

## Cover story



By H. Darr Beiser, USA TODAY

**Winding road:** New Mexico State assistant Mike Rutenberg, watching his Aggies play Texas-El Paso on Sept. 19, graduated from Cornell and held jobs with the NFL's Redskins and UCLA before reaching Las Cruces.

# Nomadic assistant chases football dream

Continued from 1C

to know, "Would this work? Or would that work?"

Since those days doodling at his high school in Bethesda, Md., Rutenberg has aspired to be a head coach. Like other young coaches, his first gig as an assistant comes at a school that's not in one of the six major FBS conferences that treats coaches to six-figure salaries, multiyear contracts, luxury cars and extensive support staffs. First-year head coach DeWayne Walker gave Rutenberg a no-frills one-year deal in January as a defensive backs coach tasked with helping turn around a foundering program that hasn't been to a bowl game since 1960.

Rutenberg puts in about 112 hours a week during the season, which works out to \$5.58 an hour — nearly two dollars less than New Mexico's minimum wage. His annual salary is \$7,402 less than the median household income in Las Cruces as estimated by the U.S. Census Bureau. None of New Mexico State's assistants make more than the average tenured professor at the school (\$78,300, according to the most recent American Association of University Professors salary survey).

The Aggies have had some success this season, highlighted by their first victory against rival New Mexico since 2002. At 3-6, they already have won as many games as they did last season.

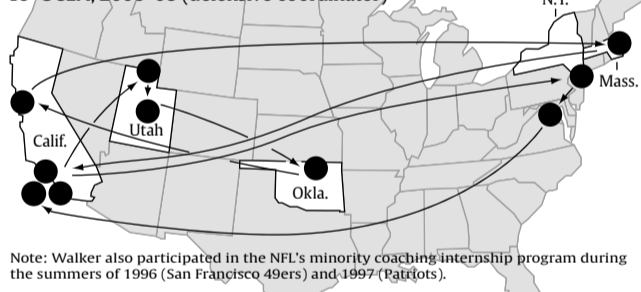
"You can't imagine how (far the players have come) in terms of work ethic, maturity, professionalism and football IQ," Rutenberg says. "We have work to do still. This is going to be a good football team."

Rutenberg, 28, played sprint football — where players are required to be under a certain weight — at Cornell, hardly the athletic résumé of some young assistant coaches who have parlayed their collegiate feats into

## Long journey to head coach

New Mexico State assistant coach Mike Rutenberg doesn't have to look far to see what his path to a head coaching job might look like. His boss, first-year head coach DeWayne Walker, is at his 11th stop in a 22-season coaching career. Walker was a defensive backs coach for nine of the 10 teams.

- 1 Mount San Antonio College, 1988-92 (defensive coordinator, 1992)
- 2 Utah State, 1993
- 3 Brigham Young, 1994
- 4 Oklahoma State, 1995
- 5 California, 1996-97
- 6 New England Patriots, 1998-2000
- 7 Southern California, 2001
- 8 New York Giants, 2002-03
- 9 Washington Redskins, 2004-05
- 10 UCLA, 2006-08 (defensive coordinator)



jobs at Bowl Championship Series schools such as:

► Oklahoma quarterbacks coach Josh Heupel (\$210,000). A runner-up for the Heisman Trophy with the Sooners in 2000, Heupel, 31, received a raise last offseason (\$40,000) that's more than Rutenberg's total salary.

► Texas running backs coach Major Applewhite (\$260,000). The 31-year-old had been an offensive coordinator at Rice during his young career before he was hired by the school for whom he was the starting quarterback a decade ago.

► Virginia defensive backs coach Anthony Poindexter (\$156,000). The former standout has had two stints at his alma mater, including his current job.

Poindexter, 33, was the only one of the three to play in a regular-season NFL game, although his professional career lasted only three injury-filled seasons. All three are in at least their fifth

season as an assistant.

"I think that's good for them," Rutenberg says. "I've heard guys say that was easy for them (to get a job). But if they weren't good at what they do, there's no way they'd be on staff. I have a ton of respect for the guys making it as quick as they did."

