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MOUNTAINEERS RIVALRIES GUIDE

For WVU, the Backyard Brawl trumps all other rivalries

Brown, Baker willing to forgo other rivals in favor of annual series with Pitt

BY CODY NESPOR

CNespor@DominionPost.com

Since joining the Big 12, West Virginia has had to be very deliberate when choosing its nonconference opponents. In moving from the Big East, the Mountaineers went from a conference where fans could reasonably drive to most away games to one where even the shortest road trip required a trip through TSA and an airplane ticket.

To make up for that change, the Mountaineers began using their non-conference schedule to give fans exciting, reasonable close contests to attend. WVU scheduled five games against Maryland, two against NC

State.

In recent seasons, the Mountaineers have made a point to renew some of their traditional rivalries with three games against Virginia Tech since 2017 and a home-and-home series with Penn State beginning this season.

The biggest of them all, however, was the renewal of the Backyard Brawl against Pitt in 2022.

"I think those regional rivalries are important," WVU head coach Neal Brown said. "The Pitt game I think should be played every year, I've said that all along.

In scheduling all of these noncon-

SEE BRAWL, I-4



William Wotring/The Dominion Post

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MOUNTAINEERS RIVALRIES GUIDE

BRAWL

FROM PAGE I-2

ference games, however, the Mountaineers perhaps inadvertently gave themselves very difficult schedules season after season. Since 2012, WVU had 36 nonconference games on its schedule. Three were eventually canceled — a contest at NC State in 2019 due to weather and games against Florida State and Maryland in 2020 due to COVID. Of those 36 nonconference games, 19 were Power Five opponents and only five were against Group of Five teams. West Virginia played 12 games against FCS opponents, however, two of the teams they played, Liberty in 2015 and James Madison in 2012 and 2019, have since been elevated to the FBS level.

WVU has played multiple power five nonconference games in six straight years. With Pitt and Penn State both on the docket in 2023 and

2024, that will make it eight consecutive years playing 11 of 12 regular season games against Power Five competition.

“What’s best for the program, not necessarily what’s best for me, but what’s best for the program is I think you play that Pitt game, you play a (group of five team) at home, you play an FCS at home and you’re going to play nine league games, which should give you seven home games every year,” Brown said. “I think that’s the best opportunity for success. I think it’s the best for our fan base to have a seventh home game every year and it allows you to really build some momentum early in the year.”

With the Big 12 expanding to 16 teams in 2024, WVU athletic director Wren Baker echoed Brown’s idea.

“That’s partly contingent on what the conference schedule looks like,”

SEE BRAWL, I-6



Benjamin Powell/The Dominion Post

West Virginia Mountaineers fans hold up a sign during a men's basketball game against Pitt in the WVU Coliseum during the 2021-22 season.



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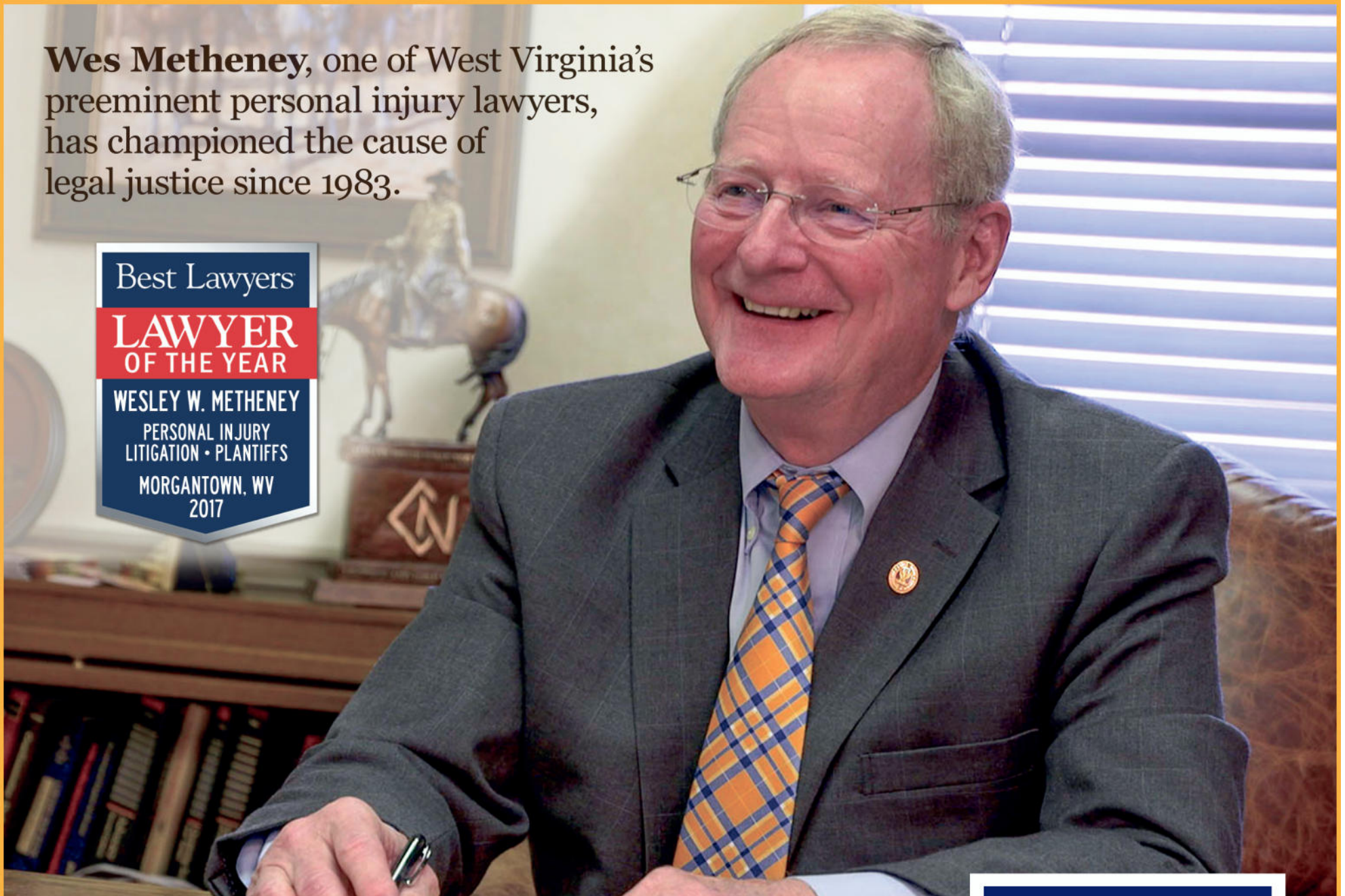
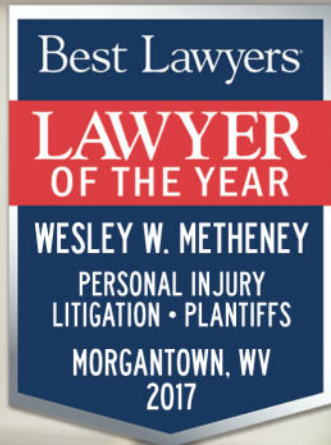


