

# It's whole new ballgame for Pitt

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The signs advertising Pitt football's upcoming season are plastered all over the city. From the billboards on the side of the road to the banners on the backs of buses, the university has wasted no expense touting the program's first year in the ACC.

And there's no doubting the excitement surrounding Pitt's transition into a new conference. On Labor Day, the Panthers' will open their schedule against Florida State at Heinz Field. Pitt didn't quite sell out its season ticket allotment -- a feat it hasn't accomplished since 2003 - but at last count less than 8,000 seats remained.

"If you start thinking about the teams that come into Pittsburgh to play our teams, it doesn't get any better," said associate athletic director Chris Ferris. "Florida State, 8 p.m., our city in the spotlight. Every time our city has seen that, whether it's been the Winter Classic or another event, Pittsburgh is always great."

It's not surprising that season tickets have sold so well. In July, hundreds of fans gathered at Stage AE just to celebrate Pitt's official entrance into a conference that's a step up from the Big East. The Panthers' schedule certainly helps as Florida State, Notre Dame and Miami highlight the home slate.

Like anything new, the move has brought the expected boom in ticket sales and anticipation. But as West Virginia learned, interest tends to drop off when the losses pile up. The Mountaineers sold 37,000 season tickets for their inaugural season in the Big 12. After finishing the year 7-6, that total dropped by about 4,000 this year.

When it comes to generating fan interest, an enticing schedule is vital. Having success against that schedule is even more important. West Virginia struggled to adjust to the higher level of competition in the Big 12. Pitt will face the same problem in the ACC. But Pitt Athletic Director Steve Pederson isn't worried that ACC fever will taper off.

"Obviously, if you can win the conference you're winning at the highest level," Pederson said. "We've been able to do that very successfully in basketball and we can to continue to grow

success in all other sports. And the more success we have, the more the excitement will build.”

According to Pederson, a rotating schedule will also help maintain the increased interest in the program. The ACC is made up of two seven-team divisions. Pitt will play each team in its division and Syracuse every season. The Panthers will also face a new member of the Atlantic Division each season -- Boston College in 2014, Louisville in 2015 and Clemson in 2016.

“Everybody in the league is good and every one of the institutions in this league are among the finest institutions in the country,” Pederson said. “No matter who we are playing, it’s going to be a great game in college athletics.

“That’s a great part about the conference every year. You’re always going to be playing the best. I think as you play against the very best, the excitement will build. Our teams will get better and better. If you win ACC championships, you have a chance to win national championships. I think the excitement will only grow.”

Still, one of the games that seemingly never failed to pack Heinz Field is missing: The Backyard Brawl. Pitt’s rivalry game with West Virginia disappeared last season and the hole in the schedule highlighted one of the issues with conference realignment. The disappearance of the Backyard Brawl and other rivalry games -- such as Texas A&M vs. Texas -- consistently sell out stadiums.

In Pitt’s case, games against Penn State will resume in 2016 and Pitt will face Notre Dame, but a conference rivalry game is missing. Ferris, though, sees the change as an opportunity to revamp forgotten rivalries with former Big East members Virginia Tech, Boston College and Miami.

“Every year in Pittsburgh you’re going to see great college football, not just in an inaugural season,” Ferris said. “So it’s going to be exciting. It really will last for a long time. We really believe a lot of our new fans that join us this year will stay.”

It’ll be up to second-year coach Paul Chryst and his staff to smooth the transition between conferences, which will include expanding recruiting efforts south and facing faster, and better, programs.

“I think our staff has done a terrific job preparing for this move,” Pederson said. “I give them a lot of credit for putting them in a position where they are planning and working toward this move.

Literally, everything will be new. I think that presents its own set of challenges. Every venue you go to is new. Every team is a new team.”