

# Pac-12 Conference Football Media Day

Tuesday, July 27, 2021  
Hollywood, California, USA

**George Kliavkoff**

Pac-12 Commissioner

**Merton Hanks**

**Rob Mullens**

Commissioner Press Conference



I also want to take a moment to emphasize that the health and safety of our student-athletes and all those connected to Pac-12, including our fans, will continue to be a priority in light of the continued threat from COVID-19.

As a conference, 9 of our 12 schools are requiring vaccinations for all students. We have been strongly encouraging everyone to get vaccinated, including through educational webinars and public service announcements.

We plan to have safety protocols in place that include regular testing for any student-athlete who is unvaccinated as well as for anyone vaccinated or unvaccinated who is symptomatic.

33 days out from our first football game, two-thirds of our teams have already achieved more than 80% of their players being vaccinated. And half of those teams are above 90%. We're very proud of that.

Let's now talk about something much more fun: athletic success. As I mentioned in my May press conference, going forward the Pac-12 will be hyper-focused on greater success in football and men's basketball. It's not a secret that these are the two most impactful sports, and that revenue generated from football and men's basketball often funds our overall athletic programs.

In partnership with our schools the conference will take the steps necessary to give our student-athletes the best possible opportunities to win titles in these two sports.

Before we talk about our longer-term football prospects, let's start by focusing on this season. We have nationally recognized coaches, many with long track records of success. We have some of the best student-athletes in the country that are consistently selected in the first few rounds of the NFL Draft. We have strong returning athletes and incoming recruits.

The talent returning to the Pac-12 in 2021 is truly elite. 16 of our top 25 offensive players, and 15 of our top 22 defensive players from 2020 are returning to the conference.

THE MODERATOR: Please welcome Pac-12 commissioner, George Kliavkoff.

GEORGE KLIAVKOFF: Welcome to the 2021 Pac-12 Football Media Day. I want to start by thanking our student-athletes for being here today and for representing their teammates. What they do on a day-to-day basis to balance both their athletic and academic obligations is remarkable.

I also want to thank and welcome our head football coaches, athletic directors, our corporate partners, the Rose Bowl, our other Rose Bowl partners, and our friends from the College Football Playoff.

I cannot mention our head coaches without taking a moment to honor the recent loss of UCLA football Coach Terry Donahue, the all-time winningest coach in Pac-12 football history, and a great and humble man who reflected the best values of our conference.

Finally I want to thank the members of the media that have joined us today in person. We greatly appreciate all you do to tell the stories of the Pac-12 to our fans.

I want to begin my remarks today by reiterating the Pac-12's ongoing commitment to student-athletes. The Pac-12 has been a leader in providing for continuing education, improved healthcare, guaranteed scholarships, and a liberalized transfer rule for student-athletes.

The Pac-12 was also the first conference to include student-athletes in our governance structure. This commitment to put student-athletes first comes directly from our presidents and chancellors. With their guidance we will continue to strive to be the leading conference in supporting student-athletes.



Our returning players include two stars who were featured in last year's Pac-12 football championship game. The top defensive player in all of college football is Oregon's Kayvon Thibodeaux.

USC's Kedon Slovis is one of the nation's top returning quarterbacks.

The Pac-12 also had two of their seven recruiting classes this year. Our schools tapped into the transfer portal to bring in experienced talent, including importantly, 14 players coming back to their West Coast roots after playing for Power 5 schools outside the Pac-12 footprint in 2020.

The Pac-12 will play 83% of our total games against Power 5 schools, the second highest among any Power 5 conference. These games include matchups with some of the top programs in college football, including LSU, Ohio State, Michigan, Texas A&M, and Notre Dame.

Finally, we have a new home for our football championship game. I can't think of a better showcase for our two teams than Allegiant Stadium in Las Vegas on December 3rd. I know that our student-athletes, fans, and media are absolutely going to love the experience of Allegiant Stadium in Las Vegas.

Tickets to our football championship game go on sale to the general public at 10 a.m. today.

