

ESPN out of Big Ten TV rights negotiations

By **JOE REEDY and RALPH D. RUSSO**
AP Sports Writers

As the Big Ten prepares to become a 16-team, coast-to-coast superconference with the additions of USC and UCLA in 2024, it is ending a 40-year relationship with ESPN and moving toward partnerships with two new networks.

Two people familiar with the negotiations told The Associated Press on Tuesday that the Big Ten was looking for a seven-year deal worth \$380 million per year to broadcast its football and basketball games from ESPN, and the network declined.

Both spoke to The AP on condition of anonymity because the negotiations were

not being made public.

The deal would not have given ESPN first choice of Big Ten football games in a given week at any point and would have reduced the number of Big Ten games the network could broadcast from the current 27 to about half that number, one of the people familiar with the talks said.

ESPN has held television rights for Big Ten football since 1982. The network shares Big Ten football and basketball rights with Fox in the current contract, which expires in 2023.

Fox, which owns 61% of the Big Ten Network, will remain the conference's primary rights holder, with CBS and NBC set to join as partners, one of the people told The AP.

CBS' long-term deal with the Southeastern Conference is set to expire after the 2023 season. That deal gave CBS the rights to the SEC's football game of the week, usually slotted in the 3:30 p.m. Eastern time window on fall Saturdays.

ESPN secured that SEC package to go with the rights it already owned from the powerhouse conference for \$300 million per year. Starting in 2024, ESPN will be the exclusive network home of the SEC.

It appears CBS will replace SEC football with the Big Ten on Saturday afternoons, though the network is not likely to have the exclusive first choice of games the way it did with the SEC.

The Big Ten said Tuesday

in a statement its new television contracts are still being finalized.

"The conference continues to have productive meetings with both linear and direct-to-consumer media partners," the conference said.

An announcement on a new set of deals that is expected to be worth more than \$1 billion annually to the Big Ten is expected soon.

Sports Business Journal first reported ESPN was out of the Big Ten negotiations and CBS and NBC were each positioned to land a piece of the conference's rights for upward of \$300 million per year.

In June, the Big Ten announced it was expanding West with the additions of the Pac-12's two flagship Los Angeles-based schools: Southern

California and UCLA.

The move came a little less than a year after it was revealed Texas and Oklahoma would be leaving the Big 12 and joining the SEC in 2025, when the Big 12's TV contract runs out.

The Pac-12 is next up to the negotiating table among the Power Five conferences, with deals set to expire after the 2023-24 season. The Big 12's current deals run out after the 2024-25 academic year.

While neither conference is expected to come anywhere close to landing deals that rival in value the Big Ten's and SEC's, not having the Big Ten creates more space for ESPN to fill on its family of networks.

Goodell: NFL appeal of Watson suspension 'right thing to do'

By **TOM WITHERS**
AP Sports Writer

BEREA, Ohio — NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell said he feels the league needed to keep pushing for a year-long suspension for Cleveland Browns quarterback Deshaun Watson because of his "egregious" and "predatory behavior" toward women.

Speaking at the owners' meetings Tuesday in Bloomington, Minnesota, Goodell addressed the league's decision to appeal a six-game suspension given to Watson by Sue L. Robinson, a former federal judge appointed by the NFL and NFL Players Association as an independent league disciplinary officer.

Robinson found Watson violated the league's conduct policy after he was accused by two dozen women of sexual assault or harassment while he played for Houston. Watson has settled 23 of the 24 lawsuits filed by the women, though he has denied any wrongdoing.

The league has been seeking an indefinite suspension and fine for Watson, and felt Robinson's six-game ban wasn't enough. Goodell cited the collective bargaining agreement for empowering the league to seek further discipline.

"Either party could certainly challenge and appeal that and that was something that we felt was our right to do as well as NFLPA," Goodell said. "So we decided it was the right thing to do."

Watson's fate now rests with Peter C. Harvey, a former New Jersey attorney general handpicked by Goodell to handle the appeal. Harvey has previously worked as an arbiter in league cases.

Goodell said the league is pushing for a full-year penalty for Watson because of the evidence against the 26-year-old, who was accused of being sexually inappropriate with the women during massage therapy sessions while with the Texans in 2020 and 2021.

In her 16-page ruling, Robinson concluded Watson violated the league's personal conduct policy with his behavior, using both "egregious" and "predatory" to describe his actions

Goodell was asked why the league is seeking a harsher punishment.

"Because we've seen the evidence," he said. "She (Robinson) was very clear about the evidence. She reinforced the evidence, that there was multiple violations here and they were egregious, and that it was predatory behavior."

"Those were always things we felt was really important for us to address and in a way that's responsible."

Goodell doesn't have a sense of when Harvey will issue a decision. There's no specific deadline for Harvey, but the appeal policy requires that it be "expedited."

There also remains the possibility the sides could reach a settlement.

While attending the meetings in Minnesota, Cleveland owner Jimmy Haslam had little to say about the ongoing appeal.

"We'll respect and honor the process," he told reporters

Meanwhile, Watson's playing status for the Browns' exhibition opener is unknown.

Browns coach Kevin Stefanski didn't reveal whether Watson will play in Friday's game in Jacksonville. Stefanski said the team has a plan but he won't make it public until he tells his players.

"We have a framework for how we are going to handle this preseason," he said. "As you know, you always reserve the right to change your mind based on how practice goes and those type of things, but we are pretty confident in the plan we have."

