

Special Report

Jim Delany's days as Big Ten Conference commissioner are coming to an end after 30 years on the job. He has been a force – sometimes controversially – for keeping his league at the forefront of many revenue-producing efforts.

The end of the Big Tenure

By Matt Craig

It's difficult to describe Jim Delany without drifting into the realm of the dramatic. A quick Google search for his name would have you believe he's some sort of demigod, ruling dictatorially over all of college athletics. He has been called the Godfather of Conference Realignment. Public Enemy No. 1 of the College Football Playoff. The most powerful man in college sports.

Officially, his title is just Big Ten commissioner. But during 30 years at the post, from which the 71-year-old will retire on Jan. 1, he has been one of the most influential figures in the history of intercollegiate athletics. Either as the architect of television rights deals and nationwide expansion, or – depending whom you ask – merely an overseer during a time of overwhelming market forces, Delany unquestionably ushered in the era of big money in college athletics.

One thing is for sure. The life of a student-athlete has changed dramatically since Delany was lacing up his sneakers for Dean Smith at North Carolina, a member of two Final Four teams and a team captain as a senior in 1970.

"He would tell you he was better than he really was," jokes Eddie Fogler, Delany's teammate and roommate at North Carolina, of his basketball talents. "No he was a good player. Really tough. The competitive piece is a big part of who Jim is."

NBC broadcasted select NCAA Tournament games for the first time in 1969, but even when Delany's Tar Heels reached the Final Four, only the eastern half the country could watch the early semifinal on the network. The western half then watched the later semifinal, featuring Lew Alcindor and the eventual champion UCLA Bruins.

In other words, Delany played at a time when the term "student-athlete" didn't sound like an oxymoron. As recently as this year's Big Ten media day, he lamented the loss of things like the four-year scholarship, the \$15 per month "laundry check," even the freshman

ineligibility rule. The impact of four years under the legendary tutelage of Smith on the rest of Delany's life cannot be overstated.

"One thought I've had for really my whole adult life after leaving North Carolina was that I think – and this might sound less than true, but it's a true statement – I think we made some real serious mistakes in the '70s that have come to create problems for us," Delany said. "I think that's really expedited everything and

millions in today's NBA instead of the semimonthly payments of \$4,177 he got from the ABA?"

Then, as now, people make the most of their circumstances. The power of money in the sport, both as a competitive advantage between schools and a provider of new opportunities across the board, is a Pandora's box that very few choose not to open.

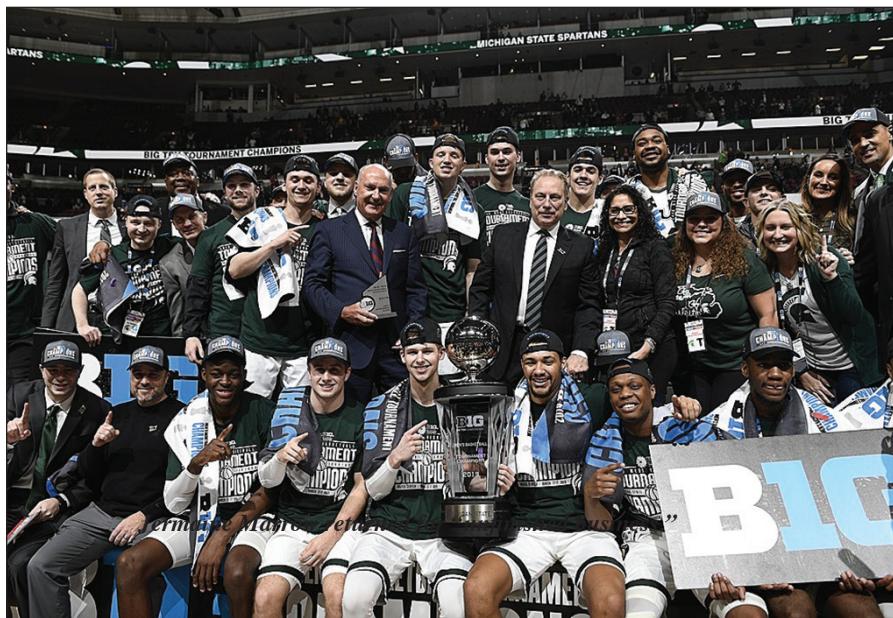
Which is why the same logic should be applied to Delany. The common criticisms leveled against him point toward a moral high ground that ignores one of a commissioner's primary responsibilities: to maximize the resources for member institutions.