As a football conference, the Pac-12 has always been known for the excitement of our play, particularly at the skill positions. Two great examples are the reigning NFL MVP Aaron Rodgers and the NFL Rookie of the Year Justin Herbert. We've also been known for the strength of our entire league. Unlike conferences with a single dominant team, we often have multiple top teams and significant depth in the conference and a nine-game conference schedule. While this has led to greater parity, it has historically hurt us in the ratings and it has certainly cost us CFP invitations.

I want to be 100% clear, going forward the Pac-12 conference will make all of our football-related decisions with the combined goals of optimizing CFP invitations and winning national championships. This is a decision fully supported by all 12 of our athletic directors.

The great news is that now we have in place at the conference the team to execute on these goals. As you all know, last year we hired senior associate commissioner for football operations Merton Hanks to run football for the conference. Merton is an overachiever. He was a fifth-round draft pick of the San Francisco 49ers, who went

on to make four Pro Bowls and win a Super Bowl during his nine-year NFL career. Merton also spent time at Conference USA and as the VP of operations for the NFL.

Today we are announcing the hiring of Shonna Brown to work as an associate commissioner of football operations for Merton. Shonna comes to us from Conference USA and has also spent portions of her career at the NCAA, the American East Conference, the Mid-America Conference, and the Miami Dolphins. Her experience and knowledge will be invaluable.

The other great news is we already have a framework for success in achieving our football goals. Several years ago the conference formed a men's basketball strategic working group. This was a multi-year effort that reviewed all basketball decisions with the goal of increasing the Pac-12's NCAA tournament bids, Final Four appearances, and eventually national championships.

The fruits of that work began to appear this past season. Today we are announcing the formation of a football strategic working group led by Merton. The football group will include our football head coaches and our ADs. The mandate for this group is simple: recommend changes to our football program with the goal of optimizing for CFP invitations and winning championships.

Consistent with my meeting with our ADs in Las Vegas, I can confirm that every decision the conference makes related to football is on the table for discussion. We will look at our conference schedules, including the number of conference games that we play, and the start time of each game. We will look at our non-conference scheduling. We will evaluate whether having divisions does or does not make sense. We will work collectively to keep our very best recruits in our markets and to market our league to recruits everywhere.

The football working group will begin meeting immediately and provide regular updates and recommendations to me and our board.

Alongside this focus the Pac-12 will continue to be the conference of champions and continue to invest in the success of all sports. With the summer Olympics underway in Tokyo, we can once again expect to see the Pac-12's excellence in these sports on full display. The Pac-12 sent more than 300 Olympians to these games across 28 sports and representing all 12 of our universities and 52 countries. Over 60% of these athletes are women. In addition to our athletes, eight Pac-12 coaches are head coaches of Olympic teams.

At the last summer Olympics in Rio in 2016, Pac-12



affiliated athletes won 55 total medals in 12 sports. If the conference had been a country, it would have finished fifth among all countries in the medal count. As a conference we dominate Olympic and women's sports. In fact, the Pac-12 has won the most or tied for the most NCAA titles for 56 of the last 60 years, including in each of the last 16 seasons.

This is an achievement we are proud of and will not walk away from even as we increase our focus on football and men's basketball.

Before I conclude my remarks, I'd like to quickly address some of the significant recent developments related to college athletics. If the media reports turn out to be true, we believe the move by Texas and Oklahoma from the Big 12 to the SEC strengthens our unique position as the only Power 5 conference with teams in the Mountain and Pacific time zones. We have a stable, highly successful, and well positioned membership with a high bar to entry. Given our investments in football and men's basketball, our historic domination of other sports, we do not think expansion is required to continue to compete and thrive.

That said, the fallout from Texas and Oklahoma gives us an opportunity to once again consider expansion. We had already had significant inbound interest from many schools. We will work with our presidents and chancellors to evaluate these opportunities.

We expect these decisions to take some time and we will not be sharing any further information today about ongoing expansion discussions.

