

Monday Morning Quarterback: For the Sun Belt, a lame but lucrative duck

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COMMENTARY

Theo Lawson



There's no refuting the fact that the Idaho Vandals continue to pen the script of what we can only term as a dream football season. Just a few months ago, the premise of nine wins was something that could only be forged by the unconscious mind — something UI fans could only fathom in the midst of a pleasant REM cycle, but by no means in a woken state.

Nine would be two fewer wins than the Idaho program achieved during the four-year span that preceded the 2016 season. Nine would match the best FBS season the school has known. Maybe nine isn't probable, but at this torrid rate, it's certainly possible.

Idaho (7-4, 5-2) left the door open for nine wins when it swept away another Sun Belt Conference opponent, South Alabama, 38-31 Saturday before a sparse post-Thanksgiving crowd at the Kibbie Dome.

Nine would do wonders for the Vandals. Heck, nine might even make the Sun Belt re ... nope, nice try.

Lest you think commissioner Karl Benson and his Sun Belt Conference minions are twiddling their thumbs, rethinking the league's future in their offices within the bowels of the New Orleans Superdome, they most certainly are not. Dairy or non-dairy creamer is probably a more pertinent discussion right now.

Benson graciously answered my phone call earlier in the week. I called to talk bowls, but, uhh, got sidetracked at the end of our interview when the initial discussion lost its luster. (Spoiler: Benson almost assured the Vandals of a trip to the Arizona Bowl, as long as the league fills all five bowl spots. Want to get an early start on flight reservations to Tucson? Go for it.)

So after a few minutes of bowl babble, my question probably came out of left field.

Not verbatim, but it was something to the effect of: "When the league decided to boot Idaho, how much of the decision hinged on wins and losses, and how much it hinged on tightening the geographical footprint?"

I can only imagine Benson sitting back in his swivel chair, rolling his eyes, donning a facial expression that read "When will these damn tater tots from Idaho leave me alone?"

Instead, as I anticipated, he dished out a rather bland response.

"I can't put a number or a comparison," Benson said. "The decision was made based on multiple factors and it's a decision that the Sun Belt felt was in its best interest and now we move forward."

He continued: "Idaho enjoys this season in the Sun Belt and next year and the Sun Belt takes advantage of Idaho's bowl eligibility this year and hope it results in a bowl win for the Vandals and the Sun Belt."

Which is the softer, more polite way of saying, "Hey, we're kicking you to the curb, but while you're here, mind making us a profit?"

The Vandals are putting together a season that has potential to be their best run at the FBS level since 1998. They've stomped one of the Sun Belt's long-term members, Texas State, and stunned a few others, although Saturday's verdict against the Jaguars can hardly be considered an upset special.

Vegas took the Vandals by 5½ and may have bumped that number up a few points when South Alabama players paraded around the UI logo pregame — a gesture that only added more starter fluid to the fire the Jags lit under the Vandals when they pounded Idaho here two years ago, then mustered a late comeback in last year's meeting at Mobile, Ala., after UI stormed out to a three-touchdown lead.

During my chat with Benson, I asked if he'd had a chance to see the Vandals play this season. It's not uncommon for commissioners to make their rounds during the three-month long season and though I didn't expect that Benson would make the cross-country excursion to watch Idaho in person, the Vandals have twice traveled to his own neck of the woods in Louisiana and maybe, I figured, the commish stopped by.

"I have not," Benson said.

At the very least, Benson had his ESPN app open when the Vandals and Jaguars clanked helmets Saturday. He has a rooting interest in South Alabama at the moment, because the Jaguars can become bowl eligible with one more victory.

And what does that mean for the conference? Cha Ching!

So we can be sure that Isaiah Saunders gave Benson a series of ulcers with his 142-yard rushing effort, Kaden Elliss and Ty Graham with their interceptions and Russell Siavii with his game-clinching pass breakup in the end zone.

Now South Alabama's postseason, and Benson's pockets, hinge on a final game against New Mexico State. Likewise, the Louisiana-Lafayette club that couldn't beat Idaho a few weeks ago, now rests on its own season finale to determine whether the Cajuns will spend their December resting or bowling.

So yes, Idaho's stay in the Sun Belt is essentially a ticking clock and no, there isn't a chance the Vandals get a late checkout. This isn't a presidential election and the Sun Belt won't perform a recount a la Michigan, Wisconsin and Pennsylvania. Idaho's term is officially over in 2018.

But there is such a thing as leaving with style. Right now, the Vandals have it down pat.

Theo Lawson covers Idaho football for the Tribune. He may be contacted at tlawson@lmtribune.com or (208) 848-2260. Follow him on Twitter @TheoLawson_Trib.