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BRAWL

FROM PAGE I-4

Baker said. "In this environment where we have nine conference games, that means some years you're going to have five home games and some years you're going to have four from your conference schedule. I think it's important to the state and to Morgantown that we always, at a minimum, have six home games but we'd like to have seven.

"You start to do the math on that and it starts to restrict your opportunities. That's why your one FCS game is important because it ensures that you can get an affordable home game on the schedule."

If WVU were to adopt both of Brown's ideas, playing Pitt annually and scheduling a Group of Five and FCS team each year, all of those other regional rivalries would have to be put on hold.

"I'm all-in on the Backyard Brawl, I think it's great," Browns said. "With those other regional rivalries, I think

it's hard to play both. Those two (Virginia Tech) games (in 2021 and 2022) were awesome. It was a great home environment here and it was great going down there. The Penn State game, we're meeting that thing head on and we're excited about it but I don't think it's in the best interest to play both of those games (Pitt and Penn State) in the same calendar year."

"I think having a Power Five regional rival on the schedule every year is important," Baker added. "We would probably prefer that be Pitt, I'm not a brain surgeon but that didn't take me very long to figure out that's a very important game to our fanbase and theirs and this area and region."

Tradition regional series with Maryland, Virginia Tech and Penn State would be put to the side in favor of continuing the Backyard Brawl, something Brown isn't necessarily against.

"I think that's one of the best rival-

SEE BRAWL, I-7



William Wotring/The Dominion Post

West Virginia players celebrate with the Black Diamond Trophy after defeating Virginia Tech in Blacksburg, Va., last season. Games against Power Five regional rivals like VT, Maryland and NC State could become less and less common as WVU focuses on scheduling Pitt every season.

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BRAWL

FROM PAGE I-6

ries in all of college football and so we should play that every year," Brown said. "It makes it hard to play those other regional games."

This is all, of course, contingent on Pitt also wanting to play every year.

"I know (Pitt AD) Heather Lyke, we've known each other for probably eight or nine years now," Baker said. "I told her we want to play as much and as long as they want to play. I know there's a willingness on our part to extend in every sport, and I believe that's the case on their end. I don't know if that means every year, every other year, if they want to take a break off and then resume, we'll just have to see."

While power five matchups would be shelved, this change could open up interesting opportunities to play local Group of Five teams. The Mountaineers haven't even played a Group of Five teams since beating Eastern Carolina in 2017.

"Could we get a meaningful Group of Five FBS opponents that we either pay some money to come in here or we do some type of two-for-one?" Baker wondered. "You would like for it to be a game with some kind of regional meaning. One of the MAC schools, maybe a Sun Belt school. We're not eager or probably willing to go to Huntington, but I don't know if we would say no to Marshall if they wanted to come here."

The Friends of Coal Bowl against Marshall has been dormant since 2012 and WVU actually starts a two-for-one series against nearby Ohio University starting in 2025. A game at Eastern Carolina also pops up on the schedule for 2026 — along with the beginning of a home-and-home series with mighty Alabama.

"As you're building a schedule out, that's probably the perfect schedule," Baker said. "It's challenging, it's got some meaningful games but it doesn't beat your team down to where they're not ready to go come conference time."



William Wotring/The Dominion Post

West Virginia Mountaineers guard Kedrian Johnson (0) celebrates after defeating Pittsburgh Panthers in the Backyard Brawl in Pittsburgh last season.

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WVU's Last Backyard Brawl Hero

Tyler Bitancurt's kicks led to wins over Pitt in 2009, 2011

BY JUSTIN JACKSON

JJackson@DominionPost.com

The moment lasts a lifetime on YouTube, as Tyler Bitancurt's 43-yard field goal sailed true through the uprights on that November night in Morgantown back in 2009.

