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Colleges offering top dollar for non-conference home games

By Thomas O'Toole, USA TODAY

DALLAS — Monetary guarantees for non-conference home football games are rising at "a fairly alarming rate," according to a top athletics director, and in some cases surpassing or approaching \$1 million.

Ohio State, for example, will pay \$1.4 million for Navy to come to Columbus in the 2009 season. Wisconsin will pay "just under \$1 million" for each of two home games against Northern Illinois, according to athletics director Barry Alvarez. Texas is paying \$900,000 to Florida Atlantic this fall. Arkansas is paying Tulsa \$850,000, and Georgia and Tennessee are paying more than \$800,000 for a single home foe.

"I would say it has been building over the last five to eight years, and I think what really triggered upward mobility of guarantees was the addition of the 12th game (in 2006)," Kevin White, new AD at Duke and president of the National Association of Collegiate Directors of Athletics, said at the group's convention. "I think it's just subject to whatever the market will bear. There is no way to legislate against this kind of escalation. I think at some point it will move into a maintenance phase. But the cost of doing business has become much steeper than in years gone by as it relates to having a one-way opponent."

Major powers often are eager to pay guarantees because they take in several million dollars at a home game, not to mention the ripple effects in their towns from a crowd of 90,000 or 100,000. It also gives them a competitive advantage that could have implications for Bowl Championship Series spots. Less successful teams or those with smaller athletic budgets see guarantee games as a way to build their coffers and give players the experience of facing a major power in a huge stadium.

The 12th game gave impetus to the increase and created a bidding war among bigger schools, say some ADs.

"As you start building your program, you want to play more games on your campus," said Missouri's Mike Alden. Missouri has not paid more than \$600,000. Alden expects that to change if the Tigers continue their recent success. Good records and the size of a team's stadium also drive the price, Alden says, partly because "of the perception that you are successful and you must have greater revenues."

Some schools are trying to negotiate 2-for-1 deals, where the big-money school gets two games with just one return. Oklahoma will do that with Tulsa.

Contests between powers such as Ohio State and Southern California, who play in September in Los Angeles, are typically home-and-home deals with each team keeping the bulk of its own gate.

"You talk about coaches salaries skyrocketing," said Georgia athletics director Damon Evans, "now the guarantees are just skyrocketing."

"We haven't had to pay a million yet, but we're looking at it. It wasn't that long ago that we were paying \$350,000 to \$400,000."

Said Oklahoma athletics director Joe Castiglione, "The needle is north of \$800,000."

Castiglione said he offered a school \$725,000 last year but was turned down and later learned the school was using his offer in talks to get

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more from another school.

"It's very frustrating," said Castiglione. "In some cases, people are dishonoring contracts, typically without much time to find a suitable replacement."

Ohio State's Gene Smith calls the Navy payout a "special situation" and says he doesn't plan to pay that much at least until after 2014 because his schedule is set till then. The Navy payout came because another school pulled out of a contract with Ohio State, leaving the Buckeyes with a hole in their schedule. But Navy had to buy its way out of a contract in order to come. Ohio State's guarantee will in effect cover Navy's buyout as well.

"We've always wanted to play a service academy," said Smith. "This is our opportunity to do it, and we can afford it."

So where is this headed? The ADs say the market will make that determination. But Castiglione said some he has talked with are openly wondering whether the rewards at home are worth the cost of the guarantee, particularly if the home team loses, as Michigan famously did to Appalachian State last year.

"One has to make the decision if they want to be in that marketplace," he said.

While schools such as Ohio State can afford the payments, many in the Football Bowl Subdivision are not as well equipped.

Another issue is whether perks will be added to contracts beyond the money. Normally, the transaction is purely money. But could some kind of incentives become the norm?

"I'm sure it's coming," said Evans. "There's no doubt in my mind."

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