

Frontier/DAC merger talks get serious

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If a summit meeting in Dickinson, N.D. is any indication of the future, the Frontier Conference good look a lot different come next year.

Several officials from Frontier Conference schools joined Frontier Commissioner Kent Paulson on a trip to Dickinson on Wednesday to talk with the four remaining schools of the fledgling Dakota Athletic Conference about a possible merger with the Frontier.

Among the people at the meeting were Paulson, Carroll College Athletic Director Bruce Parker and Mike Mace, President of Rocky Mountain College, on Wednesday. The group discussed the Frontier's expansion options with representatives of the four remaining DAC schools and NAIA CEO Jim Carr.

Talks weren't just limited to merging the two leagues together, but how to do it. With schools like Minot State, Black Hills State and the University of Mary gone to, or leaving for NCAA Division II status, the once 10-team DAC is left with a tough situation and the Frontier could certainly help.

Putting together a new league which would include remaining DAC members Dickinson State, Valley City, Jamestown College and Dakota Wesleyan would certainly change the landscape of the Frontier, it would also change NAIA football. A 10-team Frontier in football would give the league two automatic qualifiers for the NAIA football playoffs, and it would solve some scheduling problems the Frontier has been dealing with for years.

However, it also has geographical implications for a school like Eastern Oregon, the Frontier's football-only member. It would also revamp basketball and volleyball scheduling, but would also give the Frontier two more wrestling schools in DSU and Jamestown.

So there's plenty of upside to the merger, but there's obstacles too.

But Montana State University-Northern football coach and athletic director Mark Samson, at least in the preliminary stages, sees more upside to the plan.

"I think it could be good," Samson said. "Obviously from a geographical standpoint, adding those four schools would make us a big conference area wise. So that's something to consider.

"But I just think it would enhance a lot of things within our league," he added. "Bringing in Dickinson and Jamestown, two very well-known schools in the NAIA would certainly be good. And from a football standpoint, it would allow us to have two automatic qualifiers, and to get away from the schedule we've been playing with in our league. I just think there are a lot of good things about it."

There's also plenty of contingencies to consider, which was what Wednesday's meeting in Dickinson was all about. The group discussed many different options for 2011 and beyond, but one thing appears certain, like in the rest of the collegiate athletic world, even in the NAIA things are changing.