

## Heart of America says 'yes' to Mustangs

Written by Jim Ecker

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Mount Mercy University has found a new home for its sports teams in the Heart of America Conference, but membership comes with a kicker.

The Mustangs can participate in the league for the next three years, but they must have a varsity football team by the 2018 season to stay in the conference at that point.

Scot Reisinger, the athletic director at Mount Mercy, said the Mustangs will happily accept the offer from the Heart of America and begin working on a decision about football.

The presidents from the Heart of America schools voted Wednesday to invite Mount Mercy and Clarke University of Dubuque into their league. Clarke has announced plans to add football by 2018 and the Heart of America commissioner expects Mount Mercy to follow suit.

Mount Mercy officials have discussed adding football, but no decisions have been made.

"We will begin our process to ensure it (football) is a good fit for all of us on our campus and hopefully be able to commit to that 2018 deadline," Reisinger said Thursday.

Reisinger said Mount Mercy plans to make a final decision about football by the end of the 2015 calendar year.

In the meantime, the Mustangs will belong to the Heart of America Conference for the

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2015-16, 2016-17 and 2017-18 school years without football. If the Mustangs have a football team by 2018, they can stay in the league. If they do not have a football team by then, their membership will expire and they'll need to find a new league unless the conference by-laws are waived.

All of the current schools in the Heart of America have football. The conference is willing to wait three years for Mount Mercy and Clarke to follow suit.

Mount Mercy will begin competing in the Heart of America Conference in some sports during the 2015-16 school year, according to Reisinger, but probably will have to wait until the 2016-17 school year to compete in others due to scheduling issues. As a result, the Mustangs are prepared to operate as an NAIA "independent" in some sports during the 2015-16 school year until they can join the league in all activities.

Reisinger said the school's Board of Trustees will make the final determination on football, based on input from faculty, staff, students, alumni and other constituent groups.

Football is an expensive sport that would require a major financial commitment for facilities, coaches, a support staff, equipment, travel, housing and other factors. Mount Mercy plans to build a stadium for soccer and track as part of its new Robert W. Plaster Athletic Complex. Reisinger said the stadium could be modified to include football.

Reisinger was informed Wednesday that the Heart of America presidents had voted in favor of the Mustangs, ending a long period of uncertainty about the school's future.

"We're obviously very excited that we have a home for our sports to go to," he said.

Mount Mercy currently belongs to the Midwest Collegiate Conference, but that league is disbanding after this school year. William Penn and Grand View are leaving the Midwest Collegiate for the Heart of America. Now Mount Mercy and Clarke apparently will follow the same path.

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The Heart of America Conference will have 14 colleges in Iowa, Missouri, Kansas and Nebraska once Mount Mercy and Clarke are formally admitted.

The Heart of America will have five schools in Iowa with Mount Mercy, Clarke, William Penn, Grand View and Graceland. There would be five Missouri schools with Avila, Central Methodist, Culver-Stockton, Evangel and Missouri Valley.

There are three Kansas schools in the HAAC with Baker, Benedictine and MidAmerica Nazarene. Peru State of Nebraska is also a member of the league.

Lori Thomas, the league's commissioner, said the Heart of America will have two six-team divisions for football this fall and would consider two seven-team divisions when the league expands to 14 members. She expects Mount Mercy to add football by 2018.

"We feel positive they will add football," she said.

One possible seven-team division could include the five Iowa colleges and Culver-Stockton, which is located in northeast Missouri near the Iowa border. They would need one more school to fill out that division.

Mount Mercy applied for membership in the Chicagoland Conference last year, but the Mustangs were denied membership by a single vote (a 75 percent "yes" vote was required). Mount Mercy has been offered a spot in the North Star Conference, but the Mustangs deferred a decision on that offer to see what the Heart of America would do.

The North Star Conference features schools from North Dakota and South Dakota, along with one school (Waldorf) from Iowa. The Heart of America Conference offers a better geographic fit for Mount Mercy, especially if the league adopts divisions to reduce travel. The North Star Conference does not require football,

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which made it a possible destination for the Mustangs.

It's been a long process for Mount Mercy with the demise of the Midwest Collegiate Conference, the rejection by the Chicagoland Conference, the offer from the North Star and now the offer from the Heart of America.

"It's been very tiring, but I've really enjoyed the process," Reisinger said. "And ultimately, I think we ended up in the best place for us, so that is what's exciting about it.

"I don't want to do this every year, but it's actually been something I've sort of enjoyed - the challenge and overcoming that challenge."

Mount Mercy, located on the northeast side of Cedar Rapids, is an NAIA school that awards scholarships. The school announced plans last month to add a varsity men's volleyball program and a cheer & dance squad.

Mount Mercy's bid to join the Heart of America Conference was approved by at least 75 percent of the league's Council of Presidents.