



The NCAA News -- October 8, 2001

The NorPac is back

Long name, long trips, long-time tradition all part of nationally based field hockey league's inspiring evolution

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What do you call a conference that spans the Pacific, East and Midwest regions of the United States? The Coast-to-Coast Conference? Big America? How about the Northern Pacific Atlantic Central Conference?



In the case of the Northern Pacific Field Hockey Conference (NorPac), perhaps a more appropriate name would be "The Survival Conference" or the symbolic "Phoenix." But for now, the NorPac will stick with the name that represents 19 years of fruition, scarcity and rebuilding.

The NorPac was recognized as an NCAA single-sport conference in 1998. But its history is far more encompassing.

In 1982, seven schools competed for the conference title: California State University, Chico; University of the Pacific (California); San Jose State University; Stanford University; University of California, Berkeley; University of California, Davis; and Washington State University. During the 1970s and early 1980s, the West Coast enjoyed a wealth of top-level field hockey teams, earning several national championships along the way. The NorPac was a multisport conference, and a competitive one at that.

And then, the NCAA opened its doors to women's athletics. Schools scrambled to join conferences as the Association of Intercollegiate Athletics for Women dissolved, and programs were dropped so that other sports could be enhanced. By 1986, the NorPac was exclusively for field hockey. From 1983 to 1991, one by one, the NorPac dwindled to just three schools: California, Pacific (California) and Stanford. Though they continued to play each other and designate a champion each year, the schools were considered "independents" by the NCAA, and seven lonely years ensued.

A grant to the rescue

During that time, the West region lost its automatic berth into the NCAA championship, was melded with the more populated and highly competitive Midwest region, and all but

lost its chance at keeping field hockey alive in the West.

According to California coach Shellie Onstead, the trio would play each other two, sometimes three times a year. Then they would make one trip and play several schools. But home games against out-of-region teams were few and far between.

"We'd pray for teams to come here," she said. "We'd manage to keep a schedule, but recruiting-wise, it was brutal."



Current NorPac Commissioner Carla Konet said attracting recruits to a school that had no chance of getting into the NCAA tournament was almost as difficult as keeping administrators interested in funding a struggling program. Furthermore, other schools had little inclination to play a team that did not count in the Rating Percentage Index.

"We survived all those years," Konet said, speaking from first-hand experience -- she was the head coach at Pacific (California) for 18 years. "But we knew we were going to lose field hockey on the West Coast if we didn't do something."

Sometimes, sheer desperation gives rise to invention. In the case of the NorPac, a collective effort to obtain a United States Olympic Committee (USOC)/NCAA conference grant gave the league new life.

The grants were being awarded as part of an \$8 million, four-year USOC program to assist NCAA conferences with funding for Olympic sports. The money was meant to enhance endangered sports, those that had fallen below the minimum sponsorship criteria for NCAA championships and emerging Olympic sports, as well as to increase the number of athletes, varsity intercollegiate programs and conference championships in those sports.

In 1997, Konet, her fellow NorPac coaches and field hockey colleague Nancy Schuler applied for a \$2.7 million USOC/NCAA grant. The grant proposal outlined a four-year plan and specific goals "to strengthen and expand the Olympic sport of field hockey at California colleges and universities." The proposal's main premise was that the funding was necessary to enhance scholarships, cover program costs, and improve facilities and equipment. In the long term, schools could attract better players, raise the level of competition and convince more schools to acquire programs. Eventually, the conference hoped to add more teams and break into east and west divisions.

The grant was rejected, but the basic goals remained the same. In 1998, a second try with equally ambitious ideas but a tailored approach was approved. The NorPac was allocated \$150,000 to be used during the next three years, specifically for the conference championship.

"The grant was huge," Konet said. In addition, the United States Field Hockey Association agreed to contribute \$2,000 in equipment for use at the championship for each year of the grant.

"Our success and growth as a conference would not have happened without the conference grant for our championship tournament or the USFHA's support," Konet said.

The funding was the first solid evidence that the NorPac had a future.

In the first year, money covered team travel expenses and lodging for the championship. Over the long term, the funding was intended to improve the championship and develop officiating and coaches clinics.

"It made for a quality tournament," Konet said.

Building numbers

In the year between the two proposals, Saint Louis University, Southwest Missouri State University and Davis & Elkins College joined the NorPac. The additional teams added meat to the second proposal and likely aided in its approval. The conference was just two teams shy of achieving its eight-member goal.

Shannon West, head coach at St. Louis, said her team joined the conference because "we wanted consistent opponents and a guaranteed schedule." She also wanted the byproducts of conference membership, such as healthy rivalries, a championship and "a purpose to work toward."

