

Commissioner thinks Mustangs will add football

Written by Jim Ecker

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The commissioner of the Heart of America Conference thinks Mount Mercy University will start a football program by 2018 if the college is invited to join her league.

The Heart of America presidents will vote April 1 whether to invite Mount Mercy and Clarke University as full members. As it stands now, league by-laws require all schools to have a football team.

"Clarke has made an announcement that they're going to start football in 2018, and I think Mount Mercy is going to follow right behind them," Heart of America Commissioner Lori Thomas said Thursday. "They know it's in the by-laws and we feel positive they will add football. That's the way I understand it."

Thomas has indicated in the past that the by-laws could be changed, dropping football as a requirement, but that does not appear imminent. "At this point in time, there is no change in the by-laws," she said.

Mount Mercy has been offered a spot in the North Star Conference, but the Mustangs have deferred a decision on that offer to see if they'll be invited to join the Heart of America Conference. The North Star primarily features colleges in the Dakotas, whereas the Heart of America features schools in Missouri, Kansas, Iowa and Nebraska and is a better geographic fit.

It appears likely Mount Mercy would accept an offer to join the Heart of America if football is not required. If football is required, the Mustangs would have three choices:

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1. Add football and join the Heart of America
2. Do not add football and join the North Star (football not required)
3. Operate as an NAIA independent

"We'd have a decision to make," Mount Mercy athletic director Scot Reisinger confirmed Thursday.

The Heart of America presidents could force a decision about football by voting to admit Mount Mercy at Wednesday's meeting. A 75 percent "yes" vote is required for membership.

Mount Mercy officials have discussed adding football, but a final decision would rest with the school's Board of Trustees. The school's stadium at the new Robert W. Plaster Athletic Complex, scheduled for completion in a few years, could be modified for football in addition to soccer and track, according to Reisinger.

Mount Mercy University had been hopeful of joining the Chicagoland Conference, but the Mustangs were denied membership last summer by a single vote. Mount Mercy is currently a member of the Midwest Collegiate Conference, but the league will be disbanding after the 2014-15 school year.

The athletic directors in the Heart of America Conference have voted in favor of adding Mount Mercy and Clarke, but it was a "straw vote" and not binding on the presidents. "The Council of Presidents have the final vote on that and they will take action on April 1st," Thomas asserted.

Thomas declined to venture a guess on how the presidents will vote.

"Those type of things, you never know where the discussion is going to go," she said. "Obviously, there's going to be some philosophical discussion. Where do we want to be as a conference? How large? How small?"

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The Heart of America currently has 10 members. Grand View and William Penn, both located in Iowa, will give the Heart of America 12 members for the 2015-16 school year. Grand View and William Penn are currently in the Midwest Collegiate Conference with Mount Mercy and Clarke, and their departure contributed to the demise of the MCC.

The Heart of America presidents will be considering geography, travel costs and other factors as they debate further expansion.

"It's going to make travel different," Thomas noted. "How do the presidents feel about that? Those (factors) are all going to be taken into account."

Thomas said there are no questions about Mount Mercy as a respected NAIA college. "I've said before, Mount Mercy and Clarke are excellent, quality institutions," she remarked.

The Heart of America Conference would have five schools from Missouri, five from Iowa, three from Kansas and one from Nebraska if Mount Mercy and Clarke join the league. The five Missouri schools are Avila (Kansas City), Central Methodist (Fayette), Culver-Stockton (Canton), Evangel (Springfield) and Missouri Valley (Marshall).

The three Kansas schools are Baker (Baldwin City), Benedictine (Atchison) and MidAmerica Nazarene (Olathe). The league also features Peru State from Peru, Neb.

The five Iowa schools would be Graceland (Lamoni), William Penn (Oskaloosa), Grand View (Des Moines), Clarke (Dubuque) and Mount Mercy (Cedar Rapids).

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Thomas indicated the Heart of America would adopt a divisional format if the league expands to 14 teams, either across the board or sport by sport.

The Heart of America will have two six-team divisions for football this fall.

Mount Mercy and Clarke would be able to participate in some Heart of America sports during the 2015-16 school year, but might have to wait for the 2016-17 school year in other sports due to scheduling issues.

Reisinger said Mount Mercy has been preparing schedules to operate as an independent in 2015-16, if necessary.

Wednesday's meeting of the Council of Presidents will be held at Avila University in Kansas City.