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### **A Powerful League Piles Up Its Advantages**

*By Brad Wolverton*

Birmingham, Ala.

On a quiet block in this sleepy Southern town sits an ordinary office building that, but for a few football helmets visible along a row of office windows, gives little hint of being the center of the college-sports universe.

But thanks to a \$3-billion television agreement that kicks in with the start of the college football season this week, that is exactly what the Southeastern Conference, headquartered here, has become.

The 15-year deal with CBS and ESPN, the richest in the history of college sports, guarantees each of the league's 12 athletics departments an average of nearly \$17-million a year, the equivalent of a major bowl payout. Add that to the tens of millions in guaranteed sponsorship revenue that SEC teams already generate, and ticket sales and private donations that, for many of the conference's programs, have seen little falloff during the economic slump, and it's no wonder this league seems to be separating from the pack among major conferences.

Even before the new TV contract, the Southeastern Conference was virtually minting money. Home to six of the country's 15 largest athletics budgets, and many of the highest-paid coaches, SEC teams increased their spending on sports by 36 percent over a recent four-year period, according to U.S. Education Department data.

Over the past decade, the SEC has been the rabbit in the race to build the nicest facilities, scored more top-20 finishes than any other conference in sports it plays, and smashed fund-raising records, giving it a leg up over other leagues in recruiting the best coaches and most talented players. (And for anyone who wants to dispute the conference's dominance, feel free to take up the case on one of dozens of blogs and Web sites where rabid SEC fans hang out.)

Not that the league is without detractors. The SEC's swagger—if it was a nation, conference officials like to say, its former and current athletes' Olympic medals would have placed it fourth in last summer's Beijing Games—has led critics to decry it as little more than a breeding ground for professional athletes. While its academic record is improving, the SEC still trails its peer conferences in several key measures.

And the league's heightened spending on a select group of sports—its departments sponsor an average of 20 sports, far fewer than many other universities do—has raised concerns that, to stay in the race, programs in competing conferences may have to streamline their own offerings.

"The SEC has been the catalyst for an escalation of spending in a select number of sports that I think ultimately is going to break the current model of Division I athletics," says Amy P. Perko, executive director of the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics, referring to the broad-based programs that many departments support.

The only way other conferences will be able to keep up, she and others fear, is by ramping up their spending on football and basketball and reducing opportunities in other sports. But with an average of one SEC athletics event scheduled to be televised nationally every day of the year for the next decade and a half, even that might not be enough.

#### **Recent Success**

Many factors have contributed to the league's rise to power, including the South's fast population growth, the lack of professional sports in most of the states where SEC teams play, and the conference's well-timed winning streak.

The SEC has a long history of success, but this may be its golden age. Last year the Southeastern Conference won national championships in five sports, and finished as runners-up in six others. Three straight national titles in football, and two of the past four NCAA championships in men's basketball, have given the SEC a Forrest Gump-like presence on the biggest stages.

The victories were piling up just as the league was renegotiating its media-rights package. Most people figured the SEC would blaze its own path, following the Big Ten Conference in creating a television network. But ESPN was hungry to hold on to SEC football, which it says some 77 million people watched last season.

When the league's commissioner, Michael L. Slive, one of the shrewdest negotiators in sports, laid out his list of demands, he was surprised when the powerful cable network came back with everything he wanted, and more. Last summer, just before the economy headed into free fall, ESPN agreed to pay the league \$2.25-billion to broadcast its games. With a few strokes of the pen, the Southeastern Conference became America's Conference.

"There is no downside to this deal," Mr. Slive told *The Chronicle* in July, during the league's preseason media gathering here. Instead of fronting start-up costs for a separate network, bickering with cable companies over distribution, and trying to sell advertising spots on its own, league officials can kick back in their La-Z-Boys and click between one of several ESPN networks that will televise an unheard-of number of games. During the first four days of this season alone, ESPN and its sister channels will broadcast seven SEC showdowns. ESPN also picked up the rights to syndicated league games, such as Tennessee-Western Kentucky, a David and Goliath match-up that, until now, would have never aired outside the region. But in a world where the SEC rules the airwaves, games like that will now be broadcast from coast to coast.

SEC universities hope the exposure will help them attract students who might otherwise not have considered their institutions. One thing is for sure: The league's additional reach is something that highly recruited athletes have already noticed.

"I felt the SEC was the strongest conference, and where I could get the most publicity," says Brent Benedict, a Florida football standout who committed to the University of Georgia in June. "We're going to be on TV the most, and that's part of what my decision came down to."

#### **A Damaged Reputation**

Until recently, such big television deals might not have been possible. While the league was well-known for its winning ways, it was also notorious for skirting the rules. Since the NCAA began keeping records, in 1953, Southeastern Conference teams have committed 49 major infractions, more than any league except the Big 12 Conference.

When Mr. Slive took over as commissioner, in 2002, nine SEC programs were either on NCAA probation or being investigated for purported violations, league officials say.

"You don't do yourself a lot of good if you're successful because you're cutting corners," says Gene A. Marsh, a professor of law at the University of Alabama, who served on the NCAA's Division I Committee on Infractions from 1999 to 2008. "People think less of you."

