



Sports

The time is now: Minnesota State needs to make move up to Division I



**CHAD
COURRIER**
Free Press

It's time for Minnesota State to decide: Division I or Division III? Scholarship or non-scholarship?

The life of the North Central Conference and Division II is waning. The league is stuck at seven teams, with no logical options for adding programs anytime soon. Winona State, Nebraska-Kearney, Michigan Tech ... they've all been mentioned as possible eighth members, but those aren't going to hap-

pen.

So far, the NCC has made promises to work hard to find another member, but like O.J.'s never-ending quest to find his wife's killer, it's time to look in the mirror.

In football, the league has added pseudo-members Central Washington and Western Washington in an effort to flush out a schedule, but that's like adding

Kevin McHale to an NBA front office. He fills a spot but hardly enhances the product. These games will count toward the league championship but are less interesting than Vikings minicamp.

The scheduling agreement will be OK with league members until one of the two Washington schools win a conference championship.

In basketball, there's discussion that the NCC might look at a three-

time, round-robin schedule, which is better than the current setup of playing each team twice, with two-thirds of the season's games against nonconference opponents. Again, this doesn't address the problem, just tries to make each season more palatable.

The bigger problem is that the NCC and Division II athletics are

Please see COURRIER, Page D6

COURRIER: School must get proactive

Continued from Page D1

terminal. There has been movement within the NCAA to eliminate Division II, meaning your athletic programs may someday be scholarship or non-scholarship, Division I or Division III.

So given that the league is failing, and Division II may soon be extinct, it's time for Minnesota State to opt up. Actually, Minnesota State is five years past the ideal time to make that move.

North Dakota State and Northern Colorado successfully made the move three years ago. South Dakota State went at the same time, though there have been more struggles. But when Division I is flooded with programs over the next decade, even South Dakota State will be well ahead of the newcomers.

Within the NCC, North Dakota appears to be ready for Division I, and it seems other conference members are surprised that it hasn't already happened. South Dakota, St. Cloud State and Nebraska-Omaha all seem capable of making the transition.

So it's time for Minnesota State to be a leader, to be aggressive. The move to Division I wouldn't be easy, but it has never been more doable. The budgets and staffing have increased over the last five years, making those leaps more manageable. The football and basketball teams will be able to make money through "guarantee" games, taking on high-powered programs that pay

lesser opponents for the right to rout.

Athletic director Kevin Buisman is innovative and proactive, and he's brought the programs a long way since he took over in 2002. Most of the coaches are young and energetic and would be spurred by the opportunity to take their programs to the next level.

The basketball team has played in consecutive national tournaments, showing that its closer than ever to being ready to compete at the highest level. The wrestling team already competes against Division I talent. The baseball team has duelled evenly with the University of Minnesota over the years. The hockey team is already a Division I program.

Or Minnesota State can stay true to its history, waiting for others to move and reacting, forming more committees to undertake more studies to create more press releases. It's time for the university's leadership to step forward, don't worry about failure or fear success.

There will be bumps, no doubt, but the choices are few. Minnesota State can opt for Division I now, get ahead of the pack, be proactive. Or Minnesota State can wait until the NCC folds and Division II disappears, then cut back and hope the MIAC or UMAC have an opening.

Chad Courrier is a Free Press staff writer. To contact him, call 344-6353 or e-mail him at ccourrier@mankatofreepress.com.