

For the kids paying the bills, the Big Sky works

Marty Trillhaase/Lewiston Tribune

Political historian Randy Stapilus started off his column this week by observing he enrolled at the University of Idaho nearly 40 years ago because it was not "football-obsessed."

A university where the football team posted three winning seasons between 1945 and the early 1980s was just the kind of school Stapilus said he found "amenable."

He's on to something. It is possible - and some would say likely - that many if not most UI students may get through four years of school without attending a single Vandal football game.

They may leave football alone. It is not the other way around, however.

At the UI, fees students pay and the taxes their parents shell out will subsidize nearly half the costs of the intercollegiate athletics program.

That's a bit better than Idaho State University, where fees and taxes cover two-thirds of athletics costs, or Lewis-Clark State College, where public dollars pay roughly 60 percent of the bills.

Even Boise State University - with its upper-division football team, legions of enthusiastic fans and healthy television contracts - can't support athletics without help. Student fees and tax revenues support about 10 percent of its program.

All of which begs the question: What are they getting in return?

Keep that in mind as you contemplate UI President Chuck Staben's decision last week to return to the Big Sky Conference after nearly two decades navigating the upper division.

After being cut from the Sun Belt Conference, Staben didn't have much of a choice. As the Tribune's Theo Lawson reported, Staben concluded attempting to remain as an independent within the Football Bowl Subdivision was "irresponsible."

Still, it's the gutsiest move of Staben's tenure.

Staben will draw flak from those who perceive this as a loss of prestige and fear that dropping down to the Football Championship Subdivision will hurt the Vandal program financially.

Ask around, however, and you're likely to find people who are more hopeful. After accounting for reduced expenses, the net financial impact may not be so horrific, they say.

Looking at this from the student perspective, you have to wonder what was the point of a UI football program that bounced around five leagues in 18 years?

Why would a UI student living in Moscow have much interest in a rival football team from Georgia State?

What's to interest an alum in watching the Vandals get outmatched merely for the purpose of drawing in television dollars?

How do you build interest in a team that - as the Tribune's Matt Baney noted - is 73-163 for the last two decades? Or 41-139 for the last 15 years? Or outscored an average of 15 points per game?

For the UI, the Big Sky Conference is a logical fit.

Vandals will play their regional peers - Montana and Montana State, Eastern Washington, Idaho State and Portland State. Isn't it possible students from towns small and large throughout Idaho and the West will relate better to schools and communities they already recognize?

There are no guarantees, but the UI will go into the Big Sky as a competitive force.

"Winning is a lot better than losing," Staben said.

It's hard to imagine fans not responding. And in four or five years, when the Vandals are on the cusp of winning a Big Sky Conference title, some will wonder why Staben or one of his predecessors waited so long. - M.T.