

# THE BREAK-UP OF THE SOUTHWEST CONFERENCE

By Auston Fertak

When people reminisce about college athletics, only a few select conferences cause them to think, “What a powerhouse!” The Southwest Conference (SWC) was one such conference. For much of its eighty-two year history, the SWC gloried in its distinction as the most tightly-knit league among major college athletic programs. Its excitement and energy ran from deep in the heart of Texas to Arkansas and by 1976 included The University of Texas, Texas A&M, Rice, Texas Christian University (TCU), Baylor, Texas Tech, Southern Methodist University (SMU), and the University of Houston (UH). A premiere football conference with legendary coaches and Heisman Trophy winners, the SWC produced national champions in the 1930s, 1960s, and



1970s. Despite having some of the best college athletes and ranking as a football powerhouse, the SWC fell apart when the desire to win overshadowed ethics and teams began using almost any means necessary to succeed.<sup>1</sup>

Though not the only conference engaging in recruitment violations, the SWC ranked as one of the worst. Constant sanctions levied on the

member universities by the National Collegiate Athletic Conference (NCAA) partly led to the break-up of the SWC. Already at a disadvantage with its small regional television markets, the conference’s bigger universities had their games blacked out because of NCAA violations that landed them on probation. Individual alumni boosters at some SWC universities felt that the NCAA rules did not apply to them because they had not agreed to the NCAA’s terms. These boosters paid student-athletes under the table to attend their alma maters as well as for their performance on the field. At one point the Southwest Conference had seven of its nine teams serving some sort of NCAA sanction that included loss of scholarships, loss of television broadcast rights, and bowl game bans. The lack of institutional control by the presidents and athletic directors kept the cheating going, and the problem went all the way to the office of the governor of Texas, Bill Clements. With the recruiting scandals and NCAA probations for cheating that cut television revenues, the conference’s athletic departments could not meet their multimillion-dollar budgets.<sup>2</sup>

Every year, universities compete to obtain the best high school football talent on national signing day. The

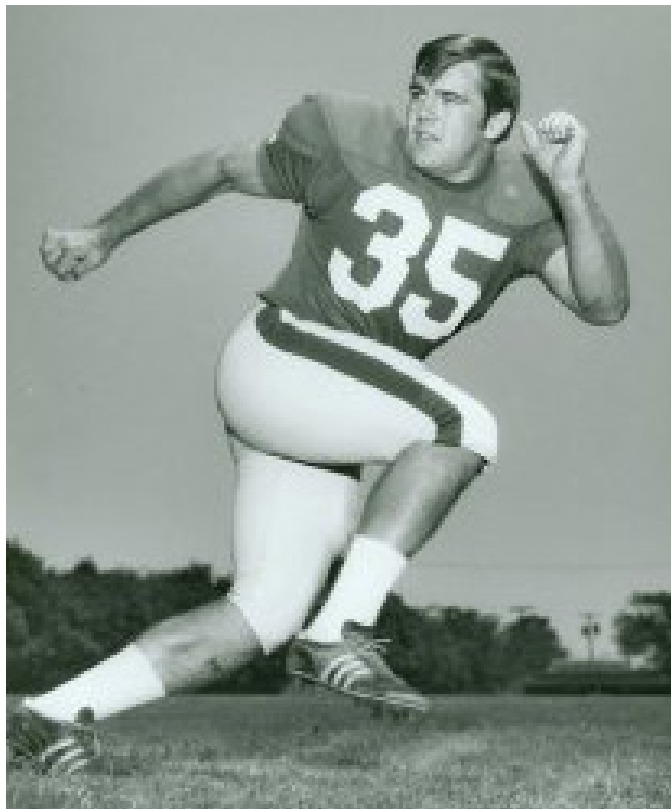
*This portrait of the Southwest Conference mascots reflects the 1976 addition of the University of Houston.*

Photo courtesy of Southwest Conference, Thompsonian Institute.



process involves finding the blue-chip student-athlete who will sign a football scholarship with the hope of improving the school's football program and winning a national championship. National signing day also concludes the recruiting process for that year's class, and universities anxiously await their chance to find and attract the nation's best athletes. In the 1970s and 1980s, the SWC was notorious around college football for repeat recruitment violations by giving athletes money to sign. Persuading teenagers to commit to an athletic scholarship at a particular university is difficult with other universities also vying for those athletes' services. Former SMU coach Ron Meyer said, "It's just the damndest thing with high school kids. You never know what they're going to decide."<sup>3</sup> SWC alumni boosters who sought to circumvent the system found out that money spoke louder than any recruiter ever could.<sup>4</sup>

The Southwest Conference was made up of the "haves" and the "have-nots." The private universities such as SMU, TCU, Baylor, and Rice could not compete with the powerhouse public universities like The University of Texas, Texas A&M, Texas Tech, and Arkansas that had an advantage from their names alone. The smaller universities had to find a way to even the recruiting playing field; many boosters attempted to do this by paying the better athletes to sign with the boosters' school in hopes of winning a national championship. Operating with misguided loyalty, wealthy alumni who contributed to this scheme at times