There are two FBS assistants who make less than \$30,000, although both come with asterisks. Western Kentucky quarterback coach Bob Cole (\$25,008) also receives \$8,206 a month from Wyoming, which dismissed Cole as offensive coordinator last November. Louisiana-Monroe quarterback coach Jonas Weatherbie, son of head coach Charlie Weatherbie, can't accept a salary because of Louisiana's nepotism laws.

## Simple surroundings

Rutenberg's apartment is adjacent to a golf course on the

## About this series

USA TODAY concludes its three-part series today on the compensation of football coaches at the nation's 120 largest college football programs, including the first comprehensive, coach-by-coach survey of assistant coaches' pay.

The report looks at how, amid budget cuts throughout higher education, salaries for many head coaches have risen since USA TODAY salary surveys in 2006 and 2007. In addition, assistant coaching and administrative payrolls keep increasing.

The series also provides a look at life for coaches in the big time's lower financial reaches.

You can find a searchable database that can be sorted by head coach, assistant coach, school or conference at [collegefootball.usatoday.com](http://collegefootball.usatoday.com).

## To read Parts I and II, go to [collegefootball.usatoday.com](http://collegefootball.usatoday.com). They include:

- A look at how salaries have risen as higher education struggles in tough economic conditions
- Keeping head coaches happy takes more than salary
- Assistant coaches also are enjoying a boom in compensation
- Boise State's winning formula
- Tennessee isn't the only program where coaching is a family affair
- Schools are getting creative with job titles

north end of town, not bad digs for somebody who went nearly three years without a paycheck or any financial support from his family. His home has the feel of a hotel room, showing little sign that he spends much time there.

Aside from some game balls he earned as a graduate assistant at UCLA and an entry-level assistant with the Washington Redskins, there are few personal touches;

his refrigerator has more condiments than food and pales compared with the amount of rations he keeps in his school office.

Still, it's a palace compared to some places he slept earlier in his career, beginning as an intern with the Redskins. Rutenberg was hired as a scouting assistant in 2003 and later became assistant to coach Joe Gibbs in his second go-around in Washington, dealing with day-to-day football operations and coaching administrative assignments.

Beyond a paycheck, Rutenberg also received a high-end blow-up mattress for his efforts, a gift from Redskins owner Dan Snyder who heard about Rutenberg's penchant for working through the night. Rutenberg also came away with something more valuable: a relationship with Walker.

"When I interviewed for the (Redskins defensive backs) job, he picked me up at the airport," Walker says. "After the interview, he dropped me off. That was kind of my introduction to him."

The Redskins hired Walker, who stayed for two seasons before becoming UCLA's defensive coordinator in 2006.

"When I got the job at UCLA, he was trying to become my (graduate assistant)," Walker says. "He was bugging the crap out of me. I didn't have a spot for him, so I asked if I could bring him in as an intern."

Then-UCLA head coach Karl Dorrell agreed. Rutenberg left the Redskins, where he says he made a pretty good wage. In Los Angeles, his living quarters ranged from a guest room at his cousin's to a windowless basement, places he stayed for free or very cheaply. The most expensive places he stayed came when Rutenberg followed UCLA on the road that first year as an intern.

"On our road games, he had to pay his own way," Walker says. "He slept in my hotel room on the road. We really couldn't do anything for him financially."

A year later, Rutenberg, who has a hospitality degree from Cornell, was hired as one of UCLA's graduate assistants and enrolled in the school's masters of education program.

## For now, eight is enough

Walker has assembled a mix of assistants. Opposite Rutenberg, there are veterans who have lived the nomadic life that typically comes with the profession, including Dale Lindsey, an ex-NFL player who has been coaching for more than 30 years. However, New Mexico State has eight assistants, one fewer than the maximum allowed under NCAA rules.

Athletics director McKinley Boston says because the school had to pay the final year of former head coach Hal Mumme's contract, the athletic budget didn't have room for a ninth assistant this season. "Walker calls the plays and fills the role as the defensive coordinator, so I don't think we're missing anything," Boston says.

Minus that assistant, New Mexico State ranks 97th in average salary per coach (\$52,072) among the 98 schools for which USA TODAY was able to obtain complete compensation information for all assistants. (Louisiana-Monroe, which also is paying eight assistants, finished with the lowest average, \$46,777.)

