

App State Officially Joins Sun Belt

Written by Mike Flynn
Tuesday, 01 July 2014 06:18

A move that was decades in the making came to fruition on Tuesday morning when Appalachian State University officially became a member of the Sun Belt Conference.

With the move to the Sun Belt, one of 10 NCAA Division I conferences in the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS — formerly Division I-A), all 20 of Appalachian State's varsity sports programs will now compete at the highest level of collegiate athletics. Appalachian, which entered the NCAA Division I ranks in 1970 and was a member of the Southern Conference since 1971, had played in football in the Division I Football Championship Subdivision (FCS) since 1982, when the SoCon moved to the subdivision formerly known as Division I-AA.

"This is a great day for Appalachian," director of athletics Charlie Cobb said. "For the first time in more than 30 years, all of our student-athletes now have the opportunity to compete at the highest level of college athletics while raising the profile of our University on a regional and national level."

Officially joining the Sun Belt culminates a process that began in September 2010 when Appalachian State announced that it would conduct a study to evaluate the feasibility of a move to a conference that sponsors Division I FBS. An 11-member feasibility committee convened in

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2011 to study whether it was best for Appalachian State to remain in NCAA Division I FCS or seek to move to Division I FBS. After seven months of objective analysis, which included feedback from all University constituencies (students, faculty, staff, alumni and the local community), the committee determined that Appalachian State's unprecedented athletic success, the University's enrollment of 17,000-plus, its academic philosophy and its strategic vision going forward more closely mirrored NCAA Division I FBS institutions and recommended that the University seek membership in an athletics conference that sponsors football in FBS. Appalachian State's Board of Trustees approved the recommendation on Sept. 23, 2011.

The search for an FBS conference that establishes natural geographic rivalries and makes sound financial sense concluded on March 27, 2013 when former Chancellor Dr. Kenneth E. Peacock and the Appalachian State Board of Trustees accepted an invitation to join the Sun Belt Conference.

The Sun Belt Conference's membership consists of 11 full-time members — Appalachian State, UALR, Arkansas State, Georgia Southern, Georgia State, Louisiana-Lafayette, Louisiana-Monroe, South Alabama, UT-Arlington, Texas State and Troy. Idaho and New Mexico State are football-only members, giving the Sun Belt 11 gridiron programs (UALR and UT-Arlington do not field football teams).

Founded in 1976, the Sun Belt's 21 non-conference football wins in the 2013 season was a new record for the league — eclipsing the mark of 19 set the year prior. The Sun Belt also fared well against its peer opponents from other conferences whose champions did not automatically qualify for the Bowl Championship Series. The Sun Belt finished a combined 8-1 against members of Conference-USA (4-1), the Mid-American Conference (3-0) and the Mountain West Conference (1-0) , had the best overall non-conference win percentage among the four non-AQ conferences and was the No. 1-rated non-AQ conference in the final BCS rankings in 2013.

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The 2013 football season also saw two Sun Belt teams take home bowl-championship trophies, as Louisiana-Lafayette won its third-straight R+L Carriers New Orleans Bowl and Arkansas State won its second consecutive GoDaddy Bowl.

However, football isn't the only sport where the Sun Belt has enjoyed recent success. As recently as 2013, two Sun Belt squads earned berths in the NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament. This past spring, Louisiana-Lafayette held a unanimous No. 1 ranking in baseball and got within one win of advancing to the College World Series while the Ragin' Cajuns' softball program did participate in the Women's College World Series. In recent years as many as four Sun Belt teams have advanced to the baseball postseason in a single year, while as many as three Sun Belt softball teams have accomplished that feat.

While Appalachian State will undoubtedly see an increase in the competitiveness of opponents across all sports in the Sun Belt, the Mountaineers' athletic success over the past decade has proven that they are capable of competing at a high level.

Since 2005, Appalachian State has placed in the top 115 in the Division I football Sagarin Ratings (combining FBS and FCS teams) seven times in nine seasons, earned four postseason National Invitation Tournament berths and appeared in a total of six national postseason tournaments in men's and women's basketball, earned a pair of top-50 Ratings Percentage Index rankings in baseball, including a run to within three wins of the College World Series in 2012, and sent individual athletes to NCAA national competitions in men's and women's cross

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country, men's and women's indoor and outdoor track and field and wrestling. App State claimed 41 conference championships in its final nine years in the SoCon.

“This day would not be possible if not for decades of vision, hard work and achievement put forth by thousands of Appalachian State students, faculty, staff, campus leaders, alumni, supporters and community members,” Cobb said. “We hope that the entire App Nation joins us in celebrating this historic day and will continue to help us rise together to achieve great things.”