With respect to the Austin case recently decided by the Supreme Court. I want to be on the record that we completely agree with the majority's affirmation that college sports is a special and distinct pursuit. As college students our student-athletes should be eligible to receive any and all legitimate educational benefits.

That said, we must continue to defend the collegiate model. It is likely that some will see the decision in Austin and particularly the language of the single concurring opinion as an invitation to attack the very foundation of the collegiate model. College athletes are students at educational institutions. In the case of the Pac-12, at some of the finest universities in the world.

Introducing unfettered professional practices into college sports will undermine our educational mission and will have many unintended negative consequences, especially for athletes competing in women's and Olympic sports.

The Pac-12 is also in favor of student-athletes being able

to benefit from their name, image, and likeness, and we welcome the changes that were implemented by the NCAA on July 1st.

We support the opportunity of our athletes to monetize their personal brands just as other students on campus are able to build and market their own intellectual property.

I want to announce today that the Pac-12 networks will be launching a new licensing program to provide student-athletes highlights and content to any company that is working with any of our Pac-12 student-athletes in connection with their NIL.

This initiative, which leverages our network's rights and capabilities, will be one of many we plan to implement to support our Pac-12 student-athletes in the new NIL landscape.

Although we support legitimate NIL, we also support a bright line against any payments designed to induce a player to join a specific school or any payments that resemble pay-for-play.

These are non-negotiables and we must continue to work with Congress to draft a federal law that clearly establishes this line to protect what is distinct about college sports and the integrity of our competitions.

I believe the implementation of NIL can be a significant competitive advantage for our Pac-12 schools. Our schools sit in some of the largest and most desirable media markets in the world. Many of our prominent alumni have started or currently run some of the biggest and most important companies in the world.

Speaking of desirable media markets, we know that the single biggest opportunity that the conference has over time to support our schools and student-athletes is to strike the right balance between revenue, national exposure, and competitive advantage in our next set of media rights deals.

This is a difficult balancing act. But in a few years, thanks to the foresight of our presidents and chancellors, we will be in a unique and enviable position, unlike many other conferences, we still own all of our media rights.

This gives us unlimited flexibility in how to structure new deals beginning in 2024. In fact, we believe our media rights will be even more valuable if there is further consolidation among the FBS conferences in the next two to three years.

Given the proliferation of bundled media services and the



unique and very limited nature of live sports, I believe we will have a large and diverse group of bidders for our media rights.

Finally, as I mentioned before, the Pac-12 is in favor of CFP expansion. We believe allowing more teams and athletes to compete for a national championship is a win for the Pac-12 and for our football players. We appreciate the work that was done to put forward the initial 12-team proposal. There is much about the proposal that we like. But the Pac-12 and the other conferences that were not part of the two-year process to create the proposal will need some time to collect feedback from our stakeholders and identify any issues that need addressing.

As we identify these issues, we will work collaboratively with our CFP partners to recommend an expansion plan that increases access, takes into account the best interests of our student-athletes, and also preserves the rich traditions of college football.

That concludes my prepared remarks. I'd like to invite Merton and Rob Mullens, University of Oregon athletic director, and the chair of our Pac-12 athletic director group, to join me onstage to answer your questions.

THE MODERATOR: We'll go ahead with questions.

**Q. Commissioner, I wanted to ask you in recent news as far as the NIL is concerned, are there any plans for the Pac-12 as well as the other schools in the Pac-12 to provide educational services for the student-athletes as it pertains to that regarding taxes, financial education, things of that nature?**

GEORGE KLIAVKOFF: Yes, all of our schools are doing independent educational programs for their student-athletes. Maybe I could turn that over to Rob to talk about some of the specifics around his university.

ROB MULLENS: Sure, I think all of our schools have long had robust student-athlete development programs. We've been providing these services for several years. Obviously we'll tailor those to the new environment we're in with NIL, get feedback from our student-athletes, from our coaches, and continue to update those programs.

But absolutely, we're doing an A to Z educational programs at our schools.

GEORGE KLIAVKOFF: At the conference level we'll be putting in place programs like I announced today related to highlight packages being available. We'll continue to do that from the conference level and work with each of the schools as they continue to work under individual state

laws until there's federal legislation.