Bitancurt's field goal as time expired gave WVU a walk-off 19-16 victory against then-No. 8 Pitt at Milan Puskar Stadium.

And then?

"Honestly, it was terrifying," Bitancurt now recalls. "All the guys rushed the field and I was at the bottom of the pile. I remember in the moment newspaper headlines about a kicker tragically dying after making the game-winning kick running through my mind."

Seconds later, the young man from Springfield, Va. was hoisted on the shoulders of his teammates.

"My long snapper was Cody Nutter and he was on top of me in the pile," Bitancurt said. "When I finally got pulled up, I remember asking him how long the pile-up lasted. He told me about 20 seconds, but it felt like more like 10 minutes. I was just happy to be alive. It was so surreal."

Pitt returns to Morgantown on Sept. 16, its first trip there since the two rivals were members of the Big East in 2011, when Bitancurt's extra point was the difference in a 21-20 victory.

This year's meeting will certainly have Bitancurt's attention.

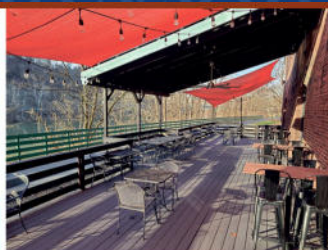
Now married back home near Springfield, the former kicker works for UPS and his family is still celebrating their 15-month old daughter.



Ron Rittenhouse/The Dominion Post

West Virginia's Tyler Bitancurt (40) kicks a 43-yard game-winning field goal against No. 8 Pitt during a 19-16 WVU win in Morgantown in 2009.

SEE HERO, I-12



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AP Photo

West Virginia's Tyler Bitancourt kicks the game winning field goal with a hold from Jeremy Kash against Pitt during the final seconds of a game Friday, Nov. 27, 2009, in Morgantown. West Virginia won 19-16.



AP Photo

West Virginia's J.T. Thomas celebrates following a 19-16 win against Pitt during the 2009 game in Morgantown.



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HERO

FROM PAGE I-10

Yet the feeling that goes behind a good old-fashioned rivalry has never left him.

"I guess I was always that way, even back in high school," he said. "The rival schools in high school, I really hated them. When we played soccer against them, it just meant so much more to me.

"It was the same in college. Growing up in Virginia, I already hated Virginia Tech. When we played Pitt, it's hard to put into words how much I wanted to beat them. To be able to go out and kick that game-winner, it was just an awesome part of my life."

As for the field goal itself, Bitancurt has this advice for all coaches:

"Here's a tip: Never ice the kicker," he said. "I knew Pitt was going to ice me and when they called the timeout, I still went through the motion of taking a practice kick.

"When they called the timeout, I just kept envisioning the ball going through in my head. The extra time just gave me more time to reset. I knew I was going to make that kick."

Had Pitt somehow faked a timeout, Bitancurt said, and allowed the play to run normally, it may have been a different story.

"If the kicker is expecting to be iced, his mind can be in a different place," Bitancurt said. "If the

SEE **HERO**, I-13

AP Photo

West Virginia kicker Tyler Bitancurt celebrates with fans after a 31-24 victory over Iowa State on Friday, Nov. 23, 2012, in Ames, Iowa.

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AP Photo

West Virginia's Tyler Bitancourt (40) celebrates with teammates after kicking the game-winning field goal in West Virginia's 30-27 win over South Florida on Thursday, Dec. 1, 2011, in Tampa, Fla.

HERO

FROM PAGE I-12

other team makes it look like they're going to ice him, but doesn't, then you can get rushed in your mind maybe and things can be different. I just think it's counterproductive to ice the kicker."

Bitancourt's career at WVU spanned the final season of Rich Rodriguez through the school's first year in the Big 12. He is second on the school's all-time scoring list with 357 points.

"I kind of went through it all, with Rich Rod leaving to playing in the Big 12," he said. "At the time, I don't think any one of us realized (in 2011) that it could be our final game against Pitt."

"Once we were in the Big 12, it was all so new, but I think there was a real loss not having that rivalry anymore. I think it meant a lot to so many of us who had lived through it."

Or, in Bitancourt's case, literally living through it from the bottom of that pile in 2009.

"I'm glad the series started back up last year," he said. "I'm glad they're playing Penn State, too. College sports are supposed to be about those one or two games each year that just bring everyone together."

"The feelings that go with that is unexplainable. I really hated Pitt. I wanted to beat those guys more than anything. Hopefully they can keep those games going."



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West Virginia's search for an in-conference rival continues into expanded Big 12



CODY NESPOR

It's fair to say that despite being in the Big 12 for over a decade now, West Virginia still hasn't found a true conference rival. The closest they've come, in my opinion, was their exciting conference series against the Texas Longhorns.

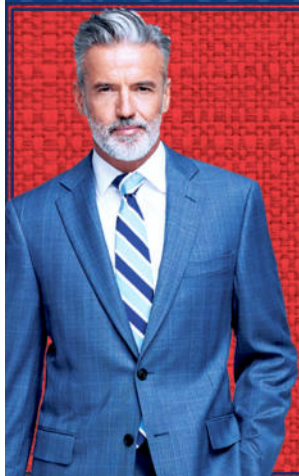
Everybody roots against the Longhorns, that's the kind of program they are, but it did feel like their games against the Mountaineers went ever so slightly beyond that. The series started with a bang when the No. 8 Mountaineers toppled the No. 11 Longhorns 48-45 in their first conference game in 2012. The series also included what may be WVU's

SEE NESPOR, I-15



AP Photo

The Texas defense lines up against the West Virginia offense during the second half of a game on Saturday, Oct. 1, 2022, in Austin, Texas.



