

In their second post-WAC season, UI hoops teams are settling into the Sky Life

Meanwhile, the Idaho football team again mulls its options

Dale Grummert/Lewiston Tribune

MOSCOW - As a gangly 6-foot-9 freshman basketball player in 2013, Ty Egbert saw the Western Athletic Conference as a valuable athletic classroom, a post-oriented league where he could roll up his sleeves and hone his skills.

"It was a lot more big-boy basketball," the University of Idaho junior recalled. His older, weightier teammates "were always big-boying me, and I thought, 'This is what I'd like to do.' "

Three years later, Egbert is adjusting to the faster, breezier rhythms of the Big Sky Conference, where last year the Vandals moved all their sports except football, re-establishing ties to a league they'd fled in 1996.

Egbert believes the transition has made him a better athlete. Meanwhile, like other members of the UI men's and women's basketball teams, he thinks the more intimate, regional feel of the Big Sky has lightened his load a bit.

No matter what position you played, life in the WAC was getting rugged when the Vandals left, especially in terms of travel.

As the Vandal football program heads into another period of uncertainty and is even mulling the possibility of joining the school's other teams in the Big Sky, UI basketball players and coaches have launched Year 2 in their new/old conference, hopeful that its advantages will become more apparent as they move forward.

They have no advice for the football team, which will learn on March 10 whether it's still welcome in the Sun Belt Conference. But in basketball, the Vandals' journey back to the future, though difficult in various ways, has been relatively smooth.

"I love it back in the Big Sky," Idaho men's basketball coach Don Verlin said this week. "I don't want to speak football-wise. But basketball-wise, I think it's the right place for us. A lot of regional rivalries. A lot of games we can get to. A really good conference, a lot of good teams, a lot of competitive games."

Yes, a lot. It's more ironic than surprising, but by returning to a conference they once thought they'd outgrown, Vandal basketball players are actually facing some of the stiffest league competition they've seen in recent years.

That's especially true for the UI women, who won back-to-back WAC titles in 2013-14 but narrowly failed to make the eight-team Big Sky tournament last year. The Idaho men qualified as the No. 7 seed but were eliminated in the first round, after marching to the WAC championship game the previous year.

Both Idaho squads take 2-1 league records into Big Sky games against Northern Arizona tonight, the men at home and the women at Flagstaff, Ariz.

If the Vandal men are adjusting to a more guard-oriented game in the Sky, the women are trying to harden themselves for more aggressive opponents.

"We're adjusting a little better this year," Idaho senior guard Christina Salvatore said. "It's a different style of play in the Big Sky. I think you have tougher posts inside, more talent inside - I don't know, more versatile all-around. As we're starting to settle in, I'm starting to like it a little better. When you have success in the WAC, you don't really want to leave. So leaving it after two championships was a little tough."

The Vandals, especially the men, felt more at home in the WAC when it included schools like Boise State, Utah State and Fresno State. During the final phase of their eight-year stay in the league, they were playing the likes of Missouri-Kansas City, Chicago State and Texas-Pan American. Nine states were represented in a nine-team league.

"That's when I felt, gosh, we should get ourselves back in the Sky," Verlin said. "I love the regional rivalries. I love playing schools in this area. That's what college basketball should be all about."

He said he's recruiting the same caliber of athlete as before, and the parents of some of his players (though not all) can attend road games more easily than they could in the WAC.

A conference schedule that includes a few Inland Northwest road games is perhaps especially advantageous for Idaho women's coach Jon Newlee.

"It helps us with our recruiting, the local players, knowing that we're going to be closer to home and their parents can come watch," he said.

The Big Sky is more far-flung these days than during Idaho's previous 30-year affiliation with the conference. The UI men's road trip two weeks ago to North Dakota and Northern Colorado was reminiscent of their WAC experience. But both Idaho teams have enjoyed rekindling rivalries with schools like Eastern Washington, Montana, Montana State and Idaho State.

True, some of the Big Sky road trips present their own challenges.

"I've been on some hellacious bus trips to Montana," said Newlee, a former Idaho State coach. "Before we (the Vandals) got in the Big Sky, we had a flat tire on our bus going out to Missoula. That was brutal."

Overall, though, Verlin and Newlee, both eighth-year UI coaches with wide experience of travel conditions in the West, have no complaints about life on the Big Sky road.

"It's cake compared to the WAC," Verlin said. "In between games (generally on Thursdays and Saturdays in most men's leagues), we always had a flight, and sometimes two flights. You don't know how many times we rolled into here (at Moscow) at 6 o'clock on a Sunday night."

Travel itineraries like that, often disrupted further by the variables of post-9/11 air travel, can take their toll on athletes, both physically and academically.

"I think it's a lot easier," Egbert said of juggling schoolwork and sports in the Big Sky. "You've got shorter travel times. We have more time to sit in the hotel and do our homework. I know for some guys it's hard to read or do homework while in a bus or car, moving."

If the Vandals had a moment of regret about returning to the Big Sky last year, it perhaps came in March, while coming to grips with the league's quaint longtime policy of staging its postseason tournaments at the site of its regular-season champions.

After years of playing in the WAC tournament at Las Vegas, the Vandals last year (a) failed to get their women into the postseason at all and (b) lost a first-round men's game before a few hundred fans at 10 a.m. Pacific time in Missoula, Mont.

Last April, the Big Sky announced a three-year agreement to play its men's and women's tournaments at Reno, Nev., with all 12 schools invited.

"When that passed, I was probably the happiest coach in the Big Sky," Newlee said.

Apparently, the Egbert family of Coulee Dam, Wash., approved as well.

"I'm excited - my dad's excited," Ty Egbert said. "We're going to meet down there, and after we win the Big Sky championship we're going to hop in the truck, drive home and get ready for March Madness."

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