When he took over the Big Ten in 1989, after a decade as the commissioner of the Ohio Valley Conference and four years as an NCAA enforcement representative, there was real money to be made. Just five years earlier, the landmark U.S. Supreme Court decision "NCAA v. Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma" outlawed the NCAA monopoly on media rights, giving schools and conferences the ability to negotiate television contracts on their own behalf. The Big Ten and Pacific-10 saw the potential for massive television money first and sold their rights to ABC.

The Big Ten, anchored in the Midwest, saw an opportunity in central Pennsylvania. The conference added Penn State in 1990, Delany's very first

year as commissioner. He was keenly aware of the financial incentives tied to access and exposure in the Pittsburgh and Philadelphia television markets. "If full integration were to occur," he said in an Associated Press story at the time, "I think the dollars generated by their exposure would go into our pot and would be divided 11 ways."

Thus began the Super Conferences scramble. Over the next decade, the SEC picked up Arkansas and South Carolina; the Big Eight brought in Texas, Texas Tech, Baylor and Texas A&M; the ACC added Florida State; the Big East swallowed Virginia Tech, Rutgers, West Virginia, Temple and Miami.



Jim Delany (second row, left of center) and Big Ten champion Michigan State.

hasn't allowed for the full socialization, cultural and academic, for students."

It's easy to be nostalgic for simpler times. The tidal wave of money, which Delany helped create, has certainly complicated the idea of student-athletes and amateurism, leading to the highly commercialized product we see today. But does this reality reflect changing attitudes of student-athletes, or simply changing opportunities?

Would Charlie Scott, the first African-American scholarship athlete at North Carolina and a 1970 graduate alongside Delany, have turned down a professional career if his 22-point career scoring average could yield

More markets meant more money, which meant more success on the field and the court. Minnesota reached the Final Four for the first time in 1997; Ohio State made it in 1999 for the first time in 31 years; and Wisconsin made it in 2000 for the first time in 59 years. During the same span, Michigan and Ohio State won national championships on the gridiron for the first time in three decades.

If one must ascribe Delany an overly dramatic and unnecessarily harsh comparison, perhaps the most accurate would be Gordon Gekko. He couldn't help but capitalize on his foresight. This greed-is-good reputation started during a media rights contract renegotiation in 2004. Delany recalled an exchange with ESPN executive vice president Mark Shapiro in a Chicago Tribune article by Teddy Greenstein: "He low-balled us and said: 'Take it or leave it. If you don't take our offer, you are rolling the dice.' I said: 'Consider them rolled.'"

Delany's gamble was on the creation of a Big Ten Network, the first of its kind, which would carry exclusive games and compete directly for cable subscription fees.

"He threw his weight around," Shapiro said in the same Tribune article, "and said, 'I'm going to get my big (rights-fee) increase and start my own network.' Had ESPN stepped up and paid BCS-type dollars, I think we could have prevented the network. In retrospect, that might have been the right thing to do. Jim is making a nice penny on that."

Many predicted doom leading up to the launch of the network, even with Fox on board as a 49 percent partner (Fox now owns 51 percent). Then the unthinkable happened. On Sept. 1, 2007, in the first game ever broadcast on the Big Ten Network, defending Rose Bowl champion Michigan lined

up for one of college football's most iconic field-goal attempts. The kick was blocked, and FCS foe Appalachian State shocked the Wolverines at the Big House. All eyes were on the upstart conference cable network.

Within two years, BTN turned a profit. In 2006, Delany portioned off 40 football and 60 basketball games annually in a 10-year, \$1 billion deal with his old friends at ESPN. By 2009-10, each member school was getting \$22 million in TV revenue payouts, with \$7 million coming from BTN.

