The Sun Belt screwed up by dropping New Mexico State football, but what else is new
That may wind up being a positive for the Aggies, but it's business as usual for a poorly run conference.
By Nicolas A. Lewis

So I don't know if you know this, but the Sun Belt Conference has capitalized on the opportunity to shrink it's size over the past few months. They are in hot pursuit of a ten-team conference with a conference championship game and a narrow geographic footprint, which will turn them into a New Year's Six contender.

Wait, what?

Early this offseason, a tweak to the NCAA rules made it so that a conference could have a title game with either 10 or 12 members. This was primarily aimed at the Big 12, who is desperately concerned about falling behind the rest of the P5 in both relevance and revenue.

They even hired a firm to determine the best conference alignment for their College Football Playoff odds, and found that expansion would give them only a fractional bump in their chances. This is relevant, of course, because the Big 12 has only 10 members right now, and whether or not that number will increase has a very direct trickle-down effect on just about every inch of the Group of Five.

Almost all of the most likely and most often mentioned expansion targets for the Big 12 are in the American (UConn, Cincinnati, Houston). If the AAC loses membership, they likely poach from Conference USA, who maybe does the same from the Sun Belt, and so on ad infinitum.

So what's this got to do with NMSU and the SBC?

The Sun Belt voted in March to proactively shift to a ten-team football conference in 2018 via the termination of Idaho and New Mexico State as football-only members. It is still a future event, but I can assure you that this alignment causes more problems than it solves.

The conference has said that one of their big reasons for doing this was to rein themselves into a more logical and financially feasible geographic footprint. This is certainly true, as you can then have clear East and West divisions that will reduce travel, as well as the removal of two rather extreme geographic outliers that will cut down on travel as a whole.
But at what cost? Because that's about the only positive they'll have.

Sure, Karl Benson will tell anyone who will listen that their CFP revenue will now get split 10 ways instead of 12 and more is more, but does anyone truly believe that a $200,000 increase in per-team playoff revenue is going to do anything to close the competitive gap the Sun Belt faces?

That revenue bump would be necessary just to counteract the potentially lost money from the shift from eight to nine conference games. I am quite certain that teams like Louisiana-Monroe will see as much gain from a bigger piece of the revenue pie as they will lose from one less payout game.

For the Big 12, this all centers around improving their odds of making the CFP, which makes for some debatably justified hand-wringing; for the Sun Belt, it would change absolutely nothing beyond how they decide who goes to the New Orleans Bowl.

Benson, per his comments from media day last year, seems to think that a conference title game could create the first 12-0 Sun Belt champion, which would then lead to the Sun Belt champ being the highest ranked G5. This would definitely be true... if it was still 2007 and Boise State had just beaten Oklahoma.

We all saw what happened last season. The American Athletic Conference was so competitive and talented that the only hope any other conference had was to go undefeated and have the AAC cannibalize itself enough to slide in at the last second.

There is enough parity in the AAC that there's no guarantee of an undefeated season, but that's also the only G5 conference where you don't have to be undefeated in order to get ranked. The Sun Belt, on the other hand, just played their first season with more than two bowl tie-ins and barely managed to fill them.

So you have the weakest football conference deciding to shrink it's geographic footprint and overall membership in an attempt to boost revenue on a per-team basis, but what if realignment does happen? Suddenly the Sun Belt would lose more of its best teams and have to scramble into FCS to fill the gap, lest they fall further into oblivion as an eight-team conference.

Now comes the best part. The Sun Belt will regret dropping down to 10 teams, but they also specifically will regret dropping New Mexico State. The Aggies didn't make sense as a football-only member, but what about a full membership?

NMSU would immediately become the best men's and women's basketball program by a wide margin, and would boost the conference profile in those sports significantly and immediately. That would seem to make the move a value addition, even if you don't believe as I do that Mario Moccia is leading a financial and perceptual renovation of NMSU athletics as a whole.

In their PowerPoint you saw a program that is trying to reinvest in itself in all the right ways; that program is probably going to make itself attractive to a conference looking for a shot in the arm, and realignment could leave the SBC on the outside of the bidding for a trinket they had first dibs on. One that they decided they were somehow better than.