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NESPOR

FROM PAGE I-14

best moment in the Big 12 on Will Grier's touchdown and two-point conversion in a 42-41 win in 2018.

It's hard to say the series ever really ascended to rivalry status considering it was unceremoniously killed off this season. With the Big 12 expanding to 14 teams in 2023, the round-robin scheduling format was ditched and Texas ended up being one of the teams WVU will not play. And with Texas bolting for the SEC next year, the series is all but dead and buried.

Even when the series was alive there were discrepancies on how the annual matchup was viewed by players and coaches.

"We're excited to play Texas, I don't necessarily believe it's a rivalry game," WVU head coach Neal Brown said in 2020. "I think our natural rivalries are kind of in our geographic footprint. I don't think Texas is looking at West Virginia as a rivalry."

"I feel like it is (a rivalry) because of the hype that goes into it," former WVU defensive lineman Darius Stills said in 2019. "Just from the game last year, it kind of set it off. I feel like it's always been a rivalry because of the fan bases that get into it."

The fanbases played a big part in the will-they-won't-they non-rivalry. There weren't always a lot of sparks on the field — although

SEE NESPOR, I-16



AP Photo

West Virginia quarterback Will Grier runs in the game winning two-point conversion with 16 seconds to go in a game against Texas, Saturday, Nov. 3, 2018, in Austin, Texas. West Virginia won 42-41.



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NESPOR

FROM PAGE I-15

former WVU receiver David Sills did technically start the “Horns Down” controversy — but two strong, passionate fanbases continuously helped fuel the fire.

“After the past few years, I see it becoming more of a well-known game for our fan base,” former WVU kicker Evan Staley said in 2019. “Not necessarily a rivalry, but I could see it forming one. It’s definitely a big game every year, and we always look forward to playing Texas.”

“As players, I wouldn’t say just because it’s a rivalry game,” former WVU offensive lineman Colton McKivitz added, “but there’s an edge there. Anytime we’re playing Texas there’s an edge.”

It takes two to tango, however, and the Longhorns always had bigger fish to fry than the Mountaineers with its annual Red River Rivalry with Oklahoma and a plethora of in-state opponents to feud with.

Whatever the relationship between UT and WVU was or could have been, it doesn’t matter now as the Longhorns move one to what they perceive as greener pastures.

So where does that leave WVU in terms of having a conference rival? Well, the Mountaineers do have another kinda-sorta Big 12 rival in Iowa State.

I wouldn’t blame you if you weren’t aware that games between the Cyclones and Mountaineers have been dubbed the “Riot Bowl.” It’s not exactly a flattering name for a rivalry and the name seems to only

exist in some obscure places online — the college football subreddit and one or two ISU fan pages.

But there is an unofficial trophy, a beatup gas can adorned with some stickers, and the ISU fan page WideRightAndNattyLite.com had some nice things to say about the Mountaineers when they joined the conference in 2012.

“With our new Appalachia friends joining the Big 12 in a few weeks, we at WRNL would like to introduce the Riot Bowl,” a post on the site dated June 11, 2012 reads. “The annual match up of Iowa State and West Virginia, which will have its inaugural game on November 24th in Ames. Schools that are separated by a mountain range but are quite alike. Alike how, you ask? Well, we like beer and they like beer. They like burning things, we like burning things. It’s a match made in heaven that the world has never seen!”

Now, if UT-WVU couldn’t bloom into a full-blown rivalry, ISU-WVU has even less of a chance. The teams have never played a football game when both are ranked and only three of their 11 Big 12 contest have been decided by one score.

With that being said, the Cyclones are in a somewhat similar position to WVU lacking significant geographical prominence in the conference. Both teams also have their biggest rivals in other conferences as Pitt is in the ACC and ISU’s biggest foe, Iowa, resides in the Big Ten.

There also has, technically, been an on-field incident. You may or may

SEE NESPOR, I-17



AP Photo

West Virginia forward Kevin Noreen (right) falls to the court after colliding with Iowa State forward Dustin Hogue during a game in Ames, Iowa, Wednesday, Feb. 26, 2014.

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AP Photo

West Virginia's Jeremy Kash (top) celebrates with kicker Pat McAfee following a field goal that sent the game into overtime against Cincinnati Saturday, Nov. 8, 2008 in Morgantown.

NESPOR

FROM PAGE I-16

not recall the time ISU's Dustin Hogue kicked WVU's Kevin Noreen in the chest during a blowout men's basketball game in the WVU Coliseum in 2014. Not exactly household names, but a small scuffle did ensue.

Although what might be the best course of action for WVU and its fan-base is to not reach and try to create rivalries where none exist. Rivalries need to happen organically and with Cincinnati now in the league, the

opportunity is there for one to come about on its own merit.

"Cincinnati, that's a natural rivalry," Brown said this offseason. "It's about a four-and-a-half drive between the two schools, we recruit the same people, we have history in a previous league so I think that's natural."

Whether something substantial with the Bearcats will actually develop is impossible to say, but it's the Mountaineers best chance at having a true Big 12 rival they've ever had.



AP Photo

West Virginia defensive back Ellis Lankster leaves the field as Cincinnati players celebrate scoring a touchdown in overtime during the 2008 game in Morgantown. Cincinnati won 26-23 in overtime.