SMU alum and booster Sherwood Blount was linked to a fund that paid thirteen SMU football players \$61,000 over two years. The NCAA banned him from associating with the athletic department at any time in the future. Photo courtesy of FanBase.

became important, though unofficial and unacknowledged, parts of their universities' athletic programs.<sup>5</sup>

In the most extreme case, SMU suffered the "death penalty" for repeated NCAA violations. But even though "a program could be shut down if it was found guilty of major violations twice within a five-year period," it continued cheating while on probation because it felt an obligation to honor its "contracts" with athletes already on campus—and perhaps also because it assumed no one would suspect a sanctioned university to continue its wrongdoings.<sup>6</sup> Such defiance illustrates how under-the-table competition in the battle for signing football players had become a way of life in some SWC schools. The pride of alumni drove them to employ assistant coaches in their plan to recruit classes of athletes that would produce on the field. As Richard Justice of the *Houston Chronicle* remarked about the SMU case, "It wasn't just that one assistant coach knew. A whole slew of them knew, some of them stuffing envelopes with cash."<sup>7</sup>

SMU was the most penalized university in the SWC, with a total of fourteen sanctions, most of them due to behind-the-scenes dealings of boosters. Dallas, home to SMU, became the new hotbed for real estate and oil in the 1970s. Most of the high-powered lawyers and bankers had gone to SMU and grown tired of their university coming in last in the conference. The biggest booster was Sherwood Blount, a Dallas real estate developer, who had played football at SMU from 1959 to 1961. He was linked to a slush fund that paid thirteen SMU football players \$61,000 over two seasons, and the NCAA banned him for life from any association with the SMU athletic department.<sup>8</sup>

One of college football's worst-kept secrets was the age-old tradition of boosters trying to persuade recruits to consider their school. Usually the way the system worked was that the head football coach went to a recruit's house and tried to sell the recruit on the positives of the university and the success of its football program. If the coach could not get the recruit to sign during the visit, boosters tried to seal the deal, usually offering the



The NCAA placed Texas A&M on probation for recruiting violations in 1957 when Paul "Bear" Bryant served as head coach of the football team.

Photo courtesy of Texas A&M.

recruit money, a house, a car, or anything the boosters thought could persuade the player to accept the scholarship and enroll in the university. Former SMU head coach Ron Meyer claimed, "Many of the best high school players in the state just decided, after years of wanting to be Longhorns and Aggies and Sooners, they wanted to be Mustangs."<sup>9</sup>

Paying players went back to the times of legendary coach Paul "Bear" Bryant. During his time as head coach of Texas A&M, the NCAA placed the Aggies on probation in 1957, when the coach had wealthy alumni give recruits





*In 1981, UH upset SMU 13-11, but SMU went on to win the conference in 1981 and 1982. In 1984, the two schools shared the title.*  
 Photo courtesy of Digital Library, University of Houston.

money to attend Texas A&M. Corruption became so common in the old Southwest Conference that at one point newspaper reporters called the conference “The Old West,” referring to teams getting away with anything and facing minimal repercussions from the NCAA for their actions. In the 1980s, however, all of the schools except Arkansas and Rice served some type of probation, for a series of booster-related scandals of which school personnel were not only aware but involved.<sup>10</sup>

The NCAA had plenty of reason to disassemble the entire conference and make each university independent with no conference affiliation. With the NCAA Committee for Infractions constantly monitoring repeat offenders in over half the conference, the public came to see it as an almost normal event. The constant cycle of probation and sanction against SWC universities limited television exposure and made it difficult for the NCAA to market the schools. UH Professor and General Counsel Eric Bentley stated, “It is very hard to brand a university that isn’t in the public eye as much as they can be.”<sup>11</sup>

Most of the sanctions prevented schools from playing in post-season bowl games with the exception of the Cotton Bowl, which always included a SWC team. This cost the sanctioned universities and the SWC a lot of money because the payouts that would have gone to the SWC were redirected to other universities in other conferences. While the boosters and schools hoped that paying players would improve their chances of winning a championship, the plan backfired because their schools lost the chance to compete in the championship bowl games they so desperately wanted.

In addition to limited media exposure caused by sanctions, the schools were not always the only game in town. TCU and SMU stood within an hour of the Dallas Cowboys; Rice and the University of Houston pulled from the same fan base as the Houston Oilers. Over the decades, the emergence of the Dallas Cowboys and Houston Oilers robbed the SWC’s four schools in Dallas/Fort Worth and Houston of their game-attending fan



*Despite the UH Cougars being subject to NCAA sanctions that kept them off of national television, quarterback Andre Ware won the Heisman Trophy in 1989.*

Photo courtesy of University of Houston.

base. Simply, too many teams feeding off of too few televisions in a small regional media market hurt revenues. The conference was pigeon-holed by the Texas TV market, unlike other conferences such as the Pac Ten and the Southeastern Conference that covered a wider geographic area.

