

Kansas: Pioneer League Debuting in 2007-08

Pioneer League to feature five schools from the Frontier League joining forces with Jayhawk-Linn.

By Dean Backes

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Several members of the Frontier League's lower division have finally made their break.

With the enrollments of the upper division schools growing at a rate the smaller schools can't keep up with, most members of the Frontier League's small school division will join forces with former Three Rivers League member Jayhawk-Linn, to form the new Pioneer League this fall.

The league begins its inaugural season with a full slate of schedules in all sports except for football. With Kansas football teams competing in the final year of the two-year scheduling cycle, Frontier League teams will play in two divisions for the final time this season. Starting next season the Frontier League shrinks to one eight-team division.

Before the split, the Frontier League had schools competing in classes 3A, 4A and 5A. Gardner-Edgerton, the third-largest 5A school in the state, had the largest league enrollment of 756, while Central Heights weighed in as the smallest school in the league with 172 students in grades nine through 11.

"We felt like we were all searching for something different," Wellsville principal Sheldon Pokorney said of the smaller schools in the conference. "We were still able to compete with the Paolas and the Ottawas. We knew we could compete. It was just becoming increasingly more difficult."

Since Wellsville, Central Heights, Prairie View, Osawatomie and Anderson County played in a 13-team conference, scheduling became very difficult. After filling their conference slates, Frontier League teams had very little room left for playing teams outside of the conference.

That lack of flexibility hurt the smaller schools in the post season.

"We were pretty much locked into the Frontier League," Pokorney said. "We didn't really see any 3A teams until we came to sub-states. By then we usually didn't have that good of a record and we'd end up being a No. 8 seed."

In the early stages of the discussions, Anderson County wasn't real keen on joining the new league. But, eventually Bulldog athletic director Josh Adams and the rest of the Anderson County administration realized joining the league would be in their school's best interest. The

coaches and administration discussed the possibility of joining the new league with the school board and the rest is history.

"We thought it'd be crazy to drive by the other (Pioneer) schools in order to play the Frontier League schools," Adams said. "Besides we're all pretty close in size and we're all within about 25 miles of each other."

While the rest of the Frontier League's lower division schools were discussing the split, Eudora (the final lower division school) was quite content to stay put. Of course when you're winning at the rate the Cardinals have in recent history, especially in football, it's natural to want to stay where you are.

During the past three seasons Wellsville, Central Heights, Anderson County, Osawatomie and Prairie View combined to post a 27-42 Frontier League record in football. Eudora, on the other hand, posted a 27-7 overall record and won 14 of 15 league games. The Cardinals only loss during that time span was 38-17 to Osawatomie in 2004.

"We haven't even entertained thoughts of leaving," Cardinal athletic director Dave Durkin said. "We're happy in this league. We are having success where we're at now."

Durkin said the key to playing in a league in which you're outsized is to changing your own mindset.

"We had to raise our expectations in order to compete in the Frontier League," Durkin said. "We have to be tougher and work harder. We have good kids and good coaches and the kids have performed well. A lot goes into it. We just make sure the kids have everything they need to be successful."

While Durkin is satisfied with Eudora's situation, he definitely understands the plight of his former league mates. He was there once.

"If we're going to have two divisions why not have two different leagues," Durkin said.