

sports

Fencing and indoor track championships cut

Last week's spring meeting of the ACC athletic directors seems reminiscent of the American Wild West.

At High Noon, the rugged gun slinger, fighting for survival, chalks up two more scratches on his gun handle after knocking off his latest victims.

Yesterday's memories are today's reality for the UNC fencing and indoor track teams. Just last week both of these sports learned they had been scratched from the list of ACC-sponsored championship sports. The battle of financial survival in college athletics has taken two more victims.

The conference's decision to cut back two more men's sports coincided with the addition of recognizing women's volleyball as a conference-sponsored event. So beginning in the 1980-1981 season there will be 11 men's sports and five women's

sports that have conference champions. The conference's attempt to balance the number of men's and women's sports is an effort to meet federal guidelines described in Title IX, but it seems the primary reason for the cutbacks is a simple thing called money.

john fish

"We just decided we would no longer conduct conference championships in these two sports," Marvin "Skeeter" Francis, director of the ACC Service Bureau, said in a telephone interview this week. "Most schools will continue their programs but there just won't be champions in them. They will become more like club sports."

Francis said the decisions were in no way affected by Title IX and they really had no effect on the number of scholarships since no school gave full scholarships in either sport.

ACC Commissioner Bob James, in a recent news release, said, "It is my understanding that some of the institutions which have sponsored indoor track and fencing teams will continue to do so, and participants in the two sports will be eligible for NCAA meets and tournaments. The action taken by the conference simply means we will no longer have an indoor track championship meet or fencing tournament."

Exactly why were fencing and indoor track the chosen sacrifices of the conference?

Francis said the conference's eight

athletic directors were given a list of all sports and they took it into consideration the number of participants, scholarships involved and how many people would be "disturbed" by the cancellation of the particular sport's championship. After much discussion, lobbying and deal-making, the athletic directors voted. When the cards were laid on the table, fencing and indoor track were left face down. Surprisingly enough, swimming and lacrosse were very close in the vote.

"I don't think anyone is really upset about it (the decision)," Francis said.

Wrong, Skeeter. Try second floor Woollen Gym, first door on the left, and meet Ron Miller, UNC's fencing coach.

For the past 13 years Miller has built one of the best and most respected fencing programs in the country. Since the sport's 1971 initiation in the ACC, Carolina has won eight conference championships, and thus fencing ranks as UNC's most successful sport during the past 10 years.

Miller has been instrumental in helping build the ACC as the best fencing conference in the nation. UNC, along with Clemson and Maryland, has established itself as a national power and consistently ranks in the national Top 10. So Miller's inability to understand the latest decisions is very easy to understand.

"Obviously, I have to be disappointed," a dejected Miller said Monday afternoon in his office. "Essentially 13 years of building a program and 10 years of building the best conference in the nation seems to be jeopardized."

The conference's move caught Miller off guard. For the past seven years he had heard of how the conference might have to cut back on expenses, but action was never taken.

Miller said the more well-established programs will combine with other interested schools to form their own tournament. But this format still poses problems.

"It makes it difficult for us to qualify for nationals," Miller said. "It's going to be

harder to recruit and it will hurt the level of competition in the long run. And because of that it can't do anything but hurt the program."

UNC is one of a few conference schools that give partial aid for fencing and the future continuation of that policy could also be jeopardized.

Although Miller doesn't believe Title IX had a direct effect on the decision, he also knows the money needed to strengthen women's programs must come from somewhere. "I'm just sorry if we became a victim of it," he said.

The exclusion of indoor track does not really make any substantial difference because of the outdoor track and cross country seasons. Also, UNC is the only school that has a suitable indoor track area.

But the decision to axe fencing poses many questions. Why would the ACC, which is the national leader in fencing, cut back on the sport's importance? Fencing is a growing sport across the nation. The ACC had an opportunity to be the ring leader in the growing popularity of a sport. But it didn't capitalize, and the sport of fencing can now expect a tougher uphill battle for NCAA recognition.

The absence of former UNC Athletic Director Bill Cobey at the conference meeting could be a major reason fencing didn't make the grade. A staunch supporter of Carolina's fencing program and a former chairman of a fencing committee, Cobey's retirement meant the loss of one of the conference's strongest fencing allies.

The growing inability of conferences to sponsor sports is also a direct statement on the weakening power of the NCAA. What will start happening now on a national level? Will cutbacks become a trend across the nation? The strength of having conferences is the strength of the NCAA and it looks as if both are heading toward major problems.

"I'm just going to ride it out and see what happens," Miller said. "I know the athletes are very concerned but they're taking the same wait and see attitude."

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