitt

By Heather Dinich
ESPN.com

Pittsburgh and Syracuse, once flagship programs of the Big East, have been accepted as members of the Atlantic Coast Conference, extending the league's current membership to 14 schools, the ACC announced on Sunday morning.

The exact date for the move remains uncertain, as Big East bylaws require schools to pay a \$5 million exit fee and give 27 months notice before leaving. ACC commissioner John Swofford said the league "fully respects" the bylaws of the Big East, but Pitt chancellor Mark Nordenberg said the Big East provides options for withdrawal.

Woj.: Loyalty on brink of extinction



With Pitt and Syracuse moving to the ACC, loyalty, as it relates to conference realignment, is on the brink of extinction, writes Gene Wojciechowski. [Story](#)

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"I would think that in the weeks ahead everyone will be looking at the transition period and trying to determine whether the 27-month notice period really serves everyone's best interest or whether there should be some modification to it," Nordenberg said. "It was important to us that commissioner Swofford made clear right from the start the ACC would be comfortable with waiting for that period of time if that is the way that things unfold."

The ACC's preemptive move comes in the wake of uncertainty across the collegiate landscape, as Texas and Oklahoma are expected to meet on Monday to discuss their futures in the Big 12, and Texas A&M is still trying to work its way into the SEC.

And Connecticut is aggressively pursuing membership in the ACC to become its 15th or 16th member, a source with direct knowledge of UConn's situation told ESPN on Sunday.

There also have been reports linking Texas to the ACC, a move that could include Texas Tech. Other reports indicated another Big East team -- Rutgers -- could be under consideration by the ACC.

"UConn is a proud charter member of the Big East and we have taken a lead role in the league's success over the years," Connecticut president Susan Herbst said in a statement. "However, it is my responsibility as president that we stay in constant communication and be actively involved in discussions with our counterparts from around the country to ensure the successful long-term future of our university's athletic program."

Considering the questions that still remain throughout the rest of the BCS conferences, Swofford said the ACC has not ruled out increasing membership to 16 teams. Swofford declined to elaborate on what other schools have approached the conference about potential membership, but that he would likely continue talking to them, "probably, to some degree."

"We're very comfortable with this 14," Swofford said. "The only thing I would add to that is we are not philosophically opposed to 16. But for now we're very pleased with this 14. We think it's an excellent group."

It's the second time the ACC has gone through expansion, but this time around was much smoother and agreeable for the teams involved. Virginia Tech and Miami joined the ACC in July 2004, and Boston College joined a year later.

"I think it has to do with the fact that simply put, everybody was on the same page as to what's best for our conference going forward and everybody was on the same page in terms of these two institutions and what terrific additions they would be to the ACC in multiple ways," Swofford said, "and the fact that quite frankly, we've got a much better process right now than we had before. From an internal standpoint, it worked absolutely beautifully and that's a credit to the people around the table."

Coach K Weighs In



Hall of Fame Duke coach Mike Krzyzewski told ESPN.com's Andy Katz that adding Pittsburgh and Syracuse to the ACC would be ['a coup' for the conference](#).

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Swofford said the ACC tweaked the bylaws that pertain to expansion to make it "less cumbersome" than it was the first time around. The conference also formed a "444" committee about a year and a half ago, which is comprised of four university presidents, four athletic directors, and four faculty representatives.

Swofford said the conference has been quietly surveying the collegiate landscape since that committee was formed, but it wasn't until this week that league officials decided to expand. The 444 committee met this past Tuesday, followed by the annual meeting of presidents on Tuesday night that ran through Wednesday.

"We just felt that right now this was in our best interest," Swofford said. "I don't think it's really a reaction to that, although in a subtle way, when you look over the past year or so and see the movement with the Pac-12 that could potentially have gone further, the Big Ten expanded, the SEC expanding, that

all comes into play -- not necessarily in a measurable kind of way, but our interest is always about what's best for us."

