

# UIS will need \$2M to play ball in Division II

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Now that the University of Illinois at Springfield has cleared a major hurdle to gaining NCAA Division II status, the school faces the harder part of paying for the move. The initial cost is estimated at nearly \$2 million for a baseball team, college scholarships and perhaps a new stadium.

The 10-sport UIS Prairie Stars athletic program was formally invited Oct. 8 to join the Great Lakes Valley Conference, the top NCAA Division II athletic conference in the country. UIS could be a full member by the 2009-10 school year, leaving behind the American Midwest Conference, which is affiliated with the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics.

"The GLVC is one of the premier conferences in Division II of the NCAA," UIS chancellor Richard Ringeisen said, "and it will provide a number of things that our university is looking for, including a challenging and competitive athletic environment, leadership that will keep costs in perspective, and regional recognition to help recruit some of the brightest and most talented students to our institution."

First up for the Prairie Stars: Creating a baseball team for the 2010-11 school year — a requirement for membership in Great Lakes Valley. The move means funding up to 30 scholarships and hiring a coach and an assistant coach.

## Funding an issue

UIS athletic director Rodger Jehlicka said paying for the move is a big issue. The current athletic budget at UIS is \$1.1 million, which does not include funds for baseball. Jehlicka said the projection for fiscal year 2012, when the Prairie Stars will be active members of Division II, is \$1.9 million.

"Obviously in this day and age it's a challenge," Jehlicka said. "We have to rely more and more on outside sources."

"Hopefully our attendance in volleyball, basketball and soccer (the three sports into which UIS charges admission) will go up once we get in the Great Lakes Valley Conference. We've got a lot of room to grow. We can put substantial dollars in the budget from attendance fees."

Students already have taken on some of the financial burden to keep sports programs thriving at UIS. In 2006, they voted to increase student activity fees to help build the school's Recreation and Activity Center, or TRAC, Jehlicka said.

And there is a new fee-increase proposal on the table. Jehlicka met with the UIS student government Oct. 12, and proposed increasing student fees 14 percent in the 2009-10 school year and 8 percent in the 2010-11 school year. That would be about \$15 per student for the first year, and just more than \$10 for the second year.

Jehlicka said students currently pay about \$1,100 annually in student fees, the second-lowest total among all Illinois universities, and athletics gets approximately \$110 per student of that amount. This year, that will add approximately \$100,000 to the athletic department coffers.

The new proposal, however, has raised some concern with student representatives.

"There is a conflict from a student government perspective," said UIS Student Government Association president Ashley Rook, who has been involved with SGA for three years, and was present when Jehlicka made his pitch for the first increase in student activity fees. "We understand that funds are needed, but we are concerned that student fees will be raised to a higher level."

"We are weighing the importance of having a strong athletic program with our concern about the financial burden placed on students, particularly in this problematic economy."

Jehlicka knows student fees, even if increased, won't cover everything.

"When we first started the process to go to Division II, we outlined a five-year plan," he said. " (Student activity fee money) was to supplement moneys for baseball, (men's and women's) golf and women's soccer. It's not paying for everything. We have to get more involved with outside sources."

That's where corporate sponsors help foot the bill.

When Jehlicka became UIS athletic director in December 2005, the university had two corporate sponsors. There now are 22 and four different sponsorship levels: \$1,200, \$2,500, \$5,000 and \$10,000. There are three \$10,000 sponsors: Family Video, the UIS Alumni Association/Bank of America and Yellow Book.

"Each level has different benefits for the corporate partner," Jehlicka said. "We have the ability to modify (the package) to fit their needs... Some are cash sponsors, some in-kind."

## Fielding a dream

While there is no timetable yet for organizing a baseball team, Jehlicka said, "We have to have a coach real soon — the coach has to be here when we

start in the fall.”

Doing so would enable the new coach to recruit and put together a team.

Approximately \$40,000 is budgeted for a baseball coach and one assistant. Of that amount, roughly \$5,000 to \$7,000 would pay for the assistant, he said. There are no teaching responsibilities with the coaching position, so Jehlicka said UIS is offering a competitive rate.

“That could be adjusted, too,” Jehlicka said. For example, running a baseball camp could mean an extra \$5,000 to a baseball coach.

Also part of building the baseball program — and included in UIS’s master plan — is construction of a baseball stadium on university-owned land just south of the campus.

“Division II requires a great playing surface,” Jehlicka said. “(Building a stadium) is not the kind of thing you do in the next couple of weeks.”

Still, he’s working on it. Jehlicka recently met with Lincoln Land Community College athletic director and baseball coach Ron Riggle to discuss the cost of building a facility such as the Loggers have on campus in Claude Kracik Field.

“Ron thought the cost would be between \$750,000 and a million to build what they have,” Jehlicka said.

He also has checked with consulting firms on cost estimates. “Recent ones they’ve put together on Division II stadiums are between \$1.2-\$1.5 million,” he said.

There is the possibility that the Prairie Stars would consider playing games at Lanphier Park, Chamberlain Park and in Chatham until the stadium was built. However, playing at Lanphier and Chamberlain parks would mean becoming part of a jumbled Springfield Park District schedule that includes games played by Springfield College in Illinois and Robert Morris plus District 186 schools and Sacred Heart-Griffin High School.

“Our chancellor would really like to see a facility on campus,” Jehlicka said.

### **Upping competition**

UIS has come a long way from being “the little school on the prairie.”

Currently, the university fields six sports teams for women and four for men, and has done well in the NAIA. The men’s soccer program has won three NAIA titles since its inception in 1977. The men’s basketball team, coached by Lanphier High School graduate Kevin Gamble, has played in the NAIA national tournament twice since its inception in 2002.

And the new conference is generating excitement among student athletes. UIS freshman soccer player Michael Waldo, a Peoria Richwoods High School graduate, can’t wait for the change to the Great Lakes Valley Conference.

“Going into the GLVC ... both of my sisters played softball” at Southern Illinois-Edwardsville, then a Great Lakes Valley School. “I know the competition level, the prestige level, is one of best in Division II.

“Pretty soon UIS will be known as a powerhouse in athletics and for its academics,” Waldo said.

UIS freshman volleyball player Carrie Gerberding added that the publicity UIS has received since making the move to Division II already has motivated opponents.

“It just makes everybody play a little harder,” Gerberding said.

If Jehlicka has his way, there may be yet another reason competition heats up.

“A football stadium is on the master plan,” said Jehlicka, smiling broadly. He noted that five Great Lakes Valley schools already play football and the league needs one more to be recognized by the NCAA.

A cost on building a football stadium?

“I have no idea on that one,” Jehlicka said. “It may or not happen, but ... ”

Regardless, the overall move will pay dividends, say officials and students.

“It’s just a matter of time,” Waldo said, “before UIS becomes a household name.”

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