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CONFERENCE REALIGNMENT

ESPN has withdrawn from the Big Ten's media rights negotiations, severing a more than 40 year relationship with the conference.

The B1G was offering their "B & C" package of games to ESPN for \$380 million a year for seven years. That's far more than what ESPN is paying its SEC package, \$300 million a year for the SEC's 3:30 pm (ET) and primetime games.

ESPN's decision to withdraw could be the Pac-12's saving grace.

"It probably does mean that ESPN becomes more interested than they would have otherwise been," said Ed Desser, the former president of NBA TV who now consults with sports clients (including the Big XII) negotiating media deals.

The Pac-12's exclusive window to negotiate a new media rights deal of its own was set to expire last week. However, there are reports that the two have extended their exclusive window, which makes sense on ESPN's part as it weighed just how much it wanted to spend on the B1G.

"What ESPN might have been holding on to in the event that they could get the Big 10, that now gets freed up," explained Desser. "With revenues under strain, it's becoming time to be more selective and ESPN can't have everything."

Of course, ESPN will be fine even without the Big Ten.

"ESPN, you know, made their bed with the SEC," said Desser. "They said, 'okay, we're going to get the best, the number one conference and we're going to own it. So then that means you've got to make choices, and they're already locked into the ACC. The Big XII and Pac-12 are open questions, but they've (ESPN) kind of set themselves up so that they don't have to have a Big 10."

However, the Pac-12 does have something that benefits ESPN...a late night slate of games.

"What the Pac-12 has to offer is, first and foremost, West Coast late night time slots on Saturdays," said Desser. "That's its calling card."

ESPN will fill out its noon time slot with a combination of SEC, ACC and Big XII games. The marquee SEC games will go in either the 3:30 (ET) time slot or on prime time. But ESPN has traditionally shown Pac-12 games in that 10:00 pm (ET) or later time slot and done quite well, often drawing more than a million viewers. What's more, those games frequently have little to no competition for college football fans as Fox only occasionally will put a late night game on FS1 (the ratings graveyard for college football).

	ESPN/ABC	FOX SPORTS	CBS	NBC
NOON	SEC/ACC/BIG XII	B1G		
3:30	SEC		B1G	NOTRE DAME
PRIMETIME	SEC			B1G
10:00				

The fact that the Pac-12 has not yet opened up its media rights bidding tells me two things. One, they're making progress with ESPN. Two, they know other networks aren't banging down the door to come bid for their rights.

CBS is expected to pay \$350 million a year for the Big Ten's 3:30 pm slate of games. That basically replaces CBS's SEC games with B1G games. Almost an even swap (although they're paying a lot more money to the Big Ten than they ever paid to the SEC). But while CBS occasionally runs a college football game in the Saturday night primetime slot, it doesn't happen very frequently. And they're not likely to blow out all of their Saturday programming on college football so there isn't much demand beyond their new Big Ten deal.

NBC is expected to pay the same \$350 million a year for a package of Saturday night primetime games featuring the B1G. NBC will also continue to fight for Notre Dame's rights and Notre Dame would prefer to stay with NBC because it means they can remain independent. That will provide NBC with a Notre Dame game at some point during the day as a lead in to the Big Ten primetime clash.

Of course, if you don't have anyone bidding against ESPN, then what would force the network to pay more? And if ESPN doesn't pay up for those late night time slots, who will?

<https://twitter.com/rltsports/status/1557044856316256256>

By the way, if you're doing the math here, the Big Ten is getting \$500 million a year from Fox for their best games, \$350 million a year from CBS for the 3:30 games and \$350 million a year from NBC for the primetime games. That's \$1.2 billion a year in television rights for the conference every year...and they're not done yet.

The Big Ten is also looking to partner with a streaming outlet for another set of games.

The league issued a statement Tuesday saying: "The Big Ten Conference is currently working with world-class partners to complete multifaceted media rights agreements. The overall constructs of the new rights agreements have not been finalized. The conference continues to have productive meetings with both linear and direct to consumer media partners."