

Mustangs take 'Heart' with new divisions

Written by Jim Ecker

Monday, 18 May 2015 19:14 - Last Updated Tuesday, 19 May 2015 21:54



Mount Mercy University has been placed in the North Division of the Heart of America Conference for the 2015-16 school year as the school gets ready to join its new league.

There will be five teams from Iowa, one from Missouri and one from Nebraska in the North Division. Three of the Iowa schools - Clarke, William Penn and Grand View - are moving with Mount Mercy from the defunct Midwest Collegiate Conference into the Heart of America.

The fifth Iowa college in the North Division is Graceland, which is already a member of the league. Culver-Stockton (Mo.) and Peru State (Nebraska) will complete the seven-team North Division.

"I couldn't be more excited," Mount Mercy athletic director Scot Reisinger said Monday. "We get to keep our rivalries that we've had with the MCC schools and travel is very reasonable."

There will be four colleges from Missouri and three schools from Kansas in the South Division. The Missouri schools are Avila, Central Methodist, Evangel and Missouri Valley. The Kansas schools are Baker, Benedictine and MidAmerica Nazarena.

League members talked briefly about East and West divisions, but quickly settled on North and South.

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"It really wasn't much of a discussion," Reisinger said. "There wasn't much controversy at all about that."

Mount Mercy will not be fully integrated into the Heart of America Conference until the 2016-17 school year. The Mustangs will not be competing for Heart of America titles during the 2015-16 school year in men's basketball, women's basketball, baseball, softball, men's soccer, women's soccer or volleyball.

Reisinger said it's "possible" the Mustangs will compete in cross country, golf and track in the Heart of America this coming year, but no final decisions have been made. The Heart of America does not sponsor bowling as a league sport.

Reisinger knew Mount Mercy might have to wait until 2016-17 to begin full competition in the Heart of America, because many league schedules are finalized well in advance and are difficult to change.

"It was what I expected," he remarked, "but now what I had hoped."

The Mustangs will put "independent" schedules together in men's basketball, women's basketball, baseball, softball, men's soccer, women's soccer and volleyball (and possibly others) for the next school year. Reisinger said it will be worth the wait as the university prepares for a new chapter in athletics in the Heart of America.

Independent schedules can be tricky, but Reisinger and the coaching staff have been working on them for months and are excited about full participation in the Heart of America the following year.

"Next year there's going to be some road bumps," he allowed, "but absolutely it's the place we need to be in '16-17."

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Mount Mercy would like to schedule as many "non-conference" events as possible against Heart of America schools in 2015-16, but he said it gets complicated because so many conference games are held on weekends. Reisinger is concerned about travel issues and missed class time during the week.

"That's actually our biggest hurdle," he said. "That's the big issue."

Reisinger said many schools, including old friends like St. Ambrose and Viterbo from the Midwest Collegiate Conference, have been helpful in cobbling non-conference schedules together. St. Ambrose has joined the Chicagoland Conference and Viterbo has joined the North Star Conference. AIB, the seventh member of the MCC, has dropped its sports programs.

Reisinger said Mount Mercy will belong to the national Association of Independent Institutions (All) during the 2015-16 year to help with schedules and give the Mustangs access to postseason tournaments. The All acts like a regular conference for schools that need help.

Reisinger said there are three models being considered for divisional play in the Heart of America for basketball:

- 1) Two games against each team in your division, plus one game against every team in the other division for 19 games.
- 2) A double round-robin against all 13 opponents for 26 games.
- 3) Two games against each team in your division, two games against four teams in the other division, plus one game against three teams in the other division for 23 games.

Reisinger said the basketball format and many other issues will be resolved at a Heart of America Conference meeting in early August.

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Reisinger reaffirmed that Mount Mercy will decide by the end of the 2015 calendar year whether it will begin a varsity football program or not. The Heart of America requires all of its members to have football, but the league has given Mount Mercy until 2018 to field a team or face possible expulsion.