



# Sports

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## COVER STORY

# Arkansas move to get ball rolling

If university  
joins SEC  
as expected,  
conferences  
might play  
musical chairs

By Erik Brady  
USA TODAY

Arkansas joined the Southwestern Conference as a charter member during World War I, back when the Ivy League dominated college football.

This week, 76 years later, Arkansas is ready to jump ship and play its football and other sports in the rival Southeastern Conference. Its board of

trustees seems certain to make that official Wednesday.

Sounds simple. Longtime member of one conference casts its lot with an enemy camp.

But this story is anything but simple.

That's because Arkansas' move might cause a domino effect across the country — a rash of colleges switching conferences in a complex matrix that has more to do with TV dollars than it does with geography or traditional rivalries.

"I'm not surprised," said Ken Haines, executive vice president of Raycom, which syndicates TV sports. "It may be the first of many dominoes we're going to see fall in the upcoming weeks and months."

The first domino was Penn State. In May, it joined the Big 10 Conference. But Penn State, though it is an Atlantic-10 Conference member in other sports, is a football independent — meaning its move to the Big 10 did not leave another conference short one key football school.

This one is different. Now the SWC is left with eight schools, all in Texas.

"You can't have a conference all in one state," said ESPN college football analyst Beano Cook. "Not unless it's a high school conference."

Cook thinks the SWC will try to lure Oklahoma from the Big Eight. He adds if that happens, Nebraska might enter the Big 10 (or, by then, the Big Dozen).

Where would that leave the Big Eight? "They'd be in trouble," said Cook. "Just like the SWC is in trouble now."

It could become a nationwide game of musical chairs — with schools scrambling for conference affiliations that mean the most TV money. And when the music stops, the weakest schools in existing conferences might find themselves left out in the cold.

Meanwhile, the last two options remain Brock. "I'd hate to see our conference break up after all these many years," he said. "It's ironic that the SEC would come take one of our valued institutions when we've had 'em (SEC schools as opponents) in 22 (Cotton Bowl) games."

The SWC has been bedeviled in recent seasons by a rash of NCAA probationary member schools. The only schools untouched by such scandal: Arkansas and Rice.

Blair said at least four land-grant schools in the SEC provide major research and doctoral programs for their states — as Arkansas does for its state. He added SEC schools frequently compete against Arkansas for faculty. "It's almost like the non-athletic benefits for this may be more important than anything athletic."

SEC Commissioner Roy Kramer had no comment. But SWC Commissioner Fred Jacoby had lots of them.

"It's not good news," he said. "Arkansas has been a valued member of the conference and we're sorry they are taking that position."

Jacoby said an Arkansas official told him last week the school would likely accept an invitation to join the SEC: "They called me to tell me that their decision is that they are gone with the board approval."

Jacoby said Arkansas likely would play in the SWC this fall because it is contractually obligated to do so. Jack Crowe, Arkansas' first-year football coach, said he expects to play an SEC schedule by 1992.

"We know who our opponents are in 1991," Crowe said in an interview with Houston TV station KRIV. "We know who our opponents are in 1990. After that, I don't know what's going to happen."

Neither does the SWC, which might call an "emergency meeting," Jacoby said, adding SWC officials are so scattered he isn't sure when one could be called. Still, the emergency for the SWC could get worse.

That's because the SEC might not be done raiding its neighbor. Arkansas' departure puts pressure on Texas and Texas A&M to declare their intentions. The SEC is reportedly interested in both schools because of their large radio and television markets.

All of that could have a devastating impact on the Cotton Bowl because the SWC champion is the bowl's host school.

"I hate to see the spotlight shifted down here after we cleared our hurdles with probation and the NCAA," said Brock. "The league was bouncing back again."

But the stain of probation might have a great deal to do with why Arkansas is prepared to leave the SWC after three-quarters of a century.

Arkansas President B. Alan Sugg said the board will meet in Fayetteville. Sugg added both he and Fayetteville campus chancellor Dan Ferritor would recommend at that meeting that the Razorbacks leave the SWC. And Jim Blair, the board's chairman, said he was leaning toward approval.

"(Cotton Bowl executive director) Jim Brock better get in a straitjacket," said ESPN's Cook, "before he jumps off the nearest bridge in Dallas."

That's because the Cotton Bowl's host team the last two seasons has been — surprise — the Arkansas Razorbacks.

What might the Cotton Bowl do now? "We could stay where we are, realign with another conference or become an open bowl," said Brock. "That decision would be made by our board of directors."