

Mount Mercy could join Chicagoland league

Written by Jim Ecker

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The athletes at Mount Mercy University could become very familiar with Chicago and northwest Indiana in the years to come.

There are growing signs that the Mustangs might join the Chicagoland Collegiate Athletic Conference for the 2015-16 school year, pending a possible vote of league presidents at their executive meeting in early October.

Mount Mercy is currently a member of the Midwest Collegiate Conference, but that league will be disbanding after the 2014-15 school year due to a lack of members with Grand View and William Penn departing for another league.

Jeff Schimmelpfening, the commissioner of the Chicagoland Conference, told the Metro Sports Report Saturday that league officials have been talking to Mount Mercy officials since the spring about adding the Mustangs to the league.

"We have met with them," he confirmed. "At this point we're moving forward."

Schimmelpfening said three other members of the Midwest Collegiate Conference - St. Ambrose, Clarke and Viterbo - could be joining the Chicagoland Conference along with Mount Mercy, giving the league 18 members.

"Those four schools really want to stick together. They've made that well-known," said Schimmelpfening. "So if they're moving all four together, I feel we are definitely the best conference for them to have."

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Schimmelpfening said the Chicagoland Conference and the four Midwest Collegiate Conference schools are in the "discovery phase" at this point.

According to Chicagoland Conference by-laws, adding a new member requires the approval of at least 75 percent of the current members.

That means Mount Mercy and the other schools will have to receive at least 11 "yes" votes from the presidents of existing league members.

Mount Mercy University is a member of the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) and has no plans to switch from the NAIA to the NCAA, according to Mount Mercy athletic director Scot Reisinger.

Mount Mercy, St. Ambrose, Clarke and Viterbo need a new home and it appears the Chicagoland Conference may be prepared to welcome them into the fold.

"Our presidents are very interested in preserving the NAIA. And that would be one reason that we would definitely be open to expansion," said Schimmelpfening.

The Chicagoland Conference currently has 14 members with eight colleges located in Illinois, five in Indiana and one in Wisconsin.

The eight members from Illinois are Judson, Olivet Nazarene, Robert Morris, Roosevelt, Saint Xavier, St. Francis, Trinity Christian and Trinity International. The five schools from Indiana are Calumet St. Joseph, Holy Cross, Indiana-South Bend, Purdue Calumet and Purdue North Central. Cardinal Stritch of Wisconsin is also a member.

Mount Mercy would be the western-most school in the Chicagoland Conference. St. Ambrose, Clarke and Viterbo also are located several hours west of the current Chicagoland schools.

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The Chicagoland Conference has a mixture of private and public colleges. Schimmelpfening said Mount Mercy, St. Ambrose, Clarke and Viterbo are very similar in philosophy and competitive level with the existing schools in his league.

"There are no concerns that I've heard about the four institutions," he said. "It's just the geography of it."

There are three other NAIA leagues in the midwest that might have been possible destinations for Mount Mercy, but all three appear unlikely at this time. The Heart of America Conference requires its members to have a football team, and Mount Mercy does not currently offer football at its school.

The Great Plains Athletic Conference and the American Midwest Conference have not been talking to Mount Mercy about expansion, according to league officials at those two leagues.

"We have not had any discussions," said Corey Westra, the commissioner of the Great Plains Athletic Conference. "It's a tough spot for them, I know that. I feel bad for them, because it (the Midwest Collegiate) is a great league. A lot of people have hung together for a long time."

There also have been no formal talks between current Midwest Collegiate schools and American Midwest schools. "Not that I'm aware of," said American West commissioner Will Wolper.

This is the 25th anniversary of the Midwest Collegiate Conference, but it will go out of business after this school year. There are currently seven members, but Grand View and William Penn are leaving for the Heart of America Conference and there will not be enough schools to have a viable league. The seventh current member is the AIB College of Business.

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Reisinger declined comment on a possible new league for Mount Mercy, but he said talks have been ongoing and that the issue could be resolved this fall. "I hoped it would be done by now, but it never moves as quickly as you want it to," he said.

"I'm very confident that we'll have a home and we'll be with schools we want to be with," he remarked.

Reisinger said efforts to save the Midwest Collegiate Conference by adding new schools were not successful.

"We've tried that and we haven't had a lot of success," he said. "We're looking to move elsewhere. That seems to be the direction we're going to go."