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There are challenges to overcome on both sides if WVU-Marshall series is ever to be renewed



JUSTIN JACKSON

Chase Harler leaned up against the wall in a back hallway of Wesbanco Arena in Wheeling, the look of disappointment was apparent and needed no explanation.

"You don't want to lose to Marshall, I mean, let's be honest," the former WVU men's basketball guard said after Best Virginia fell to Herd That in the second round of the TBT this summer. "As a West Virginia guy, there is a definite rivalry there."

A native of Moundsville, Harler is a WVU alum who is also homegrown, so when the WVU alumni team took one on the chin against Marshall's alumni team, there was a real sense of hurt.

"Losing to Marshall, it just sucks," he said, before moving on

SEE MARSHALL, I-19



AP Photo

Fans fill Marshall's Joan C. Edwards Stadium for an intra-state college football game against West Virginia Saturday, Sept. 8, 2007. It was the first time the two schools played in Huntington since 1915. West Virginia won 48-23.

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Best Virginia's Chase Harler and Herd That's JP Tokoto (1) vie for a loose ball during the TBT Tournament July 27, 2023, at the WesBanco Arena in Wheeling.

William Wotring/The Dominion Post

MARSHALL

FROM PAGE I-18

to the next question.

That next question: Do you think WVU and Marshall should play on a yearly basis?

"They should definitely play," Harler said. "We play Pitt, why not play Marshall? People would love to see it. It would sell tickets."

It's at this point where politics come into play. It's easy to say WVU and Marshall should play.

Even WVU President E. Gordon Gee, in a moment of complete honesty, would probably admit privately the two schools should play.

Obviously it doesn't take much to get Marshall people to agree.

"I was always a big fan of that game," Marshall alum and former basketball standout Jon Elmore said. "People can call it a rivalry. Some people say it's not a rivalry. There's only two Division I schools in the state.

"Obviously West Virginia is a big-time brand, but Marshall is a growing brand. I think that game is always a positive."

It's when you get into the finer details — specifically where the games are played and the money — is when the idea of the two state schools playing one another blows up.

In men's hoops, the WVU-Marshall series dates back to 1929. From 1992-2015, the two schools

SEE MARSHALL, I-20

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MARSHALL

FROM PAGE I-19

met annually in Charleston.

Now, some may think that idea ended after Marshall coach Dan D'Antoni offended former WVU coach Bob Huggins in 2014, saying Huggins was scared to play Marshall, which obviously was nuts and just D'Antoni's way of trying to keep the series alive. Marshall and WVU have played just once since 2015 and that came in the 2018 NCAA tournament.

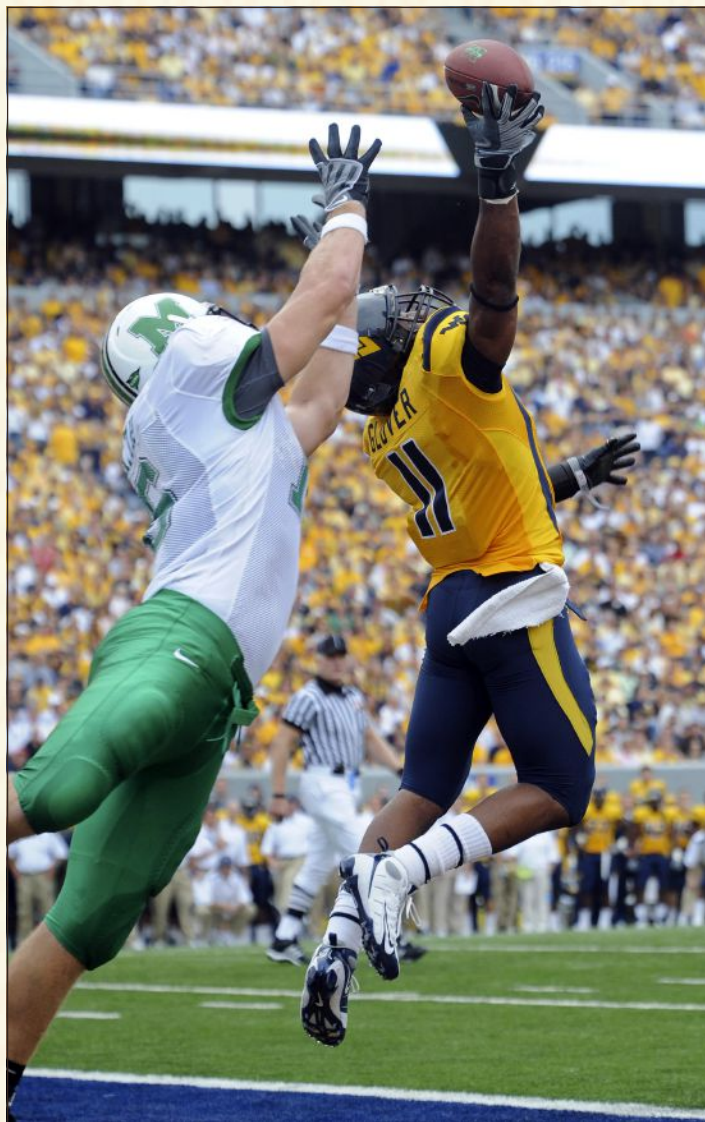
Truth is, Huggins and WVU wanted out of that series because of money. Both schools split the gate 50-50 from that game, which did not sit well with WVU since at least 75% of the fans in attendance at the Charleston Coliseum for those games swore allegiance to WVU.

