

SDSU to join Gateway Football Conference

Gateway Football Conference Commissioner Patty Viverito announced Wednesday that South Dakota State University has been accepted for membership in the league, starting in the fall of 2008.

"I want to express the appreciation for the due diligence and the very professional manner with which we had the opportunity to engage the leadership of the Gateway Football Conference, and considering an invitation and responding to the questions that have been posed to us over the last several weeks," SDSU President David Chicoine said. "It really is an exciting time for South Dakota State University, for the state of South Dakota, and, in particular, for our student-athletes in the sport of football. It is our privilege to join the institutions in the Gateway Football Conference in furthering our mutual interest of providing the highest caliber experience for our football student-athletes. We look forward to competition and collaboration academically and on the football field."

North Dakota State also was accepted for admission, bringing the league's roster to nine teams. Western Kentucky will leave the Gateway after the 2007 season to join the Bowl Championship Subdivision Sun Belt Conference, leaving Illinois State, Indiana State, Missouri State, Northern Iowa, Southern Illinois, Western Illinois and Youngstown State (Ohio) as existing members of the St. Louis-based conference.

"One can justifiably argue the Gateway is the strongest, deepest and most respected (Football Championship Subdivision) conference in the nation," Viverito said. "The decision to add North Dakota State and South Dakota State leaves no doubt. We considered expansion in a very comprehensive way, but the list of what we saw as attractive and potential candidates was very, very quickly whittled to two very obvious choices and those were South Dakota State and North Dakota State."

SDSU's entry into the Gateway will coincide with the Jackrabbits being eligible for postseason consideration and to receive the league's automatic berth into the FCS playoffs.

"The timing is perfect. In 2008, when we finish our reclassification, we jump into a conference that we can compete for a conference championship, compete for individual honors, but most importantly, compete for a national championship. That is exciting," SDSU football coach John Stiegelmeier said.

The move to the Gateway will put football on equal footing with the vast majority of the university's 21 sport offerings when it comes to qualifying for the postseason.

“Today, I can go to bed, and the 20 sports that there are national championships in, I can look at every student-athlete in our program and know that they have equal access to postseason championships starting in 2008 and 2009,” SDSU athletic director Fred Oien said. Women’s equestrian has yet to be sanctioned as a championship sport by the NCAA.

Historically, the Gateway Conference has been among the elite conferences in the FCS. A minimum of two Gateway teams have made the NCAA playoffs in each of the past 12 seasons, including three bids last year and a record-setting four teams in 2003. Gateway teams have appeared in four national championship games since 1997, winning twice; and a Gateway team has reached the semifinals eight times in the past 11 seasons.

“To be in a league with nine teams, to have eight conference games, is a tremendous step forward and the competition speaks for itself,” Stiegelmeier said. “The challenge is great, but that is the path South Dakota State football has taken, and in 2008, we’ll be ready.”

The addition of the two Dakota schools gives the Gateway six members that were ranked in the final 2006 Sports Network top-25 poll. Defending league champion Youngstown State was ranked No. 4, Southern Illinois was No. 7, Illinois State was No. 8, and UNI finished at No. 17.

“The Gateway presents a lot of other opportunities,” Oien said. “It houses and covers almost the largest possible footprint that we could have for our alumni base. It covers the largest recruiting base that we possibly could have, and its institutions, in the history of this institution, that we played quite frequently back in the ’60s and ’70s as a football program.”

Under the terms of the agreement, SDSU will pay a \$250,000 entry fee and a \$500,000 penalty if it leaves the conference before eight years.

“We took a good hard look at how much value is there to joining an established conference. If you would have looked at all of our goals for conference membership for football, the Gateway had them all,” Oien said. “I’m not sure if you can perfectly quantify that, but certainly the prestige that that conference has, the fact that it fits our footprint, the fact that they have a television contract, the fact that they have solid reserves, financial stability, and that they have a membership of the core seven that are remaining that has been there for a long time, that is tremendous value and it doesn’t come along very often.

“Dr. Chicoine and myself, as we visited, we felt it was an extremely fair price. And the eight-year commitment, we wouldn’t expect anything else because we don’t expect to ever leave there.”

SDSU will continue to play in the Great West Football Conference during the 2007 season. A charter member of the GWFC, the Jackrabbits finished the 2006 season with a 7-4 overall record, including a runner-up finish in the GWFC with a 3-1 mark.

“I have talked to each of the athletic directors in the Great West Football Conference, and I have talked to (Mid-Continent Conference) Commissioner (Tom) Duple and (GWFC) Commissioner (Ed) Grom this week, and we are committed to continue those schools, where feasible — Cal Poly, UC Davis and Southern Utah — as long as we can to help those colleagues out that really helped us get our initiation into Division I competition.”

The Jackrabbits will get an indication of the quality of the Gateway during the 2007 season as its first three games are against its future conference rivals: Aug. 30 at Western Illinois, Sept. 8 at Youngstown State and the home opener Sept. 15 with Northern Iowa.

“As we talked to our young men, we talked about the chance to be in this conference and what that would mean. The real positive there was the automatic qualifier — the chance to know at the end of the season you’re guaranteed the chance to get into the dance, or the pool or the tournament,” Stiegelmeier said. “We’re really excited about where we’re going to be in 2008.”