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Big 12 commish proposes no redshirt, more eligibility

By Tim Griffin
ESPN.com

COLORADO SPRINGS, Colo. -- Big 12 commissioner Dan Beebe has repeatedly heard football coaches complain about the attrition caused by dwindling scholarship limits and longer seasons. And he wants to do something about it.

Beebe has proposed a plan that would provide five years of eligibility for college football players. He hopes to gain support before eventually taking his idea to the NCAA Management Council for action.

The proposal would end redshirting in college football and cease the current practice of four seasons of eligibility during a five-year window.

Beebe said that college football differs than other sports because of the widespread practice of redshirting freshmen.

"The thought would be why we would give them an extra year in that sport," Beebe said. "But you're talking about a sport with more redshirts than any other sport. And it's a sport where youngsters play a physical, very tough game with a lot of hard practices."

Several coaches said the five-year eligibility plan would do away with "redshirt blues" that often affect young players who redshirt early in their careers but don't have a chance to compete in games.

"There's nothing to play for if you're a redshirt kid and there's a lot of disillusionment," Beebe said. "And [coaches] don't want to burn a year on a kid who looks promising by just playing him on the kickoff team."

The five-year eligibility plan has been around since the early 1990s and was most recently championed by former Nebraska athletic director Steve Pederson. The biggest obstacle has been opposition from faculty representatives for sanctioning an extra season of eligibility when many of their classmates finish much sooner.

But the pressure of keeping players eligible with academic enhancements has grown as scholarship limits have been cut in recent years and college football has gone to a 12-game regular season. The initial level of 105 scholarships was trimmed to 95 before settling at its current level of 85 scholarships for Division I-A teams.

The limited number of scholarships has made some coaches hesitant to use young players in spot situations. Current NCAA football eligibility rules say that if a player competes in up to 30 percent of a team's games in a particular season, he exhausts that year of eligibility. That rule can occasionally be waived pending an appeal to the conference or the NCAA in cases such as an injury.

NCAA statistics indicate that Division I-A college football players take an average of 4.7 years to graduate. Teams would benefit from a fifth year of eligibility with extra depth, removing the worry for coaches regarding redshirting.

"This idea makes so much sense," Texas Tech coach Mike Leach said. "It would eliminate all kinds of appeals and legislation about injuries. And it typically takes most people five years to graduate, and I think this would help the graduation rates."

Beebe serves on the NCAA's Football Enhancement working group chaired by Oklahoma athletic director Joe Castiglione. Several faculty representatives are on that committee, giving the Big 12 commissioner an immediate chance to sell his plan to some of its biggest traditional critics.

"The argument against it is you do it for football you have to do it for every other sport," Beebe said. "But every sport

is a little unique. Let's address the issues in that sport. And I think that five years of eligibility in football makes sense."

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