"Why would we do something that's not in our best interest?" Huggins once said about the WVU-Marshall series ending. "It's not my job to help them."

The point is well taken, which is basically WVU's side of the argument.

WVU would gladly sign a series with Marshall, if Thundering Herd officials would agree to a 3-for-1 type of deal, meaning three games at the Coliseum and one at the Cam Henderson Center.

And while this topic is about men's basketball, it's basically the same setup for football, too. WVU simply will not sign a series with Marshall in either sport that



AP Photo

West Virginia's Sidney Glover (right) breaks up a pass intended for Marshall's Lee Smith during a game Saturday, Sept. 27, 2008, in Morgantown. West Virginia won 27-3.



AP Photo

West Virginia coach Rich Rodriguez holds the Friends of Coal Bowl trophy following West Virginia's 42-10 win over Marshall in a game Saturday, Sept. 2, 2006, in Morgantown. The two intrastate rivals had not met since the 1997 season.

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William Wotring/The Dominion Post

Best Virginia's Nathan Adrian (11) shoots over Herd That's Jacorey Williams (22) during the TBT Tournament at the WesBanco Arena.

MARSHALL

FROM PAGE I-20

doesn't greatly benefit WVU.

This is just a guess, but WVU officials would possibly even consider returning the basketball series to Charleston on an annual basis if the revenues were split in a more equitable fashion based on who is actually buying tickets.

Now, obviously Marshall athletic officials won't agree to any of that for the simple matter of it makes its school look like a vagrant begging

for scraps.

In all honesty, if any one of us were Marshall's athletic director, we wouldn't agree to those terms either.

"I know there's politics and all of that," Elmore said. "They're the big school and stuff. I just think we're all West Virginians and there is that unity and bond. I think the game would mean a lot to the state."

So, what exactly would it take to get WVU and Marshall back to playing hoops again?

It would take one of two things: Either WVU changes its stance and



AP Photo

Invited guests (from left) Ed Pastilong, then-athletic director at West Virginia; Bill Raney, president of the West Virginia Coal Association; then-Gov. Joe Manchin; and Bob Marcum, athletic director at Marshall; share a laugh during a news conference Wednesday, June 21, 2006, in Charleston.

not care so much about money — good luck on that — or Marshall develops into a national brand that's on the same footing as the Mountaineers.

Could that happen? Sure, but it's not happening next week, next year or ... you get the picture.

The truth of it all is it's the fans and the athletes who lose out on a unique opportunity.

To Marshall's side of the argument, it is a special moment for the state, one that can easily be built up in today's age of social media.

Nothing can set off X, formerly Twitter, like a good-old meme battle between two sides of a state.

Will it happen? Probably not in many of our lifetimes.

That still doesn't change the morality of *should* it happen?

"It should definitely happen," Harler said. "I would even say home and away, maybe. Let Morgantown have it one year. Let Huntington have it one year. I think it would be awesome."

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LOST RIVALRIES

The Big 12 loses historic rivalries as Texas and Oklahoma switch to the SEC

Associated Press

There will be no more Bedlam in the Big 12. Baylor will say farewell to the only conference rival it has played annually for a century. The storied Red River rivalry between Oklahoma and Texas will soon take place in a different league.

The Sooners and Longhorns moving to the Southeastern Conference next summer means this season will be the last in the Big 12 for some of its biggest games. The moves will also affect rivalries much older than the Big 12, the league that kicked off in 1996 after the Big Eight merged with four Texas schools from the old Southwest Conference.

The changes are casualties of the latest round of conference realignment, which has seen some two dozen schools change affiliation this season and next.

Oklahoma State coach Mike Gundy, who quarterbacked the Cowboys in the late 1980s and now is the Big 12's longest-tenured coach entering his 19th season, sounded bitter while being blunt

SEE **LOST**, I-23



AP Photo

Oklahoma State (right) gets ready for a play against Oklahoma during the first half of a game, in Norman, Okla., Dec. 3, 2016. The 118th game between Oklahoma and Oklahoma State will be Nov. 4 in Stillwater, where the Cowboys won Bedlam two years ago to get into the Big 12 championship game.

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AP Photo

Baylor defensive back Willie Stewart (30) throws himself into the path of charging University of Texas back Jim Bertelsen (35), after Bertelsen picked up six yards in against Baylor in Waco, Texas, Nov. 9, 1970. Baylor's corner back Dwayne Trammell comes into play at right. Texas won a close game, 21-14.

LOST

FROM PAGE I-22

about the breakup. Bedlam, the annual Oklahoma State-Oklahoma grudge match, has been played 117 times since 1904.

"I'm very traditionalist when it comes to conference rivalry games and such," Gundy said. "The Bedlam game is over because Oklahoma chose to leave the Big 12, period."

Baylor and Texas, whose campuses are about 100 miles apart, have been conference foes since the formation of the Southwest Conference in 1915. The only years the schools haven't played each other since 1923 were during World War II.

As those longstanding rivalries slip away, the league has a chance to build new ones while growing from 10 teams to 16 spread across three time zones and 10 states. There certainly could be some options, including some untraditional ones, though it could take some time for any to develop.

"Looking at what has happened so far, it seemed that it was difficult for people to identify and really start consuming a new rivalry," said Cody Havard, a University of Memphis professor and Texas graduate who does research on sports rivalries.