Mr. Slive, a lawyer who in the 1990s co-founded a private practice to help athletics departments stay off NCAA probation, pushed hard for the SEC to clean up its act. His goal was to have every program in the clear within five years, and he established a committee to put an end to the infighting that had led many SEC programs to rat out their rivals whenever they thought they had crossed the line.

"In our league the crucible of competition is so intense and hot, there is sometimes a tendency for people to be happy if somebody else gets hurt," Mr. Slive says. "What I try to sell to people is that we are inexorably tied to one another, and our success helps all of us, and the failure of one of us—even if you think it makes you better—makes you worse."

Although some SEC football coaches have yet to get that message—within months of being hired last year, Lane Kiffin, Tennessee's coach, had (incorrectly) accused Urban Meyer, Florida's coach, of violating recruiting rules—the finger-pointing seems to have calmed down, and the major violations have slowed.

Mr. Slive has helped change the recruiting culture, too, acting as an impartial judge in reviewing controversial initial-eligibility cases. With the blessing of the league's chancellors and presidents, he established a process for evaluating recruits whose academic backgrounds raise red flags. If he doesn't like what he sees, he has the power to rule a prospective player ineligible.

The conference won't say how many athletes it has denied eligibility, but the increased scrutiny has made a difference, says Todd Diacon, executive director for academic assessment for the University of Tennessee system, and the faculty athletics representative on the Knoxville campus.

"People have just backed off recruiting certain players," he says, "because they know they'd never get them past a review."

#### **Academic Challenges**

Academics have never been the Southeastern Conference's strongest suit. Just two SEC universities, Florida and Vanderbilt,

are members of the prestigious Association of American Universities. That is the fewest AAU members in any of the six Bowl Championship Series conferences (the Big Ten has the most, with 11).

Until recently, high-profile athletes in many SEC programs struggled in the classroom. Five years ago, when the NCAA introduced its Academic Progress Rate, which measures athletes' semester-by-semester performance, just 44 percent of all the SEC's baseball, football, and men's and women's basketball teams were meeting the NCAA's academic-eligibility requirements.

Since then the conference has made significant strides. Now 79 percent of the league's teams in those sports are meeting the NCAA mark. But measured against the other Bowl Championship conferences, the SEC still scores the lowest.

<b>Academic Strides</b>					
<p>The academic performance of Southeastern Conference athletes has improved markedly over the past five years in baseball, football, and men's and women's basketball, the sports with the most academic problems. But SEC teams still lag behind the other major conferences in those sports, according to an analysis of the NCAA's Academic Progress Rate reports. Below is the percentage of those teams in each conference that have met or exceeded the NCAA's minimum APR score of 925.</p>					
	<b>2005</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>2007</b>	<b>2008</b>	<b>2009</b>
Atlantic Coast Conference	81	90	92	96	96
Big East Conference	76	78	76	85	91
Big 12 Conference	41	54	61	78	87
Big Ten Conference	65	72	81	86	91
Pacific 10 Conference	38	62	72	77	92
Southeastern Conference	44	56	67	73	79
<p>SOURCE: National Collegiate Athletic Association; Chronicle reporting</p>					

One reason for that, some critics say, is because the Southeastern Conference—and Southern states in general—overemphasizes sports without investing adequately in education.

While SEC athletics budgets have increased as fast as any other

BCS conference over a recent four-year period, spending on instruction at SEC universities has not grown as quickly (see chart at bottom of page).

It's not like athletes don't get plenty of coddling. Southeastern Conference athletics departments spent more than \$11-million, or an average of more than \$1-million per institution, on tutoring and other academic services for athletes in 2007-8, according to a 2008 *Chronicle* survey. (Those numbers exclude the University of Georgia and Vanderbilt University, which did not provide that information.)

And the league has some of the fanciest academic facilities for athletes. Between 1997 and 2007, SEC athletics departments spent nearly \$64-million on academic centers, more than a third of the total money spent on those buildings in the six big conferences.

As spending on sports has grown at a much faster rate than spending on academics, some critics believe that SEC universities have their priorities out of whack.

Gordon Marino, a professor of philosophy at St. Olaf College, left his job there a few years ago to take a position at the University of Florida.

"I must have been extremely naïve to think that unparalleled sports success would translate into economically healthy academics," he wrote in the *St. Petersburg Times* after quitting and returning to St. Olaf. "The Gator Nation is like a third world country with the sports in clover and their academic programs in the weeds."

As chancellor of the University of Mississippi the past 14 years, Robert C. Khayat oversaw \$100-million in athletics-facility growth, or about a sixth of the university's capital spending. He acknowledges the difficulty of competing in a league where fans' high expectations drive the need for high-priced facilities and coaches.

"There's no question it is a major challenge to maintain a balance between academics and athletics," says Mr. Khayat, who retired in June. "It's easy to become so emotional about sports that you lose sight of where your focus should be."

#### **Lengthening Their Lead**

For now, the focus on many SEC campuses is using the increased television revenue to put some distance between themselves and their competition. That's an enviable position in this economy.

