

Mustangs eye league that requires football

Written by Jim Ecker

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Mount Mercy University has applied for membership in a conference that requires all of its schools to have a football program, the strongest indication yet that the Mustangs might be adding football in the years to come.

Mount Mercy has applied to the Heart of America Conference, which will have 12 schools from Missouri, Kansas, Iowa and Nebraska in the league for the 2015-16 school year. All of them have a football team.

"The Heart of America right now mandates that football is required by the institutions," league commissioner Lori Thomas told the Metro Sports Report. "That's one of our mandates."

Thomas confirmed that Mount Mercy and Clarke University of Dubuque have applied for admission. Both schools are searching for a new league because their current league - the Midwest Collegiate Conference - will be disbanding after the 2014-15 school year.

Although football is currently required for membership in the Heart of America, Thomas said the league could change its bylaws and allow Mount Mercy and Clarke to join without football.

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"We know they're good institutions and long-time members in the NAIA," she said. "It's really going to come down to if those two institutions are a good fit for the Heart of America, and ultimately what does the Heart of America want to do as a conference and expanding.

"We're going to be entering a planning stage and will look at all of our bylaws and policies and procedures and see where we want to be in the future."

Mount Mercy University also has talked to the North Star Conference about possible admission. All seven of the schools in the North Star Conference have football, but it is not a requirement. Those seven schools are located in North Dakota, South Dakota and Iowa.

Scot Reisinger, the athletic director at Mount Mercy, confirmed his school has applied to the Heart of America Conference. Mount Mercy officials have held preliminary talks about adding a football program, but he said no decisions have been made.

Reisinger said Mount Mercy might have to accelerate talks about football, especially if the Heart of America is the school's best - or perhaps only - chance of joining a league.

"It could," he said. "It depends on what their (the Heart of America) expectations would be."

Mount Mercy is governed by a Board of Directors, which would have the ultimate say in conference membership or adding football.

"I have not been asked to put together a plan for board approval," said Reisinger. "I don't want you to get the impression that football is imminent."

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Mount Mercy plans to build a major new sports facility in the near future, including a stadium for soccer and track. Reisinger said the stadium could be modified to include a football field.

"With modifications, yes," he said. "It could be built in such a way."

The school is currently in the fundraising phase for the project, which also would include new facilities for baseball and softball.

The Heart of America could decide that 12 football schools are enough for scheduling purposes. In that case, they could add two non-football schools and form a 14-team league with Mount Mercy and Clarke climbing aboard.

The Heart of America currently has 10 colleges with Avila (Mo.), Central Methodist (Mo.), Culver-Stockton (Mo.), Evangel (Mo.), Missouri Valley (Mo.), Baker (Kansas), Benedictine (Kan.), MidAmerica Nazarene (Kan.), Graceland (Iowa) and Peru State (Neb.).

William Penn and Grand View, both located in Iowa, are leaving the Midwest Collegiate Conference after this school year and joining the Heart of America, which led to the demise of the Midwest Collegiate and forced Mount Mercy to find a new conference.

Thomas said Mount Mercy and Clarke applied to her league by Dec. 1, which was the deadline. "We are actually conducting campus visits on those campuses at the end of January," she said.

She said her league's Board of Directors, comprised of athletic directors and school representatives, will evaluate the applications from Mount Mercy and Clarke and make a recommendation to the league's Council of Presidents for possible action in April.

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Thomas, hired as commissioner in July, said the league is exploring all possible options for growth, with or without more football schools. "We're in a year of planning and where we want the conference to grow and if that includes expansion," she said.

Thomas worked at the NAIA national office for 16 years before becoming the new commissioner of the Heart of America, so she knows Mount Mercy is in a tough spot as it seeks a new conference. The Mustangs applied for membership in the Chicagoland Conference last year, but were rejected by one vote.

"I know. I get it," said Thomas. "They're a good institution and the NAIA doesn't want to lose them."

The North Star Conference could be another option for Mount Mercy. That league currently features Dickinson State (N.D.), Mayville State (N.D.), Jamestown (N.D.), Valley City (N.D.), Dakota State (S.D.), Presentation (S.D.) and Waldorf (Iowa).

Cory Anderson, the commissioner of the North Star Conference, confirmed his league has talked to Mount Mercy and other colleges about possible enrollment. "They are certainly one of many schools that we have on our radar," he said.

All seven schools in the North Star have football, but Mount Mercy would not have to add football for membership. "That would not be a requirement," said Anderson. "That is not in our constitution or by-laws."

Anderson said geography will be an important factor in expansion, but he did not rule out adding a team in Cedar Rapids. "The interstate system has certainly been our friend and we're not hesitant to go and play people or go to different locations to play," he said.

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The North Star Conference was formed in 2013 and would like to grow.

"When we started in 2013 one of the goals they had was expansion and growth, and the growth obviously had to be in the right manner," said Anderson. "Expansion is on the forefront of their strategic plan.

"We don't want to expand for the sake of expansion," he added. "We want to expand because it's good for us and great for the people that we're visiting with."

Anderson and Reisinger declined to confirm that Mount Mercy has formally applied for membership in the North Star Conference.

"We've had conversations about that process happening," said Anderson, "but I'm not quite sure yet how their campus views it. They had a good thing going (with the Midwest Collegiate Conference), and now their hands are kind of forced."

If Mount Mercy does not join a new league for the 2015-16 school year, the Mustangs would have to operate as an NAIA independent while its search continues.