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SIUE thinks big-time — Division I

By Paul Hampel
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EDWARDSVILLE Blue-chip recruits. National prestige. March Madness.

Southern Illinois University Edwardsville is dreaming big.

The school that for most of its history has been a no-nonsense commuter campus is considering moving up a notch in the National Collegiate Athletic Association to Division I.

With enrollment at a record level, three new dormitories and a fourth on the way, the school has convened a task force to examine the potential payoffs, and pitfalls, of moving the Cougars into elite athletic territory.

The committee will not look into fielding a football team. That idea was examined a few years ago and rejected.

The committee is expected to take 18 months to sort through the complexities of an upgrade before making a recommendation.

But in the meantime, university athletic director Brad Hewitt is giving full reign to his hoop dreams.

"Everybody has that dream of competing in the NCAA's (Division I basketball tournament)," Hewitt said.

"You've seen those Cinderella stories where an unknown team wins in the first round, then goes on to the second and then the third and then the whole nation knows who they are."

Hewitt sees moving up to Division I as a "natural evolution" at the school, where enrollment is about 13,500.

Natural or not, such a reclassification can be a financial jolt. Division I status may entail spending millions of dollars to upgrade facilities. At SIUE, it would probably require building a new basketball arena, Hewitt said.

It would also require extra scholarships and adjustments to conform to Title IX, the 1972 law that obligates schools that receive public funding to provide equal athletic opportunities for men and women.

And then there are intangible elements, such as whether SIUE's teams can compete on a national level with bigger schools.

Another complication would be finding a suitable conference. Hewitt said he thought the Missouri Valley Conference, which contains Division I Southern Illinois University Carbondale, would be a good fit.

Task force chairman Gary Giamartino notes that the university currently has one of the nation's finest athletic programs in Division II.

The men's soccer team, for example, is the top-ranked Division II team in the country.

Moving up a notch in classification means stiffer competition. A standout squad at the Division II level might find itself as an also-ran at Division I.

"The question is whether moving up makes sense for us," said Giamartino, dean of the university's business school. "Our student athletes have had terrific accomplishments. I don't think anyone's interested in moving to a level where we would be undistinguished."

The new task force is made up of SIUE students, faculty, staff, alumni, and residents of surrounding communities.

Among the alternatives the group is considering is establishing a hybrid classification at the school, in which some sports would step up to Division I, while others remain at Division II.

Hewitt said he believed the soccer and basketball teams are ready to compete at

a "mid-major" Division I level. He would not speculate on whether other sports, including the baseball, softball, wrestling, golf, tennis, or track and field, would be included if the university chose to go the hybrid route.

The last time a university task force met to discuss athletic issues, in 1999, it voted against fielding a football team.

However, if the school goes Division I, Hewitt conjectured that Cougars may someday prowl the gridiron.

"Who knows?" he said. "It could happen."

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