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Sun Belt Conference Announces Strategic Men's Basketball Plan

Smoothie King Center to host Sun Belt Tournament, new conference scheduling format approved

Men's Basketball

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NEW ORLEANS – After exploring a men's basketball strategic plan since the fall of 2017, the Sun Belt Conference's Presidents and Chancellors announced on Monday a series of sweeping changes to both non-conference and conference scheduling, the postseason conference tournament format, and the location of the conference tournament.

In addition, announcements regarding the women's basketball tournament format and location were made as well.

The announcement comes at the conclusion of the Sun Belt Presidents and Chancellors meeting Monday that was held in Atlanta. League members, including athletics directors and men's basketball coaches, had previously held official meetings on the strategic plan in March and also as recently as May at the league's spring meetings.

"The Sun Belt is committed to being an elite Division I NCAA conference and to accomplish our mission we are moving beyond the status quo to become more competitive in basketball," said Sun Belt Conference and Georgia State University President Dr. Mark Becker. "The conference is positioned for and has an established history of success, and our membership recognizes that new ideas are often needed to rise to new levels of success. The initiatives passed today demonstrate the commitment we have to pushing ourselves to the pinnacle of intercollegiate athletics."

The Sun Belt plan centers around improving the NCAA Division I Men's Basketball Championship seed of the conference's automatic qualifier, improving the resume of the best conference teams in order to receive additional bids to the NCAA Tournament and additional postseason opportunities should one of those teams not receive that conference's automatic qualifier, and also improving the conference tournament format and atmosphere.

"I applaud the commitment of our president and chancellors, athletic directors, and basketball coaches for their willingness to accept the unique concepts that were approved today," said Sun Belt Conference Commissioner Karl Benson. "Not only will these initiatives push our men's and women's basketball success to the next level, but our student-athlete and fan experience will be elevated with our new tournament format and host site at the Smoothie King Center."

Men's Basketball Non-Conference Scheduling Alliance

As a first step for improving non-conference scheduling, Sun Belt men's basketball teams will reserve two dates in the non-conference portion of their schedule to play against peer conference opponents. Each team will have one home opponent and one away opponent from this scheduling alliance. The scheduling alliance will fully begin with the 2019-20 season, though some games may be part of 2018-19 schedules.

Men's Basketball Conference Divisional Structure and Regular Season Schedule for 2019-20

In the next major portion of the strategic plan, the conference has adopted a scheduling format for the 2019-20 men's basketball season—dubbed the "20-game smart schedule"—that will see the conference split into two divisions (East: Appalachian State, Coastal Carolina, Georgia Southern, Georgia State, South Alabama and Troy; West: Little Rock, Arkansas State, Louisiana, ULM, UTA, and Texas State). Each team will play a 16-game schedule with five home and five away games played against divisional opponents and three home and three away games against non-divisional opponents. Based on the resulting standings of those 16 games, teams will then be placed in four pods - Pod A (#1, #2, #3), Pod B (#4, #5, #6), Pod C (#7, #8, #9) and Pod D (#10, #11, #12). Each team will play the other two pod members once home and once away for the final four games of the 20-game schedule. The regular season conference champion will be awarded based on the results of the full 20-game conference schedule.

Sun Belt women's basketball teams will continue to play non-divisional, 18-game conference schedules.

2020 Sun Belt Men's Basketball Tournament Seeding

At the completion of the regular season, teams will be seeded for the conference tournament based on the results within their pod range. As an example, a team in Pod A (#1, #2, #3) cannot be seeded any lower than No. 3 seed. It is possible, however, that the regular season champion – the team that earned the No. 1 position in Pod A – would not be the No. 1 seed in the tournament should that team not have the best pod record amongst the three teams in that pod.

2020 Sun Belt Men's and Women's Basketball Tournaments at Smoothie King Center and Campus Sites, and "Final Four" Format

This seeding structure is just one of a number of changes for the league's postseason starting in March 2020. The New Orleans Smoothie King Center, home of the NBA's New Orleans Pelicans, will host games of both the men's and women's semifinal rounds as well as both championship games.

Both the men's and women's tournament will see 10 total teams selected for the tournament with the No. 1 and No. 2 seeds receiving byes directly to the semifinal rounds at the Smoothie King Center. The No. 3 and No. 4 seeds will host quarterfinal games at home against winners of games from the first and second rounds. The quarterfinal winners will join the No. 1 and No. 2 seeds in New Orleans for a "Final Four" experience.

2020 Men's and Women's Basketball Tournament Formats

Saturday, March 7, 2020

Game 1 - No. 10 Seed at No. 7 Seed (Campus Site)

Game 2 - No. 9 Seed at No. 8 Seed (Campus Site)

Monday, March 9, 2020

Game 3 – Game 1 Winner at No. 6 Seed (Campus Site)

Game 4 – Game 2 Winner at No. 5 Seed (Campus Site)

Wednesday, March 11, 2020

Game 5 – Game 3 Winner at No. 3 Seed (Campus Site)

Game 6 – Game 4 Winner at No. 4 Seed (Campus Site)

Saturday, March 14, 2020

Game 7 – Game 5 Winner vs. No. 2 Seed (Smoothie King Center)

Game 8 – Game 6 Winner vs. No. 1 Seed (Smoothie King Center)

Sunday, March 15, 2020

Championship Game (Smoothie King Center)

Updates for the 2019 Men's and Women's Basketball Tournament Schedules

The 2019 Sun Belt Men's and Women's Basketball Championships will see 10 teams in each bracket, but with only eight making it to New Orleans' Lakefront Arena (the 2018 tournaments were contested with all 12 teams present at Lakefront Arena). For both the men's and women's tournaments, two opening round games will be played on campus with the No. 7 seed hosting the No. 10 seed and the No. 8 seed hosting the No. 9 seed. The No. 1 seed and No. 2 seed will receive byes to semifinals and the No. 3 seed and No. 4 seed to receive byes to quarterfinals.

2018-19 Men's and Women's Basketball Conference Schedules

The 2018-19 Sun Belt men's and women's basketball schedules will soon be released. The Sun Belt announced previously that those schedules will follow an 18-game mirror format. Both genders of a program will face both genders of another program on the same date – but at opposite venues.

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