

Clay

Continued from Page 6

reason for the league's durability is that state legislators would never allow it to come apart. The state has expressed its commitment to the well-being of the SWC.

UT and A&M are state schools, and the amount of state money granted to both institution's coffers is substantial.

Our legislature made it clear that UT and A&M would lose state support should they abandon the conference. This loss of state funding would dwarf any financial gains both schools might receive from moving into a different conference.

Legislators are aware of the importance of the SWC to the state of Texas and will not allow the flagships to set sail for distant waters.

In addition, state offices are filled not only with alumni from A&M and UT, but also Texas Christian, Southern Methodist, Baylor, Rice, Texas Tech and Houston. They would never allow their schools' athletic programs to disappear, and this would surely happen if UT and A&M left the SWC.

In college sports, football and men's basketball have always been the primary indicators of whether a school is alive or dead.

Despite the SWC's overall weakness in these areas for several years, there have been several successful programs throughout the conference in almost every NCAA

sport. The strength of individual programs has helped the SWC survive post-Arkansas withdrawal.

There were few NCAA sports that did not have a SWC school placed in the top 25 in the nation last year. Such sports as golf, tennis, track and even sailing had a conference school recognized as one of the top 25 in Division I competition. Football and basketball polls did have conference representation although it was minimal with the exception of A&M's seventh place spot in the Associated Press' final rankings.

There is one point that is often overlooked by league detractors: the greatest baseball conference in the nation belongs to the SWC.

A&M is building a great program that should rival the legendary Texas program for conference supremacy. At one point last year, seven of the eight conference teams were in the top 25.

While men's basketball floundered in Texas, Tech's women's basketball team won the national championship. UT's women's basketball is known for their competitive teams, even though they've had to deal with some bad press this summer.

UT also has had one of the nation's best swimming programs for several years. SMU is recognized for their fine swimming program, and A&M is moving in; building a swimming facility to rival the top five in the country.

What the conference lacked, however, was the ability to promote these successful programs on a national level. Enter Steve Hatchell.

Hatchell left the front office of the Orange Bowl to take

the commissioner's seat. He was a successful organizer of a multi-million dollar enterprise and, before that, a prominent figure in Big Eight basketball.

Only a short time after he took the job with the SWC, he promoted the SWC basketball tournament like it never has been.

Hatchell employed the services of a major public relations firm to oversee event promotion and has toiled to organize a legitimate officiating department, an area of considerable embarrassment in the past. His efforts boosted an event that lost a large segment of its audience when Arkansas left.

In college sports recruiting success is often directly proportional to the amount of TV exposure your program receives. Hatchell seems to have a firm grasp on that concept.

This summer, the commissioner's office announced that the SWC basketball championship game will be nationally televised on ESPN.

Just recently, Hatchell's office announced that eleven men's basketball games and two women's games will be carried on the new ESPN2 station.

There will be at least 50 conference games televised on other networks - a 56 percent increase over the amount of last season's network coverage.

It is apparent that the SWC is not on the verge of destruction, and apparently the league has always had the motivation and tools to be successful.

With the change of management in the front office, the conference now has the ability to promote its product and open the doors to national success.

The SWC is on the way up.

The Associated Press Top 25

1. Florida State (58)
2. Alabama (4)
3. Miami
4. Notre Dame
5. Florida
6. Nebraska
7. Ohio State
8. Michigan
9. Penn State
10. Oklahoma
11. Tennessee
12. Arizona
13. Syracuse
14. Texas A&M
15. Washington
16. N. Carolina
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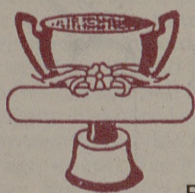
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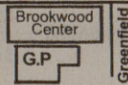
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