Once again, the rest of the country followed Delany and the Big Ten's example. Up popped the Pac-12 Network, Longhorn Network, SEC Network, and recently the ACC Network. With a direct pipeline to subscription dollars, television markets became even more important. Another round of conference expansion followed.

Delany acknowledged BTN "was a factor" in adding Nebraska to the conference in 2011, but the tradition-rich Midwestern powerhouse was accepted as a perfect fit for the league. He drew more ire for the decision to bring in Rutgers and Maryland, schools that are geographically distant with athletics programs that have been mired in scandal and mediocrity since joining the Big Ten in 2014.

Ah, but the money. Once those programs clear a six-year transition plan and begin receiving the full benefits of conference revenue sharing, it's hard to believe their fortunes won't improve. Either way, the Big Ten extends into Washington D.C. and New York City, the host cities for the past two conference basketball

at the highest level. And since Delany gets the biggest money, his schools are always in a position to succeed. What more can one ask from a conference commissioner?

Apparently, some altruism. Delany's prosperity has given him a megaphone, and the media often asks him to speak through it on the sport's hottest topics. Some have been disappointed to learn Delany puts his constituency first. "The conference has its views. I have mine. Mine are typically subordinated to theirs," he said in July. Nor has he been above wielding virtue as a tool to politic the league's interests.

For years, he was a public opponent of a playoff system in college football, citing decreased importance of regular-season games, player health and scheduling into the student-athletes' second semester. Really, he was incentivized to hold on to the Rose Bowl, a cash cow that he called in 2011 "the most important external relationship we have," hoping to "maintain it indefinitely into the future."

Then the playoff launched in 2014, crowning Ohio State its first champion. Michigan State gained entry in Year Two. By Year Three, Delany went on College GameDay to say, "The College Football Playoff has been terrific for college football, in large part because people are playing people. So it should be about who you play, who you beat." The comment advocated for Ohio State, which eventually earned a place in the playoff without winning the Big Ten championship. After being shut out of the playoff in the two seasons since, Delany told The Athletic's Nicole Auerbach in December that he was "happy to discuss" an expansion of the playoff to eight teams.

His comments on amateurism have followed a similar pattern, pushing for a full cost of attendance stipend that accelerated power five autonomy, then drawing a hard line at pay-for-play reform. He referenced the righteous dangers on either side, when applicable.

In other words, he did his job. And sometimes, as commissioner, that meant being the public punching bag (just ask Roger Goodell).

He was rewarded handsomely for it. The Washington Post reported a salary in 2016 of \$3.1 million, second highest among conference commissioners. In 2017 the USA Today unearthed \$20 million in "future bonus payments" the conference owes him according to his employment contract, the details of which were never released.

The biggest question is how the Big Ten will change under Delany's successor. Kevin Warren, 55, will be just the sixth commissioner since the conference's founding in 1896. In addition to becoming the first African-American commissioner of a Power Five conference, he also spent a portion of his career running his own sports agency, before most recently serving as the chief operating officer of the Minnesota Vikings. Perhaps those experiences will shape his views on NCAA amateurism, which will no doubt be the defining issue early in his tenure.

And yet, if he is to be compared to a figure like Jim Delany, the measuring system is pretty simple: dollars and cents.



Former North Carolina Tar Heels Gerald Tuttle, Eddie Fogler, Dick Grubar and Jim Delany.

tournaments, further moving the league from a regional to a national brand. At media day in July, that word got thrown around a lot. "We recruit nationally, we have national television second to none, we have resources, we've reinvented our stadiums, we have world-class, national-class coaches," Delany said.

The Big Ten's economic advantage on other power conferences has only widened in recent years. The conference's latest rights deal with ESPN and Fox Sports added up to a mind-boggling \$2.64 billion over six years. Last year, the conference reported \$759 million in revenue and paid out to each member school a whopping \$54 million. That's 24 percent more money than SEC schools get, 56 percent more than Big 12 schools and 83 percent more than ACC and Pac-12 schools.

In modern sports, it takes big money to compete