

Vandals join the Sun Belt Conference for football

Other sports to play in Big Sky Conference

Ben Handel/Moscow-Pullman Daily News

The Vandals are homeless no longer.

After a one-year stint as an independent, Idaho football officially joined the Sun Belt Conference on Tuesday.

"We look forward to rejoining the Sun Belt Conference and competing in a league that was recently recognized as the best of the 'Group of Five' (Mid-American, Mountain West, Conference USA, American Athletic and Sun Belt) conferences," Idaho athletic director Rob Spear said in a statement.

According to NCAA statistical analyst Jeff Sagarin, whose rankings are included in the BCS formula, the Sun Belt ranked behind the AAC, the Mountain West and Independents, but ahead of Conference USA and the MAC.

The Vandals weren't the only team to relocate to the Sun Belt on Tuesday. New Mexico State, which was a member of the Western Athletic Conference along with Idaho until the conference collapsed in 2012, will be ending its brief stint as an independent. Appalachian State and Georgia Southern made the jump from the FCS level to FBS by joining the Sun Belt as well.

"The additions of Appalachian State and Georgia Southern along with Idaho and New Mexico State put the Sun Belt Conference in a great spot in the national landscape of college football," Sun Belt Commissioner Karl Benson said in a statement Tuesday. "Expectations will be high this season after the SBC had its best football season in league history last year, and I know expectations and excitement will be at all-time highs for Appalachian State and Georgia Southern with their jumps from FCS to the FBS level.

"While Idaho and New Mexico State are both undergoing a rebuilding process, I am very confident it won't be long before the Vandals and Aggies are going to bowl games and contending for the Sun Belt football championship."

Appalachian State and Georgia Southern join the Sun Belt Conference as full members while Idaho and New Mexico State join as football-only members. The additions bring the Sun Belt Conference's all-sports membership to 11 schools and its football membership also to 11 schools, as Arkansas-Little Rock and Texas-Arlington do not compete in football.

"I'm excited to be playing in a great football conference and competing against some great coaches and players," Idaho football coach Paul Petrino said.

All Vandal athletics except for football will compete in the Big Sky Conference next year. Idaho won the Commissioner's Cup in its last year in the WAC, attaining more athletic success than any other school in the conference. The Vandals were members of the Big Sky from 1963-96.

"As a founding member of the Big Sky Conference, we are extremely excited for our return and the opportunity to compete against traditional rivals," Spear said.

Ben Handel can be reached at (208) 883-4634 or by email to bhandel@dnews.com.