One of the major reasons for the break-up of the conference was the departure of the University of Arkansas to the Southeastern Conference (SEC) in 1991. Arkansas’s departure meant the SWC lost its only media market outside of Texas. The all-Texas conference drew only regional interest and smaller crowds, which limited the schools and the SWC’s media contract negotiations.



*Texas governor Bill Clements was aware of and urged continuation of SMU’s pay-for-play plan for SMU football players in the 1980s.*

Photo courtesy of State of Texas.

After Arkansas departed, the revenue that each SWC university averaged fell by about \$1 million dollars compared to the SEC. The diminishing revenue stream caused attendance to continue to fall and weakened performance on the field. Although the SWC had strong teams until the end, none of the schools remained in the national championship hunt.<sup>12</sup> The final seven SWC champions from 1989 to 1995 failed to win their bowl games, which added to the conference’s losses.

Having strong leadership is important in any facet of life.



*Bill Yeoman, head coach at the University of Houston, reportedly paid players out of a desk drawer.*

Photo courtesy of University of Houston.

Governor Bill Clements knew as early as 1983 of improper payments to SMU football players and was solely responsible for a 1985 decision to continue the pay-for-play scheme.<sup>13</sup> The payments were made with the full knowledge and approval of athletic department staff and the athletic director. "This resulted in the university receiving the NCAA's death penalty that destroyed SMU football for the better part of a quarter-century and contributed to the demise of the Southwest Conference," he added.<sup>14</sup>

The NCAA rule for repeat offenders subjects a university with two major infractions in a five-year period to the harshest penalties the NCAA sees fit to impose. In 1986, the NCAA terminated the entire 1987 and 1988 SMU football seasons. The Board of Regents and Governor Clements were well aware of the slush fund provided by boosters. Clements wanted to phase out payment to new players but continue the payments already promised to existing SMU players.<sup>15</sup>

SMU did not stand alone, and multiple programs became the subject of internal investigations and NCAA inquiries. The NCAA sanctioned the University of Texas when assistant coach Dave McWilliams gave benefits to UT student-athletes for their performance during the game. Conference champion in 1985, Texas A&M faced NCAA investigation when quarterback Kevin Murray reportedly received a car from an Aggie booster.<sup>16</sup> The NCAA could not find any wrongdoing by Texas A&M or Kevin Murray and the school did not receive any type of sanctions or probation.

Texas Christian University (TCU) was caught in 1985 after head coach Jim Wacker, "a devout man," delivered an "honesty and integrity" sermon to his team. "One player felt a guilty conscience and turned himself and five teammates in to an assistant coach," the Ft. Lauderdale *Sun Sentinel* reported.<sup>17</sup> Wacker discovered that an

Strong moral guidelines for making decisions play an important role in maintaining a solid organization. The lack of institutional control by the universities in the SWC had become fully evident during its final years. It appears that neither the administrations nor the athletic departments tried to stop illegal payments to players. According to reporter David Barron, "Texas

alumni slush fund had paid twenty-nine of the TCU scholarship players for performance. Morris Bailey, Texas businessman and a member of the TCU Lettermen's Hall of Fame, told the *Fort Worth Star-Telegram* "Coach [F. A.] Dry once approached him and asked him to set up a slush fund for athletes that would add up to \$90,000 a year."<sup>18</sup> These types of conversations were apparently common practice during this period in the SWC.

In 1988, the NCAA placed the University of Houston on three years' probation, barred it from bowl games for two years and television for one year, and stripped ten of its scholarships after investigating more than 250 recruitment violations between 1978 and 1984. The school had also been sanctioned in 1966 and 1977 for improper payments and recruiting violations. UH head coach since 1962, Bill Yeoman reportedly paid players out of a desk drawer and retired "under fire" in 1986 as the university's winningest coach.<sup>19</sup>

In 1996, the SWC officially disbanded and the teams dispersed, but their fans followed. The University of Texas, Texas A&M, Baylor, and Texas Tech joined the schools in the Big Eight to form the Big 12 Conference. SMU, TCU, and Rice joined the Western Athletic Conference. The University of Houston became a charter member of Conference USA, which formed with the merger of the Metro Conference and Great Midwest Conference. Since then, these conferences, too, have realigned multiple times leaving one to wonder if the long-standing powerhouse conferences are a thing of the past.

Payments to student athletes were rampant in the SWC, and the NCAA was ineffective in stopping the illegal activity. The problem became difficult to contain and too big to fix. Schools and conferences have yet to find a way to distribute or share the revenues generated by sports programs to level the playing field with regard to recruitment for small and large or public and private institutions. Today one need look no further than the Longhorn Network to see the inequities created by the massive sums available to universities with large media markets. Although not the only conference to break the rules, the SWC remains a symbol of the problems with NCAA football.<sup>20</sup>

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*After TCU head coach Jim Wacker gave his players a speech on honesty and integrity, one of his players confessed that he and five teammates had received illegal payments from alumni.*

Photo courtesy of Life and Legacy.