Frontier enters a new era
Dickinson State and Southern Oregon change the landscape of the Frontier Conference
George Ferguson
Tuesday, March 20th, 2012

When the MSU-Northern and UM-Western men’s and Lewis-Clark State and Westminster women’s basketball teams lost out at the 2012 NAIA national men's and women’s basketball tournaments last week, the Frontier Conference as it looks now officially ended too.

That's because starting in the fall, the Frontier will have a new look as the expansion, which was approved in the winter of 2011 will take hold of the league.

Dickinson State University will compete in all Frontier sports starting in the fall, while Southern Oregon will enter the league as a football only member. SOU will continue to compete in the NAIA’s Cascade Conference in all other sports.

And while the league will have a new look, so will its schedules.

Football and volleyball will be up first. In football, with two new teams, the league will split into two divisions, still having a 10-game conference schedule. DSU will join Montana State University-Northern, Carroll College and Rocky Mountain College in the East Division, while SOU will be with Montana Tech, UM-Western and Eastern Oregon in the West Division. All teams within the same division will still play each other home and away during the season, and there will also be four cross-over games. One stipulation of the new schedule is that no Montana team, or Dickinson State will have to travel to Oregon twice during the season.

The Blue Hawks and Red Raiders could also have an immediate impact in football. SOU went 5-5 on the field in 2012 and split its two Frontier games, losing to Montana Tech but upsetting rival EOU. Dickinson went 4-6 on the season and lost to both Rocky and Carroll in 2012.

Overall, all Frontier schedules will have a new look to them. In volleyball, each school gets two more conference matches, while each basketball team will also play two more conference games with DSU now in the league. The scheduling was tough for Frontier officials because of travel distances in volleyball and basketball and that will mean an unbalanced schedule with some teams playing more games than others. It will also mean the Frontier season will start a week earlier than normal next winter.

Overall, it was a difficult winter for the Blue Hawks in indoor sports. Dickinson went 0-26 in volleyball and will have a hard time transitioning to life in a Frontier that features some of the top volleyball competition in the NAIA.

The DSU men and women have competed in NAIA Division II in basketball in recent years and have been quite successful. The Blue Hawks have also had plenty of experience with the Frontier as they play a bulk of their nonconference schedule against Frontier teams, including Northern each and every year.

However, this past season, the DSU women went just 10-19 and will enter a Frontier which is one of the top leagues in the NAIA. The Blue Hawk men also had a down year, going 12-18 and also missing out on the NAIA DII national tourny. Both DSU teams also struggled against Frontier opponents this past season, and will enter the new league with a tough road to hoe considering how good Frontier basketball has been in recent years.
Dickinson will also offer a new wrestling rival for both Northern and Great Falls. DSU competes in a different region than the Lights and Argos in the NAIA, but the Blue Hawks should be on both teams’ schedules next fall. DSU finished 13th at the NAIA national tournament two weeks ago.

So get ready, because no longer is the Frontier made up of Lights, Skylights, Bears, Saints, Orediggers, Bulldogs, Griffins, Warriors and Mounties. The new Frontier is here and fans will need to get used to names like Blue Hawks and Red Raiders.

The talk and the paper work and the meetings and the discussions are all over. It’s officially a new era for the new Frontier Conference.