The average total compensation of a Western Athletic Conference assistant is \$95,949; defensive backs coach R. Todd Littlejohn and offensive coordinator Timm Rosenbach are the Aggies' highest paid at \$70,000.

"I don't need a whole lot," Rutenberg says. "I'm pretty simple. I always told myself, 'Wherever you move, you're going to be happy because this is your passion.' If you want to be a coach, you better find a way to survive. If you have to coach on the moon, you better find a way to survive on the moon."

# SEC, Big Ten set the standard for media rights money

## All other major conferences continue to play catch-up

By Michael McCarthy and Steve Wieberg  
USA TODAY

As the Great Recession lingers, the major-college conferences' competition for media rights bucks has increasingly paralleled their competition on the field. And right now, things are tilted decidedly in favor of the Southeastern and Big Ten.

The SEC is sitting on a pile of cash, having negotiated a whopping annual average of \$206 million-plus over 15 years from ESPN and CBS. The Big Ten is looking at a similar windfall. Their schools can pour that money into coaches' salaries and other enhancements, and the pressure to keep up is on.

"That's the feeling I have sitting in the conference office," Big 12 Commissioner Dan Beebe says, "and I think it's the feeling of some athletics directors who are more closely located to the Big Ten and the SEC. ... There's a concern and awareness of the possibility of being left behind to some degree."

The issue looms as those leagues start negotiating new media deals. The Atlantic Coast Conference, whose major contracts expire at the end of the 2010-11 school year, is in talks with current rights-holders ABC/ESPN and Raycom, says Commissioner John Swofford, who touts a potential merger of football and men's basketball into a single package. The league currently draws an annual average of almost \$67 million a year in rights fees.

Swofford hopes to work out a new package by the spring, he says. The Big 12 and Pacific-10 are eyeing the expiration of media contracts in 2011-12. They're making annual averages of \$78.4 million and \$57.5 million, respectively.

Exposure, as well as money, is at stake. As the SEC's national cable home, ESPN will show more than 5,500 football, basketball and other SEC games and events on its outlets over the life of its deal. The nationally televised games even come with their own branded logo: "SEC on ESPN."

The Big Ten has 51% ownership of its own cable arm, the Big Ten Network, as well as separate football and basketball deals with ESPN/ABC and CBS, respectively. The latter are worth a combined annu-

al average of \$102 million a year, according to *SportsBusiness Journal*. The publication puts the league's projected 20-year take from its network at an annual average of \$140 million.

"That puts (the Big Ten and SEC) at a different level than any conference in the country," says one ACC athletics director, Wake Forest's Ron Wellman. "Over a period of time that will have a serious impact on the competitiveness of all of college athletics. It's very important that we do the best we can in the current negotiations."

Despite ESPN's big deals with the SEC and Big Ten, "We want to be in the ACC business," says Burke Magnus, ESPN senior vice president of college sports programming. The NFL Network also is interested in the ACC and others, says Charles Coplin, the league's vice president of programming.

Even with its Notre Dame deal, NBC Sports looks "at any very important package that becomes available," President Ken Schanzer says. Fox will "take a serious look at each one," spokesman Dan Bell says.

The SEC has been lucky and good. The conference negotiated its new TV deals in the summer of 2008 — before the stock market crash on Wall

Street triggered a global economic recession.

The ACC and other leagues won't have that luxury. While they'll likely post increases in rights fees, especially if the economy rebounds, they might find it hard to get SEC-type money.

Before the first pencil is sharpened, CBS is taking itself out of the picture, says Mike Aresco, its executive vice president of programming. Alluding to SEC schools' ownership of football's last three national titles and Florida's or Alabama's prospective entry in this season's title game, Aresco says, "Obviously, we've got the best conference."

Beebe acknowledges talk of the Big 12 and other conferences joining to create their own cable network, following the Big Ten's blueprint. "We're certainly not leaving any option out," he says.

College sports is cyclical. When the ACC struck its current 10-year, \$300 million basketball contract with Raycom, it was a pace-setter. Then the Big Ten set up its network. The SEC was playing catch-up.

Despite the recession, TV consultant Neal Pilson predicts the ACC and others will make out just fine: "TV ... reflects what the public wants. And there's a real interest in college sports."