The University of Kentucky is considering plans to build a new basketball arena, baseball stadium, and track . The University of Georgia recently approved a \$40-million plan to renovate and expand its football stadium and athletics offices. And the University of Tennessee is in the midst of a \$200-million renovation of Neyland Stadium. Its fans are so excited about the forthcoming football season, they donated \$4-million last month—in two days.

And then there is Florida, which after nearly facing the death penalty for NCAA violations in the late 1980s has become the league's crown jewel.

After winning two of the past three national championships in football and the 2006 and 2007 NCAA men's basketball titles, the Gators' athletics budget will reach nearly \$90-million this year. Although Florida is suffering more than most states in this economic crisis, the orange-and-blue faithful handed over more than \$45-million in cash donations to the university's athletics department in 2007-8, the most given to any program in the country. So far, donations have held up through the downturn, says Jeremy Foley, the university's athletic director. The football team is ranked No. 1 in several preseason polls and has already sold out all seven home games.

All that helped Florida's athletics association, the nonprofit corporation that finances the program's 21 sports, give Mr. Meyer, the football coach, a \$750,000 raise last month, just after the university's overall budget was cut by \$42-million. Mr. Meyer will make \$4-million annually for the next six years. Florida officials say they haven't heard many complaints around campus, perhaps because the coach plans to make a \$1-million donation to the university.

Much of the extra TV money flowing to the SEC's athletics departments is going toward sports. But some athletics programs are earmarking part of it for academics. Florida's athletics association will give \$6-million to academic programs this year. And at least five other SEC athletics departments—those at the Universities of Arkansas, Georgia, Kentucky, South Carolina, and Tennessee—have announced they will do more to help the academic side.

The league is not immune to the economic downturn. Florida plans to spend less on capital improvements and says it will bus, rather than fly, its athletes to more games. Yet its overall athletics budget

has increased almost \$6-million. One reason: the department just added a women's lacrosse team, which is getting its own new 1,500-seat stadium and practice facility. Without having played a single game, the team already has the No. 1-ranked recruiting class in the country.

#### **Staying Out Ahead**

Teams outside the SEC are more likely to be cutting sports right now, not adding them. So far this year, at least 42 Division I teams have been eliminated.

Over the next couple of years, even some of the wealthiest athletics departments will be facing tough decisions about eliminating sports, says Jim Livengood, athletic director at the University of Arizona.

The SEC's guaranteed new revenue will insulate the league from having to cut teams, Mr. Livengood says. "For institutions in most conferences, that's not the reality. Reality is mostly driven by how well your teams compete, and who can keep raising more money from their donors."

Those stark differences could help separate the SEC from the other power conferences, says Keith Tribble, athletic director at the University of Central Florida, a member of Conference USA.

"Being in a non-BCS conference, this is something we've been living with for a long time—the disparity between our budgets and the budgets in the big-six conferences," he says. "This new TV deal will create a further division: the SEC, the other big five conferences, and the non-BCS schools."

Coaches in the Southeastern Conference are happy for the added exposure and revenue, but some worry that they may come at the expense of other programs.

"You do worry for the greater good of college athletics," says Billy Pate, men's tennis coach at the University of Alabama. "You want to be competitive nationally and have all the resources, but you want other leagues to be competitive and healthy."

Damon Evans, athletic director at the University of Georgia, is not so convinced that the SEC has such an advantage.

"We have a great television deal, and some other nice things going on, but the other conferences aren't sitting still," he says. "Texas and Oklahoma and Southern Cal and Kansas—they're all sound financially. We've just got to keep pushing ourselves to stay out

ahead."

*Marisa López-Rivera and Ashley C. Killough helped research this article.*

**Spending on Sports vs. Academics**

Southeastern Conference teams have increased their spending on athletics as fast as any major conference during a recent four-year period. But instructional spending on many SEC campuses has not increased at the same rate.

	Athletics expenses		Instructional expenses	
	Total* (in millions)	Percent change, 2004-5 to 2007-8	Total* (in millions)	Percent change, 2003-4 to 2006-7
U. of Georgia	\$70.5	57%	\$212.1	12%
U. of Alabama at Tuscaloosa	\$74.9	50%	\$168.5	32%
U. of South Carolina at Columbia	\$64.5	50%	\$226.9	28%
U. of Arkansas at Fayetteville	\$62.7	42%	\$108.4	14%
Auburn U.	\$69.8	38%	\$172.5	5%
Louisiana State U. at Baton Rouge	\$76.3	37%	\$221.9	12%
U. of Florida	\$98.2	34%	\$548.5	20%
U. of Kentucky	\$67.8	31%	\$258.0	11%
Vanderbilt U.	\$45.5	24%	\$657.2	47%
U. of Tennessee at Knoxville	\$87.4	22%	\$412.4	14%
U. of Mississippi	\$34.8	21%	\$105.1	22%
Mississippi State U.	\$30.4	19%	\$89.2	12%
Totals	\$782.8	36%	\$3,180.7	22%

\* Expenses are for the most recent year available.

Note: Athletics spending data are for 2004-5 to 2007-8, and instructional spending numbers are for 2003-4 to 2006-7. Both periods include the most-recent data available.

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