**Q. George and Rob, I wanted to ask on realignment, you mentioned that you've had a lot of significant interest coming in from other schools. What bar would a potential member have to clear to be considered worthy of being a member of the Pac-12? Do you feel like there's any risk to staying at 12 teams if further consolidation occurs?**

GEORGE KLIAVKOFF: I'll answer the second one first.

We don't think there's any risk at staying at 12 teams.

With respect to bars, that is something we're going to be discussing with our presidents and chancellors. As you know, we take into account athletics, academics, cultural fit. All very important to us. But there is no set bar that anyone needs to clear.

ROB MULLENS: I'd just add that we have a strong 12, obviously. In this league we're all about innovation, about being ahead and evolving. This will be no different than that.

**Q. Commissioner, the AAU affiliation has been a point of pride for this conference as well as the Big Ten. In your understanding, is AAU affiliation a prerequisite? There's a report in the last 15 minutes that Texas Tech and Kirby Hocutt have had conversations with. Can you confirm that you have had contact with Texas Tech and Kirby Hocutt?**

GEORGE KLIAVKOFF: As I mentioned, we're not going to talk about any individual school. We're not going to negotiate in the media. That's just not the way we do business.

There is no reset requisite about a specific accreditation. We are very proud of the schools that have that accreditation within our schools. You may remember when Utah joined us, they did not have that and they received that accreditation after they joined us. But there's no prerequisites.

**Q. Commissioner, you noted that you're encouraging everyone to get vaccinated. Notably one of our 12 coaches are not present today because he was not vaccinated. What has been the message to Nick Rolovich at Washington State and how does the Pac-12 plan to hold similar situations going forward?**

GEORGE KLIAVKOFF: The decision whether he gets vaccinated or not is a private decision. We don't mandate that anyone gets vaccinated. We are not in the middle of



that discussion with him. That's not our business.

We were able to require that anyone who attended Media Day be vaccinated. We're happy to have all of the coaches, student-athletes and head coaches who were vaccinated joining us.

**Q. Commissioner, is there going to be any sort of cancellation policy due to COVID cases or anything like that for the season this year?**

GEORGE KLIAVKOFF: So we're considering what our forfeiture policy will be. We'll probably announce that in the next couple of weeks.

As I mentioned previously in the press, we're leaning towards going back to the pre-COVID policy of forfeits if you can't field a team, but we've not made that final decision yet.

Merton.

MERTON HANKS: We certainly have to take the temperature of the country into account as we formulate these policies. Obviously we don't want to be in a position where we have to switch streams, so to speak, mid-season. I don't think anybody wants that in any sport.

As the commissioner stated, we certainly expect to have a position announced mid August.

**Q. Obviously the Pac-12 in recent years has kind of taken a bad name in terms of the refereeing, whether that's right or wrong. What do you feel like can be done in terms of the reffing and the perception maybe out there about what's going on on the field?**

MERTON HANKS: I'll happily take that.

That's a misnomer, quite frankly. In 30 years of playing football at the highest levels across every division, so to speak, from high school, college, professionally, we've got a very good officiating program led by David Coleman. We're getting better, literally, daily. We're improving our training. We're going to make great strides. We're going to be fine as far as the officiating piece.

**Q. Mark Emmert says this is the right time to consider decentralized deregulated college sports. What does that mean for the Pac-12?**

GEORGE KLIAVKOFF: That's an ongoing discussion between the NCAA and all of the commissioners. I think we're going to see some shake-up there. Mark has been pretty clear about his desires to have less responsibility set

at the NCAA and more responsibility come down to the conferences and the schools. And we welcome that.

**Q. Commissioner, obviously last year there was a robust testing policy for COVID-19. I'm curious what the policy will be this year with so many of the athletes being vaccinated? Will there be a testing policy this year?**

MERTON HANKS: We certainly will have a testing policy. A lot of it relates to who's vaccinated, who is unvaccinated. Certainly our medical advisory committee will advise us on proper procedure.