But he pointed to some possibilities, from new rivalries that

SEE LOST, I-24



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LOST

FROM PAGE I-23

could take shape to old ones that will eventually be coming into the league. The Big 12 does get the “Holy War” of in-state rivals BYU and Utah, and there could be the rekindling of some old SWC brawls with Houston joining the league.

“With all this great expansion, we actually could end up seeing more regionalized rivalries,” Havard said.

BIG 12 RIVALRIES BEING LOST

■ **Texas vs. Oklahoma:** The 11th-ranked Longhorns and No. 20 Sooners will still play and the State Fair of Texas will still be rocking. But after the 119th meeting on Oct. 7, the midseason party moves out of the Big 12 and joins the SEC lineup of grudge matches like Alabama vs. Auburn, Georgia vs. Florida and Ole Miss vs. Mississippi State.

■ **Oklahoma State vs. Oklahoma:** The 118th Bedlam game will be Nov. 4 in Stillwater, where the Cowboys won in 2021 to get to the Big 12 championship game. But the Sooners have dominated overall with 91 victories, the most they have against any team. Oklahoma is 20-7 in Big 12 matchups.

■ **Baylor vs. Texas:** The Big 12 opener for both teams Sept. 23 in Waco will be their 113th meeting since 1901. It is the most-played series for Baylor, but there are no

SEE **LOST**, I-25

AP Photo

Oklahoma (right) runs a play against Texas in the first half of a game Oct. 12, 2019, at the Cotton Bowl in Dallas. The Big 12 will have nothing like the Red River rivalry on the second Saturday in October once Texas and Oklahoma make their move to the Southeastern Conference.

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AP Photo

An Arizona State player pretends to drink out of the Territorial Cup after their 24-14 win over Arizona during their game Saturday, Nov. 30, 2019, in Tempe, Ariz.

LOST

FROM PAGE I-24

future games scheduled. The only teams the Longhorns have played more are Oklahoma and Texas A&M, which they will reunite with in the SEC after not playing each other since 2011.

NEW BIG 12 RIVALRIES?

■ Houston vs. old SWC rivals Baylor, TCU and Texas Tech. Houston has played Texas Tech and TCU, but putting them all back together in the Big 12 will add some new spice between old adversaries.

Dana Holgorsen previously was the coach for West Virginia's move into the Big 12 in 2012, when all the conference foes were new to the Mountaineers. Things are much different for the Cougars.

"We've got history with BYU. We've got history with Cincinnati, Central Florida recently, and then obviously my familiarity with West Virginia," said Holgorsen, in his fifth season at Houston. "But then you go back to the old Southwest Conference in the late 80s and early 90s ... those will get rekindled."

■ Arizona vs. Arizona State. An import from the Pac-12, the Territorial Cup rivalry is ranked at KnowRivalry.com as the nation's most intense in the FBS "because those two teams put so much emphasis on each other," said David Tyler, a UMass associate professor and expert in sports rivalries whose research with Northern Kentucky professor Joe Cobbs is on that website.

■ BYU vs. Utah, the so-called "Holy War" between schools about 45 miles apart. BYU, which played as a football independent the past 12 seasons, is a private school founded and supported by The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. Utah is a public university where one-third of the students identify as Mormon. There have been 101 meetings, though BYU recognizes only 95.

■ More holy wars? BYU vs. Baylor, the world's largest Baptist university, or BYU vs. TCU, which partners with the Christian Church (Disciples of Christ), another Protestant denomination.

■ West Virginia vs. Cincinnati. Before adding all the new schools, the Big 12's geographic outcast was West Virginia. The Mountaineers now have a conference foe only about 300 miles away in Cincinnati. They were also together from 2005-11 in the Big East, and both won conference titles during that span.

■ Colorado vs. Utah. Rockies rivalry, anyone? The two schools have played each other 69 times off and on since 1903 and No. 70 will close the final Pac-12 regular season for both teams Nov. 25 in Salt Lake City. The series went on hiatus after 1962, but they have played each other annually since 2011 and the Utes have won six straight and 10 of the 12 matchups.

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WVU Athletics

"Finally" is displayed on the scoreboard at Old Mountaineer Field as fans tear down the goalpost after West Virginia defeated Penn State 17-14 on Oct. 27, 1984. It was the Mountaineers' first victory in their annual series against the Nittany Lions since 1955.



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WVU Athletics

Running back Pat Randolph's (24) 22-yard touchdown run gave West Virginia a 17-7 lead over Penn State with 11:59 to play during a game on Oct. 27, 1984. Randolph's touchdown gave the Mountaineers the cushion they needed as WVU went on to defeat Penn State 17-14 for its first win in the annual series since 1955.

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West Virginia University quarterback Major Harris (9) crosses the goal line following a 26-yard scramble from a broken play against Penn State on Oct. 29, 1988, at Mountaineer Field. "The Play," as it is called, has been labeled the greatest play in Mountaineer football history.

Dale Sparks/The Dominion Post
File Photo



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AP Photo

In this Dec. 31, 1975, file photo, North Carolina State football coach Lou Holtz (left) congratulates West Virginia coach Bobby Bowden atop the shoulders of his players after West Virginia's 13-10 win in the Peach Bowl college football game in Atlanta.

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Conference realignment will mean longer road trips and greater costs for traveling college football fans

Associated Press

POND GAP, W.Va. — In seven decades of following West Virginia football, little has gotten in the way when Terry Keenan wants to see his beloved Mountaineers.

Conference realignment promises to be a headache.