The invitations came after Pittsburgh and Syracuse submitted letters of application to join the league, the ACC said.

"The Big East has been Pitt's conference home for nearly 30 years. It has been a good home that we will leave with many fond memories and many strong friendships," Nordenberg said. "All of us are committed to working with (Big East commissioner John Marinatto) to make this a smooth transition."

Saying the league was excited about adding to its "northern tier," Florida State president Eric Barron confirmed to The Associated Press on Saturday that the ACC had received the application letters from Pitt and Syracuse.

He said 11 of 12 league presidents attended a meeting in Greensboro, N.C., last Tuesday, with the other participating by phone. During the meeting, they unanimously approved raising the exit fee to \$20 million -- up from \$12 million to \$14 million -- for any member leaving the conference, a maneuver seemingly designed to keep the remaining ACC schools in the fold.

Swofford said "double-digit numbers of schools" recently expressed interest in possibly joining the ACC, but declined to identify them. When asked if any other Big East members could be targets for further expansion -- published reports indicate Connecticut and Rutgers could be under consideration -- Swofford said "I don't think it would be appropriate for me to go there."

The moves also raise the possibility that the ACC basketball tournament could add to its rotation Madison Square Garden, the longtime site of the Big East's tournament. Atlanta is hosting the tournament this season before it is scheduled to return to Greensboro, N.C., from 2013-15.

"I don't think there's any question that taking a look at New York and Madison Square Garden would be very appealing for Atlantic Coast Conference basketball fans -- and even moreso now with even more teams in closer proximity," Swofford said. "With that being the media center of the world, so to speak, we'd probably be remiss if we didn't think of it in those terms."

The latest transitions are sure to create even more bad blood between two conferences that became embroiled in a nasty lawsuit the last time the ACC expanded by adding schools from the Big East. A multibillion dollar settlement reached in 2005 included the scheduling of nine interconference football games.

"I think we certainly expect that there will be collegial treatment," Syracuse chancellor and president Nancy Cantor said in a statement Sunday.

"We are pleased that Syracuse adds a New York City dimension to the ACC, a region in which we have built strong identity and affinity, and we look forward to bringing ACC games to the Big Apple," she said. "Overall, for Syracuse, this opportunity provides long-term conference stability in what is an uncertain, evolving, and rapidly shifting national landscape."

Pitt and Syracuse bring the number of programs making the Big East-to-ACC jump in the past decade to five, and Louisville athletic director Tom Jurich said the most recent moves were "kind of a shock to everybody."

St. John's coach Steve Lavin said in a statement he saw some realignment of the Big East as inevitable but believes the Red Storm "will continue to thrive as a college basketball program of distinction."

Among the questions that remain, there already has been speculation that West Virginia would be a target for the SEC to balance out that conference and grow to 14 members if and when Texas A&M finally joins.

Until now, the focus of this most recent round of realignment had centered on the Big 12. Oklahoma could be leaving for the Pac-12 and taking Oklahoma State with it. Texas has stated its desire to keep the Big 12 together, but the Pac-12 could be an option as well as football independence, a la Notre Dame, which competes in the Big East in all other sports.

While the addition of Syracuse and Pitt brings the ACC to 14 members, 16 might make more sense. Big Ten commissioner Jim Delany has said his league is set with 12, but could reconsider if other conferences make additions.

When the Big Ten was looking to expand last summer, there was plenty of speculation about Big East schools on the Big Ten's target list.

But the Big Ten added only Nebraska from the Big 12, and a few months later the Big East announced TCU from the Mountain West Conference was joining the league next year.

Complicating matters for the Big East, different numbers of its schools play football and basketball, and they often have different agendas. The nonfootball members -- which include Georgetown, Marquette and Villanova -- help make it one of the nation's strongest basketball conferences. The other football-playing members are West Virginia, Rutgers, Connecticut, Louisville, South Florida and Cincinnati.

Heather Dinich covers ACC football for ESPN.com. Information from The Associated Press was used in this report.