Then subsequent we're also subject to state and local regulation, as well. We obviously have to work with our local municipalities in that respect.

We will have a policy. It will not be as robust certainly as last year, though.

**Q. Commissioner, where do you stand on the possibility of a scheduling alliance with the different conferences?**

GEORGE KLIAVKOFF: I think it's an interesting opportunity. It's under discussion, but nothing to announce today.

**Q. In light of what happened with the Big 12, what can the Pac-12 do to protect its biggest brands from looking elsewhere?**

GEORGE KLIAVKOFF: Rob, maybe you can handle that.

ROB MULLENS: Sure.

This league is a great league. It's got a rich tradition for many, many years. There's strong collaboration. We're all committed to working together to strengthen the league, again, be prepared as the industry evolves.

GEORGE KLIAVKOFF: All of the press reports where someone writes an article completely unfounded about schools going here, schools going there, everyone picks it up, that becomes a news cycle. It's interesting, curious, fun for the fans, fun for the media. It's not based in reality if you're sitting in the rooms that I'm sitting in.

We feel very comfortable with our current membership.

**Q. Rob, with your athletic director hat on, would you prefer football-only expansion to reduce some of the logistical challenges with traveling Olympic sports?**

ROB MULLENS: I haven't given that a whole lot of thought to be honest with you. But that creates its own logistical challenges in and of itself. Off the top of my head, from the cuff, personally this is one person's opinion, I prefer a league whereby you have competition in all sports.

**Q. Commissioner, the Pac-12 Network coming into this football season, how do you feel about distribution, where it's heading?**

GEORGE KLIAVKOFF: I wish distribution was better. But some of our current and existing distribution contracts make it very difficult to expand distribution under the current model. I think we have to look forward to 2024 and set our fans' expectations. That's when we'll be able to reset the distribution.

I wish more people could see the incredibly high quality and good content that our network produces. But just being honest, the distribution is not where I would like it to be.

**Q. Commissioner and Merton, you're going to have a football coach speak today whose program is accused and documented of flagrant cheating last year in recruiting. Can you offer your assessment so far of what you know about Arizona State and the actions of that coaching staff?**

MERTON HANKS: I'll speak on behalf of the conference.

We don't have a comment. That's between the NCAA and ASU at this time. And that is our policy: we simply don't comment on those.

**Q. Shot in the dark here. What role, if any, do non-football or non-basketball sports playing in expansion?**

GEORGE KLIAVKOFF: ^ M START I think we take into account all of the factors when we would consider expansion. Certainly non-football sports would be one of those factors. The quality of the sports program at any schools we'd be considering would certainly be part of the calculation.

**Q. George, given that we don't know how many conferences are going to be in FBS, who's going to be in those conferences, is it worthy having a discussion, further discussion, about structure and access in the Playoff?**

GEORGE KLIAVKOFF: That will be part of the discussion in the next meeting of the CFP in September. I'm sure the news that broke since the last time we met will color that

discussion, for sure.

**Q. The 'We Are United' movement I think took the entire country by storm last year. What role do you expect players from all sports to have in the decision-making process at Pac-12?**

ROB MULLENS: As George mentioned in the open, obviously the student-athletes have played a leadership role in this league. We were the first to have them a part of the council. Obviously as a result of that we also set up a football student-athlete specific working group. We all have incredibly strong SAACs on our own campuses.

The student-athletes have been involved in the decision making at the Pac-12 for many, many years, both at a local level as well as a conference level. And that will continue.

**Q. While you said that expansion is not a priority and you're fine with the number you have, while the SEC is expanding in anywhere from one to three years, does that put a time frame on your consideration for the teams that have reached out to you? Do you feel there's a calendar working with you?**

GEORGE KLIAVKOFF: So I did not say that expansion is not a priority. I said we didn't think it was necessary in order to continue to be strong and strive as a conference.

It is a priority to consider all of the alternatives that have been presented to us. And we will do that in a very timely manner.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you very much.

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