



Sports

The end is near: NCC starts final fall of football

Once-mighty conference ravaged by defections to Division I

The Associated Press

MINNEAPOLIS — Before Adam Vinatieri won two Super Bowls for the New England Patriots with last-second field goals, he was warming up his foot at South Dakota State.

Before Phil Hansen racked up all those sacks for the Buffalo Bills, he was sharpening his pass-rushing skills at North Dakota State.

One of the country's strongest small-college leagues for decades, steadily producing professional-caliber athletes like Vinatieri and Hansen, the North Central Conference has withered in recent years while top teams defected to Division I. The 2007-08 season will be the

NCC's last.

"We weren't the Pac-10 or the Big Ten, but it was great competition," said Vinatieri, who now kicks for the Indianapolis Colts. His alma mater, South Dakota State, left the NCC with North Dakota State in 2004 for football in what was then known as the NCAA's Division I-AA.

The plains and prairies where these schools play are far — in so many ways — from places like Penn State and Tennessee where crowds reach 100,000 and football programs are run almost like NFL franchises.

Though dozens of NCC products have been annually scattered about the pros, those who made it faced more of an

adjustment than players from the major-conference powers. Minnesota Vikings tight end Jim Kleinsasser, whose tenure on the team is the second-longest, was a second-round draft pick out of North Dakota. He remembered a few growing pains.

"Probably the biggest thing is the awe factor," Kleinsasser said. "Being from a D-II school, you can play at the next level, but you're not a big-time player. You're not the Ohio State or Michigan playing in front of 100,000 people."

"When I first walked into the locker room here, I saw Cris Carter, Randy Moss, Randall Cunningham, John Randle and all those guys. I'm kind of like, 'Uhhhhh.' Just a dumb farm kid walking into lala land. But if you can play, you can play."

NCC football was at its finest from 1983 to 2000,

when there were 10 teams. North Dakota State was often the leader of a league that included North Dakota; South Dakota State; South Dakota; Northern Colorado; Nebraska-Omaha; Minnesota State; St. Cloud State; Augustana; and Morningside.

In 1986, North Dakota State beat South Dakota twice — the second time in the Division II national championship game. That gave the Bison their third of five titles in an eight-year span. Northern Colorado also won national championships, in 1996 and 1997.

"I'm prejudiced, but there were very few times when we would go into the game thinking we had it in the bag," said Hansen, who played for North Dakota State from 1987-1990 before totaling 61½ sacks over 11 seasons with the Bills.

"I remember one game

against Augustana ended in a tie. We should've just killed them. That was the essence of that league," Hansen said.

North Dakota State, South Dakota and North Dakota each have domed stadiums to keep out the cold and snow, one sign of the strong financial commitment to college sports in these small towns. Division I-AA, which the NCAA renamed Football Championship Subdivision, allows 63 scholarships. In Division II, football programs are limited to 36 full rides.

Those factors brought the NCC to this crossroad.

"We are probably a victim of our own success to a degree," commissioner Roger Thomas said.

North Dakota won the Division II title in 2001 and was the runner-up in 2003, but the league's demise had begun once the century turned.

Northern Colorado moved up to I-AA in 2003, and North Dakota State and South Dakota State followed.

Thomas, a former North Dakota head coach and athletic director, took over his current job as commissioner two years ago with the goal of keeping the conference together. His old school recently decided, however, to dive into the deep end and move to Division I. So did South Dakota.

The remaining members, realizing the league wouldn't last, decided to stay in Division II and move to other conferences. Though the NCC has planned a season-long celebration of the history that dates to the 1920s, this will be an emotional end for many people in the region.

"There's a sadness and a disappointment that we couldn't find a way," Thomas said.