



UIS granted full Division II status

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University of Illinois Springfield athletic director Rodger Jehlicka was told that the phone call he and the rest of the Prairie Stars athletic staff had worked so hard for the past three years would come Friday morning at 11:30.

At 11:31 a.m. the phone rang. It was the NCAA, announcing that UIS was now an official Division II school. UIS announced the decision at a news conference later in the day at The Recreation and Athletic Center.

"Division II is a whole new league, as they say," UIS chancellor Richard Ringeisen told the crowd gathered at the TRAC. "It is one of the three or four most significant moments in our history."

Jehlicka said the NCAA will release on Tuesday a list of the schools that have moved up from provisional to active membership status. He said that UIS technically will be a full-fledged Division II member on Aug. 1. And there are further benefits for UIS beside the name recognition that comes with being an NCAA institution.

"All our student-athletes will sign national letters of intent, which is huge . . . We're now eligible NCAA enhancement money. That includes money that comes down from the big (Division I) basketball tournament and also bowl games," Jehlicka said. "It also includes money that you can apply for grants for minority administrators and minority coaches.

"But the biggest thing is it allows all of our student-athletes to apply for postgraduate scholarships, millions of dollars on a yearly basis, so we're excited about that. And the other biggest thing is we're now eligible for all NCAA postseason championships. (Women's) soccer and volleyball are our first opportunity."

Looking forward

UIS coaches and athletes from every sport attended the news conference, and all of them are excited for the opportunity.

Lincoln High School product Brandon Farmer, who will be entering his senior basketball season with the Prairie Stars, has seen UIS' transformation first hand. He was in the stands when his older brother, Cory, played for UIS.

"Personally for me, it's a rub in my brother's face, but it's also a great honor to be able to play in a division this high," Farmer said with a smile. "I can't say I ever really thought I'd be able to play in a division this high."

He and his Prairie Stars teammates are waiting for a new coach to be named after Kevin Gamble left to become the director of player development and video operations for the Providence College men's basketball program.

"We have a lot of people returning and a lot coming in," Farmer said. "It might be a little shaky at first with a new coach, but we have everything we need to make it to the national tournament. We have a great opportunity, and I know we can get there."

Major step

Casey Thorpe, a fifth-year senior women's soccer player, has also had a front row seat for the growing athletic department. She knows what the move will mean for her and her team.

"It's going to bring in players of a higher caliber, and it's going to bring us better competition," Thorpe said. "I was a transfer (from SIU-Edwardsville), and I was here the first year, and it has blown up. Our first year we had eight soccer players come in, and the rest were either softball players or basketball players helping out the team. Now we're going to have 18 full-blown soccer players, and it's quite a difference."

The athletic department has grown throughout the three-year quest to join the ranks of NCAA Division II institutions. Jehlicka is excited to see what happens next.

"For the whole campus, being an NCAA Division II member, it makes you known throughout the country," Jehlicka said. "Four years ago, you go to try to recruit somebody, and they ask, 'What league are you in?' And we'd say 'NAIA.' Kids nowadays don't even know the NAIA."

"Now you say you're Division II, and they're like, OK, that's right below Illinois, Northwestern, Michigan State or Southern Cal. That's the type of student-athlete you want, (the ones) that want to be successful academically and athletically."

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