Stefanski said Watson will make the trip to Florida. The three-time Pro Bowler has not played since 2020. He sat out last season after demanding a trade and before the allegations came to light.

Cleveland's plan has been to start Jacoby Brissett while Watson serves his suspension. But now that it's possible that it will encompass most, if not all of the season, there's a chance the team could look outside for another quarterback.

Josh Rosen and Josh Dobbs are also on Cleveland's roster and are expected to get the bulk of the playing time during the exhibition season.



Photo by Mike Mulholland/Getty Images

Kevin Harvick's win on Sunday in Michigan complicates the NASCAR playoff seeding in the final weeks of the season.

Harvick's win complicates NASCAR playoff spots in final weeks

By **LARRY LAGE**
AP Sports Writer

BROOKLYN, Mich. — NASCAR just got more interesting down the stretch.

Kevin Harvick won his first Cup race in nearly two years at Michigan International Speedway over the weekend — a result that could mean a driver who has a win getting knocked out of the playoffs.

"It creates a big bubble," Harvick said Sunday. "I think some of those guys that have won races that hadn't been doing very good, it creates a real scenario to where there could be at least 16 winners. There's a lot of things that can still happen."

Just three races remain in the regular season — the next being Sunday at Richmond Raceway in Virginia, and time is running out to secure a spot in the

16-driver postseason.

Fifteen different drivers have won races this year. If there are two new winners in the final weeks at Richmond, Watkins Glen or Daytona, someone with one win will be eliminated from the playoff based on a tiebreaker on points.

Martin Truex Jr. is No. 4 in points, but he does not have a win and desperately needs one to earn a spot in the round of 16 at Darlington Raceway in South Carolina. Ryan Blaney is second in points, but he, too, is without a victory.

Should they both land a first-place finish at a race, someone like Austin Cindric or Chase Briscoe could be staying at home next month.

"We're racing 19 (Cindric) — obviously for points — and try to win the race," Blaney said after making a late pass to finish fifth.

No one could catch

Harvick in his No. 4 Ford following a restart with 35 laps to go at the FireKeepers Casino 400. Bubba Wallace had maybe the best chance to compete with Harvick, but he choose a path for the No. 23 Toyota that he later lamented.

"I want to win so bad, and this was the best opportunity," Wallace said after finishing second following his first career pole.

Harvick, meanwhile, won his 59th career Cup event and ended a 65-race drought that started after winning his ninth race during the 2020 playoffs at Bristol Motor Speedway.

"I've been through longer winless streaks," he said with a shrug.

That's a fact: Harvick's longest streak is 115 races from 2007 to 2010.

The Stewart-Haas Racing driver went to Michigan sitting at No. 17 in points and left in ninth

place. It was his sixth win overall at the two-mile oval. The 46-year-old insisted he didn't need the latest result to boost his confidence.

"Maybe I'm overconfident," he said. "I expect to win until the door closes."

Ford certainly needed assurances it could win with the Next Gen car, considering Chevrolet has dominated the series with 13 victories, including four for points leader Chase Elliott.

Harvick gave Ford its first Cup win in two months and fifth of the season to pull into a second-place tie with Toyota.

"We just have to keep pushing and try to run with those (top) guys and we have," Harvick crew chief Rodney Childers said. "If we can do that in the playoffs and be consistent and get through a round or two, we can make some noise."

Serena Williams calling it a career

By **HOWARD FENDRICH**
AP Tennis Writer

Saying "the countdown has begun," 23-time Grand Slam champion Serena Williams announced Tuesday she is ready to step away from tennis so she can turn her focus to having another child and her business interests, presaging the end of a career that transcended sports.

In an essay released Tuesday by Vogue magazine, and a post on Instagram — the sorts of direct-to-fans communication favored these days by celebrities, a category she most definitely fits — Williams was not completely clear on the timeline for her last match, but she made it sound as if that could be at the U.S. Open, which begins Aug. 29 in New

York.

"There comes a time in life when we have to decide to move in a different direction. That time is always hard when you love something so much. My goodness do I enjoy tennis. But now, the countdown has begun," Williams, who turns 41 next month, wrote on Instagram. "I have to focus on being a mom, my spiritual goals and finally discovering a different, but just (as) exciting Serena. I'm gonna relish these next few weeks."

Williams, one of the greatest and most accomplished athletes in the history of her — or any other — sport, wrote in the essay that she does not like the word "retirement" and prefers to think of this stage of her life as "evolving away from tennis, to-

ward other things that are important to me."

"I feel a great deal of pain. It's the hardest thing that I could ever imagine. I hate it. I hate that I have to be at this crossroads," she wrote. "I keep saying to myself, I wish it could be easy for me, but it's not. I'm torn: I don't want it to be over, but at the same time I'm ready for what's next."

That she would be publicly contemplating the end of her playing days is not all that surprising, given her age — her 10 Grand Slam titles after turning 30 are unsurpassed — her history of injuries and her recent record: one victory in a singles match in the past 12 months (that win arrived Monday in Toronto; she is scheduled to play again on Wednesday).

"Serena Williams is a generational, if not multigenerational, talent who had a profound impact on the game of tennis, but an even greater influence on women in sports, business and society. At a time when our nation and the world have wrestled with essential issues of identity, Serena has stood as a singular exemplar of the best of humanity after breaking through countless barriers to her participation and ultimate success," U.S. Open tournament director Stacey Allaster said. "She leaves an indelible legacy of grace and grit that will inspire athletes, female and male, for many generations to come. We can't thank her enough for all she has done for our sport."