

**MIAA** | Two Oklahoma schools accepted on 8-to-1 vote, two more schools likely to join conference

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Director of Athletics Jerry Wollmering said MIAA representatives are in the process of campus visits at Lindenwood. Meanwhile, UNK has made the decision to leave the Rocky Mountain Athletic Conference and apply to the MIAA. The UNK Board of Regents approved the decision Wednesday.

UNK will submit an official application to the MIAA and a visit process will ensue, Wollmering said.

"If everything falls into place, for the fall of 2012 we will be a 16-team conference," Wollmering said.

The two Oklahoma schools were added earlier than Lindenwood and UNK because the schools would have had a monetary penalty from the Lone Star Conference if they did not leave by Aug. 1.

Paino said there was not a concern that the MIAA would end up with 14 schools instead of the desired 16.

"I think the majority of the presidents in the MIAA really think that

expansion is the way to go and they weren't going to let this little detour slow them down," Paino said.

**Cost savings unknown**

Realigning schools in Div. II is based on saving money, unlike Div. I, which is centered on millions of dollars in television contracts.

Paino said in July that he had concerns about expansion, including increased travel costs and student-athletes missing more class time. Monday, Paino said he still has those concerns.

However, not enough presidents share those concerns. Michael Lane, president of Emporia State University, told the Index in July that he believes expansion

will result in fewer costs and out-of-class time. Representatives from other schools have agreed publicly with Lane.

"There's a belief, I believe, by the majority of the presidents that this will save, or at least be cost-neutral," Paino said.

Paino's concerns likely will de-

pend on how the divisional play works out within the MIAA. Wollmering, who is on a committee to work on travel issues, said no divisional formats have been worked out yet.

With a potential east-west divisional format, Truman only would have to travel to the far-west schools every other year in each sport. Wollmering said this would cause Truman to spend more money on travel some years, but less other years.

"I don't know if there would be any savings, but I don't know if there would be any increase either," Wollmering said.

**"Anything is possible"**

It is not out of the question that the effect on Truman could go beyond the MIAA.

Truman has had talks off-and-on for several years about a possible move to the Great Lakes Valley Conference. One of the main concerns with the GLVC has been that the conference does not sponsor football, meaning Truman would have to play an independent schedule.

However, according to media reports, the GLVC recently has considered adding football.

Wollmering did not rule out the

GLVC as an option if it turns out the MIAA expansion will cost Truman more money.

"Anything is possible," Wollmering said. "We're keeping the dialogue open."

Both Paino and Wollmering said there have been no recent increased discussions with the GLVC.

"I know that's been talked about," Paino said. "There's no serious discussions in that regard. We're committed to the MIAA. We're one of the four schools in the conference that were founding members."

Wollmering did not rule out the option in part because of the volatility in NCAA athletics. While Div. I realignment has been well-publicized, Div. II also will undergo possible changes across the board.

The GLVC will add Willam Jewell University as its 16th member in the fall of 2011. The RMAC, where Nebraska-Kearney currently plays, has considered expansion. The Northern Sun could add two schools to bring its conference to 16.

Meanwhile, Wollmering said there are talks of five Arkansas schools forming a new Div. II conference with two schools from Oklahoma.

**GUIDE** | Soccer, volleyball among exciting teams

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Truman has had nine MIAA Championships since 1999. They also advanced to the NCAA Tournament seven times during that stretch. The Bulldogs started last season 2-2-2 but finished 13-2-1. With a younger team this season, a good start would benefit the team greatly. The 'Dogs are ranked No. 24 in the preseason poll.

Game to watch: Sept. 11 vs. University of Nebraska-Omaha — UNO is one of the Bulldogs' biggest rivals and joined the MIAA in 2008.

3. Volleyball — The Bulldogs finished 24-13 last season and were ranked No. 25 overall. They return Megan Sharpe, the reigning National Freshman of the Year, along with four seniors. The Bulldogs were picked to finish fifth in the MIAA in the preseason coaches' poll.

