

Bulldogs should quickly consider a conference call

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With conference realignment happening at a frequent and even alarming rate, the time has come for UNC Asheville to consider switching conferences.

UNCA has competed in the Big South Conference since 1984. In joining the Big South, the Bulldogs garnered a good amount of exposure in the South and even nationally. But with conference realignment happening at a torrid pace, UNCA may need to consider finding greener pastures and taking advantage of openings in other conferences.

Recently, Virginia Military Institute announced their plans to leave the Big South Conference after the 2013-14 academic year and join the Southern Conference. While the VMI loss might seem like a minor one to the conference, it shows that certain schools in the conference might have other opportunities to relocate to more notable conferences, like the Southern Conference.

Relocating to more notable conferences gives schools more opportunity to brand themselves while even possibly giving their schools more credibility in respective to athletics. While the Big South does boast a lineup of schools with notoriety, including Winthrop, Liberty and Coastal Carolina, 30 years in one conference screams change and the time for UNCA to find a new home is now. The question that now needs to be asked; What options does UNCA have?

Conference realignment can change the landscape of a conference very quickly. The Atlantic Coast Conference alone added four schools in two years time. While the ACC might not be a possibility for UNCA, two conferences seem to be possible options, the Colonial Athletic Association and the Southern Conference.

While the CAA is a well-known conference, and after it adds Elon University in 2014, it will only boast 10 full-member schools. To put this in perspective, the Big South has 12 full-member schools. The difference is notoriety and profit margins the two conferences.

With schools such as James Madison University, Drexel University and UNC Wilmington already in the conference, UNCA would benefit tremendously from joining the CAA. Since its inception, the CAA produced 16 national champions in five different sports. The question remains whether UNC Asheville is a large enough institution to garner interest from the CAA, but it might be worth it for the university to show some interest and see what happens from there.

Opinion

The other conference UNCA should look into joining is the Southern Conference. With the Southern Conference Basketball Tournament being played in Asheville the last couple of years, the city proved to be a great host city for the tournament. The venue and region worked so well that the city of Asheville, the Asheville Buncombe Regional Sports Commission and the Southern Conference signed a deal to keep the tournament in town through 2017.

The tournament had an estimated annual economic impact of \$4 million, while bringing in more than 10,000 visitors to Asheville annually, according to the Asheville Chamber of Commerce. The new deal shows the Southern Conference has confidence in the city of Asheville, which could be vital for a possible UNCA addition to their conference.

The Southern Conference also dealt with its own conference realignment. With Appalachian State University and Georgia Southern University leaving for the Sun Belt Conference, as well as Elon University going to the CAA and Davidson College heading to the Atlantic 10 Conference. The Southern Conference needed to add members, so the extended invitations to Mercer University, East Tennessee State University and also Virginia Military Institute. All three schools accepted the invitation to join the conference. With the addition of Mercer, ETSU and VMI, the conference still has one space to fill, and that is where UNCA comes in.

The Southern Conference also boasts notable schools in its membership, including Western Carolina University, UNC Greensboro and The Citadel. Joining a conference with these notable schools could instantly give UNCA even more notoriety than it already has in the Big South.

This could be crucial for school expansion and branding. UNCA would be wise to engage in talks with the Southern Conference and work to negotiate a deal, although the conference would need to show interest as well. A deal with the Southern Conference would enhance UNCA's ever-increasing popularity in Asheville and beyond.

When it comes to conference realignment, UNCA has options it can look into. There are no guarantees, but for the possibility of more notoriety, branding and even the betterment of the university, it should take the steps necessary to seek this through.

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