

TOUGH DECISIONS

Debt forces Prairie View A&M to leave SWAC

Money problems have forced Prairie View A&M administrators to all but pull

worth \$300,000 annually in student fees.

Over the last five years, the athletic

program stayed afloat because the deficit was covered by funds coming from the

will be released from their contracts. But for those who only coach, a negotiation settlement will have to be agreed on.

Other SWAC members are in a frenzy attempting to fill their football and basketball schedules for the upcoming seasons.

While some league observers say they were caught off guard by the announcement, there were warning signs indicating the seriousness of the school's financial woes. For example:

- PVU stopped giving athletic scholarships last year. Athletes who decided to stay were allowed to keep their scholarships even though they no longer competed in intercollegiate sports.

- The school didn't have a golf team or tennis team this year. At the time of their decision, PVU wasn't financially able to add a projected seventh sport to meet the qualifications for Division I status.

- Deeper still, the school doesn't meet present requirements for membership in the SWAC.

In reviewing Prairie View's sports history, the Panthers have a rich heritage. At one time, they were the creme de la creme of the league. In the '50s and '60s, coach Billy Nicks' PVU football teams captured seven SWAC championships. In '62, Prairie View captured the NAIA national championship in men's basketball.

But over the last decade, the school's athletic fortunes have nosedived, especially in football and basketball -- the revenue producing sports. This past season, for instance, the football Panthers finished 1-6 in the SWAC and 1-9 overall. In men's basketball, they were 5-9 in conference play and 9-18 overall.

The only sport they have been really competitive at in recent years is track. Competitive success, the status of the women's coach, and the comparatively lost cost to fund that sport are reasons why track is PVU's lone intercollegiate sport remaining.

- In '87, the women's track team, coached by Barbara Jacket, won the NAIA outdoor title, their sixth straight.

- Jacket, by the way, will coach the U.S. women's team that will compete in the '92 Olympic Games in Barcelona, Spain.

- In '88, the men's team finished second in the team standings at the NAIA nationals. Additionally, they were national champs in the 4 x 100 and 4 x 400 relays. They were so good that they ran in the Division I nationals and placed third in the 4 x 400, finishing behind record-setting UCLA and Florida.

After this five-year period is over, it's anyone's guess if Prairie View will return to the SWAC.

But the real question is whether or not the school can develop a sports program that is financially sound enough to compete at the Division I level in every sport it participates in.

- Lonnie Shelton



Photo by Mark Gail

Prairie View football has been on a virtual downward spiral in recent years. Their 5-5 finish two seasons ago was their best since the mid-'70s.

the plug on athletics at that school. As a result, Prairie View has left the Southwestern Athletic Conference (SWAC), reducing the Super Eight to just seven member schools.

PVU officials announced at the conference meetings held in late May that the Panthers would eliminate all intercollegiate sports with the exception of men's and women's track. This move is effective immediately and is expected to stay that way for the next five years. In the meantime, the school will focus on intramural sports.

The sports being eliminated are football, men's and women's basketball, baseball, tennis, golf and volleyball.

Julius Becton Jr., Prairie View president, feels that having his school leave SWAC was a necessary move. Over the past five years, the Panthers athletic program has found itself covered deeply in debt -- reportedly to the tune of close to \$3.5 million.

The financial reality of PVU's plight is painfully clear when looking at this year's athletic expenditures and revenues. The '90 budget is a little over \$1 million, but revenues are far short of that -- \$600,000.

Cutting the athletic program to a bare minimum will save PVU 70 scholarships,



Staff Photo

Basketball never achieved lofty status, but individually, there were some prime-time people. Lamar Holt (above) was the SWAC assist leader this past season.

school's housing and food programs. Given that scenario, Becton felt it was best to trim sports and devote those previously diverted funds into other programs that would benefit a larger portion of the student body.

The fact that Prairie View was the only charter member of the SWAC remaining, didn't make Becton's decision any easier.

Prairie View's decision to leave their conference has produced more than a few ripples along the way. Athletes, coaches and other SWAC members are affected.

Many athletes will leave and play elsewhere. Those who choose to stay will keep their scholarships as long as they are in good academic standing.

Coaches, however, are in a different situation. The coaches who are also teachers, will be retained. Those coaches who wish to leave