Previously, independent programs like St. Louis had no opportunity for postseason play. Now, West said, "We're totally satisfied. Every game is competitive. We're improving our level of play. Having a conference has definitely established a sense of pride."

Other independent schools took notice.

Current Ball State University and former Davidson College coach Jennifer Halliday believed so much in the future of NorPac that she wrote a 150-page report about why Davidson should join. She distributed it to her administrators and NorPac colleagues.

In the report, Halliday concluded, "A conference affiliation is imperative to the future success of our program. It is my concern Davidson will not take a long hard look at the opportunity we have before us with the invitation by the NorPac. The window of opportunity is brief, but the benefits will become immeasurable if taken."

The document outlined the benefits of NorPac membership for her program, the projected expenses, tangible and intangible benefits, and an optimistic outlook about the future of the conference.

The reason for the behemoth effort, Halliday said, "was my concern that administrators were looking at the future -- three years out -- in order to evaluate cost effectiveness of NorPac membership."

While administrators would have to adjust to the implications of conference membership, so too would the players. They had to familiarize themselves with perks such as player-of-the-week and all-conference recognition, conference rivalries and a championship tournament to look forward to.

Halliday said that at her team's last practice before the 2000 conference championship, one of her senior players asked her, "So what's this banquet about?" The banquet in question was the NorPac banquet held in conjunction with the championship, and it was a foreign concept to the Davidson players.

"I didn't know how to explain it to them," Halliday said, herself a former standout player at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, who had been used to Atlantic Coast Conference championship banquets. "I took for granted the experiences I was afforded



Stanford's Michelle Scott (bottom photo) was named the most outstanding player in the 2000 NorPac tournament won by the Cardinal.

with the ACC," she said.

Long-awaited legitimacy

California's Amber Stockstill and Erin Robinson take nothing for granted. As seniors, they have witnessed the total overhaul of field hockey at their school.

"My freshman year, if we won, we couldn't go anywhere. We can now go to the play-in game and beyond," Stockstill said.

Robinson said she emphasizes that to the team's younger players who have never known anything but NorPac membership. "We really try to stress the fact about how little chance we had in the past and how we want them to make it to the tournament," she said.

But that doesn't mean they're satisfied.

"The conference has really given our program more national recognition as players with things like tournament MVP awards and all-conference awards," Stockstill said, "But we want to get that automatic bid back."

When Davidson joined NorPac in 2000, so did Appalachian State University. Davis & Elkins dropped its field hockey program, but Radford University joined in 2001 and filled the gap. Now, the eight-member NorPac is able to form east and west divisions. That allows for double round-robin play and provides teams with fuller schedules and an opportunity to decide in advance if their budget can allow for a trip to the conference championship, which is rotated annually among the Pacific, Central and East members.

Eight members and an annual conference championship give the NorPac a legitimacy it has long sought. Though the NorPac hasn't regained the automatic qualification it lost in 1996, it has a play-in berth. And that's a beginning.

Proof of the NorPac's increase in competitiveness is the progress it has made in three short years. In 1998, the NorPac had to sit out one year from NCAA tournament participation as a result of its request for single-sport recognition. In 1999, the NorPac champions lost in the NCAA play-in berth. In 2000, Stanford defeated play-in opponent Holy Cross and advanced to the first round of the Division I Field Hockey Championship.

In an online Web chat with Stanford fans, Stanford player Erica Swesey wrote about the changes she has seen her program go through, from no conference tournament to an NCAA tournament appearance. "One huge difference is the rising respect and standing of our conference in the NCAA field hockey realm," she said. "Besides that, we have been receiving much more support from our school."

More than anything else, the players help the NorPac make its greatest strides in gaining credibility. For the 2000 season, 41 NorPac players were ranked nationally by the National Field Hockey Coaches Association (NFHCA). And 47 were named to the NFHCA Division I National Academic Squad. In May 2001, Stanford's Michelle Scott was the recipient of an NCAA postgraduate scholarship. Many NorPac players have gone on to play with the various USFHA national age-group teams.

Though the grant has officially ended and the NorPac must look to its members for financial support and to corporations for sponsorship, its future is bright.

"It's much easier recruiting now," Onstead said. "We can diagram a path to the NCAA tournament for our players. It completely turned our whole world around."

With such worries abated, there's more time to spend thinking about peripheral matters, such as renaming that mouthful-of-a-conference title.

But whatever the NorPac chooses to call itself, the conference's history and future aligns with the game it represents, where success is achieved one goal at a time.

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