

OPINION

# College football: Go deeper in the playbook to unlock media value

BY ED DESSER AND JOHN KOSNER

10.16.2023



**T**he 2023 college football season began tumultuously: The Pac-12 disintegrated. Two of its Pacific Coast schools, Stanford and Cal, joined the ... Atlantic Coast Conference. Another, Colorado — featuring head coach Deion Sanders — became the TV address with two TV-friendly 10 a.m. local time kickoffs. In a Sept. 23 New York Times op-ed, Jordan Acker, a **University of Michigan** regent, wrote: “The recent creation of new national super conferences ... is about one thing: getting the biggest television audience — and the biggest payout.

Agreed.

We do not opine here on the proper economic model for colleges, though we hope for an economically fair one that provides athletes with a voice. Since generating more revenue is clearly crucial, our decades of pro league and major sports network experience suggests that college administrators consider these key changes that would create more media value for the key driver, football:

**1. Expand the regular season.** College football is the No. 2 sport in America. The **NFL** (No. 1) has expanded to 17 regular-season games from just 12 in 1960. College football should add at least two additional regular-season weeks and play from Labor Day weekend into the middle of December, a traditionally dead time for TV networks, but one with high “homes using TV” levels. Wear and tear on college football players is obviously a factor. But FBS schools have 85 scholarships (and now NIL) for a reason. The NFL reduced preseason games and year-round workouts as part of its longer season; colleges can too, beginning with spring ball commitments, and by ...

**2. Reconceiving the bowl games.** The bowls no longer serve their original purpose. The six big bowls in rotation could remain as sites for the second and third weeks of CFP games. The Rose Bowl could be re-imagined as a Big Ten Championship location in late December and/or a new stand-alone Jan. 1 “Future Bowl” game featuring the best two teams not in the CFP. Eliminate the lesser bowls featuring two .500 teams.

**3. The two biggest rivals should play home and home.** Yes, that happens in college basketball and baseball (both shorter seasons) and is perhaps the secret of NFL divisional play. “Pay for” games, where smaller, undermanned schools take a big check to get walloped at a Power Five school, might be good for one institution’s bottom line and the other’s record, but lopsided games do little for media value or fan engagement. What fans want is traditional rivalry games, whether it’s Ohio State-Michigan, Texas-Oklahoma, USC-UCLA, Army-Navy or Alabama-Auburn. Let’s have more of them! We’d use the two added weeks to make sure all longtime rivalries remain regardless of conference changes — such as Oklahoma vs. Oklahoma State and **USC** vs. Stanford — and perhaps bring others back, like **Penn State** vs. Pitt. We know that many schools have their schedules set 20 years into the future, but: (1) No games are currently scheduled for the first two weeks of December other than the conference championships (and Army-Navy); and (2) Money talks, such as the next CFP and conference TV deals.

**4. Expand the weekend schedule instead of the weekdays.** We suggest more games on Fridays — not just nights but afternoons too, given recent work-from-home trends. And games on Sundays as well. Yes, the NFL is a ratings juggernaut, but NFL games bring more football fans to the set and that expands audience, which can find alternatives especially if college games are strategically scheduled in windows before or after NFL games of local interest. Right now, all four broadcast networks carry college football games at the same time on Saturday afternoons. That demonstrates the sport’s unique appeal but is counterproductive to growing audiences. Tuesday and Wednesday nights are neither fan- nor school-friendly. The NFL expanded to Thursday and Monday nights. There’s no reason colleges shouldn’t program Friday through Sunday.

**5. Spread the times to create a fifth national TV window.** We mentioned Coach Prime playing 10 a.m. games to provide added unopposed exposure. Why not work together to have a regular early Saturday morning time slot? The Premier League has used that to great effect on NBC on Saturday and Sunday mornings. Besides creating five Saturday time slots, we strongly favor ...

**6. Shortening the games.** College football has drifted into the 3½-hour territory ... yes, driven by TV. All sports must trim down. Go further on the 2023 rules changes and use some of the NFL’s adjustments to reduce to three hours. Shorten halftime below 15 minutes (or the minimum to accommodate both bands!). Have fewer, longer timeouts. Manage the clock. This could even create room for an occasional sixth 9 p.m. PT “Midnight Madness” slot!

**7. Create a Saturday “Red Zone.”** Saturdays already resemble NFL Sunday Ticket, with three times the simultaneous games across a dozen channels, in double the number of time slots. The power conferences and their broadcast partners should team up to reward fans — creating an added home position to funnel viewers (and bettors) into hot games in progress. It could be a Fox/ESPN (and perhaps others) joint venture, and a new way to generate more revenue and interest out of the existing product base.

Today, you must earn your fans’ time, money, attention and hearts, and constantly be improving your TV offerings. Otherwise, you’re falling behind and possibly into trouble. Even if you’re the second biggest sport in the country.

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