Sun Belt adding 4 New Teams

By Derek Steyer

A busy day in the Sun Belt Conference has culminated with the additions of Appalachian State and Georgia Southern as all-sports members and Idaho and New Mexico State as football playing members. All four announcements took place throughout the course of the day on Wednesday.

Both Appalachian State and Georgia Southern bring with them highly successfully football programs and each team will begin the process of transitioning to the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) immediately. The 2014 Sun Belt football season will mark the debut of both in the league schedule and standings. Additionally, both the Mountaineers and Eagles will be able to compete for the league championship in football for the 2014 season. Both teams will first be eligible to compete in a spot for a postseason bowl game come the 2015 season.

Idaho and New Mexico State are familiar partners of the Sun Belt Conference, having been football members from the league's inaugural year of football in 2001 through the 2004 season. Both members played an integral part of forming the Sun Belt Conference for football and now add strength to the league. Having reached the 12 team mark, the Sun Belt Conference can now play a football championship game should it choose to do so. Both teams will be immediately eligible to compete for the Sun Belt football championship and also for a spot in postseason bowl games.

There is no question that the Sun Belt Conference is a league on the rise in football. After all, the conference finished with its most non-conference wins in league history in 2012 and also sent a record four teams to bowl games. The conference also finished the 2012 season with its best ever average computer ranking – finishing ahead of Conference USA and the Mountain West.

The league also had two wins over top-25 ranked opponents and Louisiana-Lafayette and Arkansas State won their respective bowl games. All four Sun Belt Conference institutions that went to bowl games in 2012 return for the 2013 season.

The 2012-13 men's basketball season has seen the league put together its best non-conference RPI in four years while sending two teams to the NCAA Men's Basketball Championship. Notably, the Sun Belt's men's and women's basketball teams combined for a record tying seven postseason appearances this season.

In other sports, the league is known for placing multiple teams in the NCAA baseball and softball tournaments year-after-year. Baseball and softball teams from the Sun Belt Conference are usually easy to spot in the national top 25 rankings.

Through it all, Sun Belt student-athletes excel in the classroom as well. A record 1,793 Sun Belt Conference student-athletes earned a GPA over 3.0 for the previous school year and were named to either the SBC Academic Honor Roll or SBC Commissioner's List. The 2011-12 academic year marked the third time in the last four years that the academic honors were doled out to 1,700 or more student-athletes.

The Sun Belt Conference will contest the 2013 football season with eight members – Arkansas State, Georgia State, Louisiana-Lafayette, Louisiana-Monroe, South Alabama, Texas State, Troy and Western Kentucky University. UALR and UT Arlington compete as non-football members.
About Appalachian State University

Nestled in the Blue Ridge Mountains of North Carolina, Appalachian State offers a challenging academic environment, energetic campus life and breathtaking location. Appalachian combines the best attributes of a small liberal arts college with those of a large research university. Known for its value and affordability, Appalachian enrolls nearly 18,000 students and offers more than 150 undergraduate and graduate majors. Appalachian State University remains third among top public regional universities in the South and retains 10th place among the top regional universities in the South, according to U.S. News and World Report's 2013 America's Best Colleges Guide.

About Georgia Southern University

During the past decade, Georgia Southern has shown growth in size and scope that has led to recognition by U.S. News and World Report as one of the top ten most popular universities in the nation. The University offers 112 degree programs at the baccalaureate, master's and doctoral levels through eight colleges, as well as a variety of online classes in business, education, liberal arts, science, technology and healthcare, including an array of advanced degree programs.

About the University of Idaho

The University of Idaho is the state of Idaho's oldest public university and is one of only 72 national land-grant research universities. The University is located in Moscow towards the northern portion of the state. UI has been recognized by Forbes magazine as 33rd in the nation among the 2012 "Top 100 Best Buy Colleges" and second among all national research universities in the Pacific Northwest. UI also continues to have a record number of National Merit Scholars – more than any other public institution of higher education in the Pacific Northwest. 130 Bachelor's, 88 Master's, and 32 Doctoral degrees are offered by UI and the university enrolls over 11,000 students on its main campus.

About New Mexico State University

New Mexico State University is a comprehensive land-grant institution of higher learning which is also a NASA Space Grant College, a Hispanic-serving institution and is home to the very first Honors College in New Mexico. NMSU's main campus in Las Cruces features an enrollment of over 17,000 students and the University offers 88 bachelor's, 54 master's, 53 certificate, 52 associate, 22 doctoral, 4 specialist in education and 3 doctor of education degree programs. Issues in Higher Education places NMSU among the top 100 undergraduate and graduate degree producers for minority students. U.S. News and World Report ranks NMSU in the top tier among Best National Universities.