College sports and the traveling fan are on course for a big reset in 2024. TV money has lured Southern Cal, UCLA, Oregon and Washington to the Big Ten. Arizona, Arizona State, Colorado and Utah will join the growing Big 12. And Oklahoma and Texas will head to the South-eastern Conference.

Although a few regional rivalries have been created or preserved, longer trips will be the norm.

How long? A trip between Oregon and Rutgers is more than 2,400 air miles, would require a stopover and take at least 7.5 hours if things go perfectly. It's less for schools like Southern Cal, UCLA or Washington that would have nonstop flights available.

Time will tell whether football fans will embrace this new concept, or whether realignment will put a dagger into the heart of the road warrior for games that aren't marquee matchups. For every chance for a new Big Ten school to play at Ohio State, there will be trips such as Utah playing UCF in Orlando, Florida, or Arizona State traveling to Morgantown.

Keenan isn't thrilled, although he still has a year to figure it out, especially after the conference schedules are announced.

"Just speaking for myself, I don't know. It's a bad deal, really," said Keenan, 74. "We're on the East Coast and everybody else is in the Midwest or on the West Coast. Probably the majority of the fans won't be able to do that. It puts a burden on them if they want to see the games in person."

Roy Nwaisser has attended every Southern California

SEE TRAVEL, I-31



AP Photo

Terry Keenan is shown at his home Aug. 11 in Pond Gap, Kanawha County. Keenan, a devout fan of West Virginia University football, says he doesn't believe most college football fans will choose to make the longer trips to see their teams play on the road after conference realignment takes shape in 2024.



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TRAVEL

FROM PAGE I-30

game, home or away, since 1992, except in 2020 when fans were prohibited at some games because of the pandemic. One year, his best friend moved his fall wedding to a Friday to accommodate Nwaissner.

Realignment isn't going to do him any favors.

"I'm just a little concerned that moving to the Big Ten is going to exponentially increase the number of things that could go wrong and result in me missing a game and breaking my streak," Nwaissner said.

While distance and cost are the greatest factors, there are other things to consider — weather-related flight delays, cold weather destinations late in the season, the quality of an opponent and whether there's anything else worth doing in a far-away destination.

"It's going to be terrible," said Tom Aiello, a Valdosta State history professor and author of several sports books, including one on the Bayou Classic between Grambling State and Southern. "College football was built on rivalry games, and regional rivalries at that. And those regional rivalries were largely built on some kind of personal issue. And all that goes away in these kind of manufactured conferences that they're creating."

Paying for all the long flights to new places might seem daunting, but domestic leisure traffic is expected to remain strong in 2023 and 2024, the nonprofit U.S. Travel Association said. Government figures show that while average airfares skyrocketed last year as travel began recovering from

COVID-19 restrictions, prices have eased. But hotel rates have kept rising: the average room costs \$156.47, up 19% from August 2019, according to commercial real estate data firm CoStar.

How far fans will go to see their favorite team depends on the situation, said David Tyler, an associate professor at UMass and an expert in sports rivalries.

"There is a limit in terms of the distance that people can travel for these," Tyler said. "But when they're traveling for games, it's typically about the experience when they're traveling those big distances. It's about the experience and the camaraderie and the other people more than the game itself."

While a core group of fans will be willing to travel a certain distance, games requiring that much more time on a plane will hurt attendance, Tyler said. "That's when you'll really see those diehards not willing to travel to those games."

The first few years of realignment shouldn't make a difference, according to two experts in sports rivalries. Joe Cobbs, a professor at Northern Kentucky, said there initially will be a "novelty effect" for traveling fans. Cody Havard, an associate professor in sport commerce at the University of Memphis, calls it the "honeymoon stage."

"Like if you're a big Indiana Hoosiers fan, you might say, oh, this would be great to go and see a game at Oregon. What a great opportunity," Cobbs said. "But, you know, the third, fourth time that they play in Oregon, are those fans still going to want to make that trip if they've already made it?"



Terry Keenan holds up a hat with pins he's collected over the years at his home Aug. 11, in Pond Gap.

AP Photo

Arizona fan Paul Volpe recently embarked on an exhibition trip with the Wildcats basketball team to Israel, so distance isn't an obstacle for him. But getting from Tucson, Arizona, to Morgantown "is going to be tough," he said. "But I'm excited to see the new venues. All of those stadiums, I've never been to."

Realignment also brings disappointment and stress to fans of former Pac-12 schools who will no longer see their team at the Rose Bowl for the conference football championship game or in Las Vegas for basketball.

"To get to Kansas City, at least for basketball, that's going to be a challenge," Volpe said.

Marie Robbins has been an Arizona State fan ever since her family moved to Scottsdale, Arizona, in 1979. Now living in Seattle, she attends Sun Devils' games whenever the chance comes up, either in the Pacific Northwest or back in Arizona.

Despite the longer travel starting

next year, "I'm personally very, very excited because the Big 12 lives, breathes and dies by college football just like I do," Robbins said.

Besides, realignment will open up new avenues for some people to return to their roots.

Robbins said her wife graduated from TCU, "so it already generates some intermarriage household rivalry." She also anticipates a trip to West Virginia, where she lived a few years as a child.

"That's part of the country that is part of our heart and soul," Robbins said.

Keenan has not missed a West Virginia home game since 1975, except during 2020, and has been to every school in the old Big 12, which added BYU, Central Florida, Cincinnati and Houston this season.

His advice to traveling fans in a new conference: "Probably do it while you can," he said. "You just live one time."

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