The volleyball team has reached the NCAA Tournament every year since 2000. They have four MIAA Championships and five MIAA Tournament Championships during that time. Someone has to step up on the attack with Sharpe for Truman to be successful. Alumna Lauren Graybeal was second on the team in kills and will be tough to replace.

Game to watch: Nov. 3 vs. University of Central Missouri — Central was the unanimous No. 1 pick in the MIAA. Even with the high seed, Truman is 8-2 in its last 10 games against Central.

4. Women's Swimming — Truman finished fifth in the nation last year. Alumna Kate Aherne, who collected seven All-American awards, led the team. The Bulldogs will have a tough time replacing Aherne, along with 16-time All-American Kendra Brunkow, who both graduated. The women's team returns eight swimmers who earned All-Americans last year.

The women's swimming team won seven NCAA National Championships in eight years from 2000 to 2008. They always seem to have several top swimmers. However, things could be different this year. The 'Dogs don't have a top five swimmer in any race.

Game to watch: The schedule for swimming hasn't been released yet. However, Truman usually has one or two home meets.

5. Football — People are probably wondering why the football team is on this list. They finished 2-9 last season and really underachieved. Still, Truman returns the majority of its team from last year. The biggest change will be on the coaching end led by head coach and former Bulldog, Gregg Nesbitt.

Truman has had three winning seasons in the MIAA since 2000. From the players I've talked to, team morale has improved since the hiring of a new coaching staff and we will see if that changes things on the field.

Game to watch: Sept. 25 vs. Northwest Missouri — This is the classic "Ol' Hickory Stick" game. Unfortunately, it will be tough for Truman to win the stick back. Northwest is the defending National Champions and beat the 'Dogs 70-0 last year.

**DEFENSE** | Senior defensive back Michael Elliott leads secondary

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play in space, and you can still kick them in the core and recruit some of those numbers in the run game. So yes, the safeties really lend themselves to the structure we're in."

Leading the way is junior Michael Elliott, who was fourth in the conference in tackles last season and earned honorable mention All-MIAA after playing as a true freshman two years ago. Elliott and senior defensive lineman Ryan Ploesser are the two returners who earned All-MIAA honors.

However, the defense lost first-teamer senior Eric Sternberg, who led the conference in sacks, and leading tackler senior Demetrius Lavant. Sternberg was a big reason why the team averaged 2.06 sacks per game.

This season, Nesbitt said it could be by committee who pressures the quarterback. The focus first is on stopping the run.

"Before you ever worry about pressuring the quarterback, you have to make them throw," Nesbitt said. "I think we led the league last year in pass defense, which is one of the few stats that is certainly misleading. Because we gave up 247 on the ground nobody had to throw it."

The Bulldogs gave up more than 200 yards on the ground seven times and never less than 120.

Ploesser said last spring that the new defense is simpler because it gives them only one gap to worry about. Every starting defensive lineman played in at least eight games in 2009.

"Certainly with four down versus three down



Jack Nicholl/Index

Football head coach Gregg Nesbitt (right) and assistant coach Kellen Nesbitt walk off after a team huddle during Wednesday morning's practice.

linemen you've got another guy with a hand in the dirt," Nesbitt said.

The 4-2-5 has had mixed results around the college landscape. Gary Patterson, head coach at Div. I Texas Christian University, implemented the scheme and has ranked consistently near the top of Div. I in defense.

However, conference foe Fort Hays State University has moved away from the defense after poor results last season, the only season the team used the 4-2-5. Hays ranked last in the conference in total defense and second to last against the run.

"I don't think it's different than any other system," FHSU head coach Kevin Verdugo said. "You've got to recruit the athletes to fit the scheme."

"Instead of having eight DBs on the field in a two-deep, now you've got to have 10 deep in the

secondary to have them two-deep in each position. You've got to have a fifth DB that's good enough to be that 11th starter on the defensive side of the ball."

Nesbitt also has received help on defense from the NFL, where Truman alumnus Gregg Williams is the defensive coordinator for the New Orleans Saints. Nesbitt and Williams roomed together at Truman and Nesbitt visits the Saints' training camp almost every year.

Like Williams, Nesbitt told his defensive players to pick up every incomplete pass and run it back like a fumble.

"Philosophically, we're Gregg Williams," Nesbitt said. "We're going to knock them back on running downs and try to get them into third down and hit the quarterback — get after that guy and make life difficult for him."

**FOOTBALL** | Former UCM assistant heads new coaching staff that includes three new assistants

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Nesbitt brought in three assistant coaches and retained wide receivers coach Thomas Kearney from the 2009 staff.

The new staff inherits a team that returns zero first- and second-team All-MIAA players, one of two MIAA teams to do so. The Bulldogs lost junior hybrid back Vanness Emokpae and senior first-team All-MIAA linebacker Eric Sternberg in the offseason. Senior defensive back and leading tackler Demetrius Lavant also graduated.

The Bulldogs are ranked last in both the coaches and media MIAA preseason polls.

The offense returns five players who started at least seven games last year, including senior quarterback Phil Davis and senior offensive lineman Shea Carr, an honorable mention All-MIAA selection.

At running back, senior Anton Bernard is listed as the starter, but Nesbitt said four people will vie for the starting spot. And in the receiving corps, junior Andy Mundwiller and sophomore Caleb Roberts are listed as starters. Both played backup quarterback last season.

"We got to do a better job of throwing and catching the football and blocking all along the edge," Nesbitt said. "Those perimeter guys all are going to get challenged, starting right here by me. We've got to do a better job out there."

Nesbitt said the base offense will be a two-back, as opposed to the spread and wildcat used in Vicko's tenure.

On defense, the top returners are All-MIAA selections junior Michael Elliott and senior Ryan Ploesser. Elliott started as a true freshman in 2008 and was fourth in the conference in tackles a year ago. The team is switching to a 4-2-5 base scheme from a 3-4.

Overall, Nesbitt has brought in faster-paced practices and an attitude of someone who has experienced a winning football program at Truman. Nesbitt said the turnaround starts with attitude, which branches into confidence, work ethic and commitment to each other.

"Trying to reestablish unquestioned work ethic and unquestioned commitment to one another, [the need to be] highly disciplined is non-debatable," Nesbitt said. "We're not asking — we've got some simple rules. One of them is touch all lines. You can tell a lot by you as a player whether you've got the discipline to touch a line, or whether you're coming up a little bit short. And that's right out of the National Football League."

Turning around a program in the MIAA — which is arguably the best conference in Div. II — is not unheard of. Fort Hays State University added three conference wins from 2008-09 and

Truman added five from 2005-06.

But no turnaround is as big as Northwest Missouri State University's 15 years ago, when the Bearcats were 0-11 in Mel Tjeerdsma's first season. They have made seven Div. II championship appearances since.

But unlike 15 years ago, Tjeerdsma said a turnaround in just one year cannot be done with all the balance at the top of the conference. Four MIAA teams are ranked in the top 25 in the AFCA preseason poll.

"There's too many other factors," Tjeerdsma said. "There's too much balance at the top end. It's going to be a process. I'm not saying they can't be competitive in every game, but it's going to take a little time."

"It's hard to get over the hump when you have to play the same teams. If you have five or six teams in your conference that you're really going to struggle to beat, even if you beat one, you're still going to have a losing record."

Conference play kicks off at 7 p.m. Sept. 18 at Fort Hays, and the Bulldog's home opener is 7 p.m. Sept. 4 against Southwest Baptist University.

"I think they're hungry," Nesbitt said. "I think they're excited about having a chance to compete. ... I think it's really critical that we have some success early, and I'm not going to shy away from that."

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