

The changing face of sports in Canada West

Grant MacEwan is the latest college that wants in to the CIS, but can it compete at a university level?

CHLOÉ FEDIO
Managing Editor

Grant MacEwan College sees its progression from the Alberta Colleges Athletic Conference (ACAC) into the Canada West division of the CIS as the next logical step in its continued development. The Edmonton college was given degree-granting status by the provincial government in fall 2005, and with its increased academic programs hopes to offer a more competitive environment for its athletes. However, even with consistent performance in the top of the ACAC rankings, and athletic facilities that rival the University of Alberta's, this feat may be easier said than done.

MacEwan is a few years behind the trend that saw an influx of members into Canada West: in less than ten years, the division has grown from six to 14 members. Val Schneider, executive director of Canada West, explains that it's been a steep learning curve for some of the new members, as the level of competition coupled with the increased costs of competing in the division have resulted in larger growing pains than expected.

"The travel costs are very significant because of our geographical distances. And so I think some of the colleges are finding that it's one thing wanting to expand into the CIS, but the actual costs sometimes are not taken into consideration," Schneider says. "For example, a school like Grant MacEwan, their travel costs would increase tremendously were they to join, because all of a sudden, you're competing in a conference that stretches from Victoria to Winnipeg, as opposed to what they're currently doing in Alberta."

Since Canada West spans across four provinces, travel costs are an obvious expense, but with the growth in members, which came both as a result of the merger of teams from the Great Plains Athletic Conference, and the transition of BC colleges into degree-granting institutions, scheduling has also been a challenge. The recent ballooning has prompted the division to put a moratorium on considering new teams until February 2008.

Kenneth Olynyk, director of athletics and recreation at Thompson Rivers University (TRU), who joined CIS in 2005 as a probationary member, admits that the new level of play has been a challenge.

"The transition to CIS is extremely exciting and at the same time very

draining for our student athletes," says Olynyk.

But for Mark Mahl, director of athletics at MacEwan, graduating to a higher level of competition isn't something to be rushed; his approach is "take care of your own backyard first." Only in his second year at the position, Mahl says he was hired "to get MacEwan to the next level," and cites 3–5 years as a realistic time frame.

"We've really been working on it as a department and as an athletic team to just solidify our competitive and financial spot at the top of our league; making sure that we are recruiting the best and providing the best we can in order to put our programs on the top on a consistent level in every sport," Mahl says. "I think that's something that definitely needs to be done when you're entering the CIS. And I don't think necessarily that's been done as far as some of the programs I've seen let into the CIS over the last three or four years—and that's important."

Dale Schulha, director of athletics

accommodate these changes, the influx of new teams tends to be greater in some sports than others, and some of the newer members are still not fully integrated into the organization.

"[The U of A has] 19 CIS sports that we compete in, but we've got these new colleges and university-colleges coming in and they've got six. Is it fair that they have the same vote that we do on issues around the table? Personally, I don't think so," says Schulha.

Schulha is currently part of a membership committee that's reviewing criteria to join Canada West. Though he anticipates big changes for the CIS in the future—and even mentioned the possibility of an amalgamation of the ACAC into the CIS, and the subsequent tiering of institutions to create a more competitive environment—for now Canada West has to deal with the challenges associated with change already made, and take things slow in the future.

"It's too late in my estimation of some situations, and we're going to

beating the heck out of someone, and the programs that are getting beaten like that, they don't get any better; they don't learn anything from getting hammered like that," Mahl says.

Still, he points to MacEwan's rising programs, particularly volleyball, basketball, hockey and soccer, and says it's time for the College to move forward into a higher level of competition.

"We want to be able to compete on the highest level that we can compete at for the value on which that competition is based. And I think in some situations with the ACAC, we're not getting that," Mahl says.

And though Schulha admits that adding a second Edmonton team would affect the way the U of A recruits athletes—as rosters show that MacEwan's formal university-transfer programs are also paired with the transfer of athletes from the college to the university ranks—the addition of MacEwan to the CIS could be a positive thing in the end.

"To me, it wouldn't be ideal," Schulha says. "We'd rather be the only

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at the University of Alberta, agrees that some of the newer members of the CIS haven't been competing at the same level as other members. He worries that this will cause a detrimental effect on the league in the long run, as weaker teams and stronger teams might both end up in the middle of the road. Recruiting strategies might also have to change, as the pool of athletes is getting small with the addition of new CIS members.

"When you look at it, there's only X-number of athletes across certain sports, and certainly if you're adding a Thompson Rivers or a University-College of Fraser Valley, that's got some impact," Schulha says.

Along with TRU, the University College of the Fraser Valley used to be part of the BC Colleges Athletic Association, but joined the CIS in 2006 under probationary membership.

"I don't think we've lost any 'blue chip' kids to those colleges. I don't think that's happened yet, but I think there's a bit of a watering down effect that might happen," Schulha adds.

With the growth of university-colleges and polytechnic institutes instead of the traditional universities and colleges, the landscape of education in Canada is changing and duly so with athletics programs. But even as CIS continues to grow to

grandfather the Thompson Rivers and those, but any new schools that want to come in will have a very rigorous process to go through, and it's going to cost them some money to show us that they're very serious," Schulha says.

For his part, Mahl recognizes the negative effects of combining less competitive schools into the mix with established athletics programs, and is in favour of restructuring the way competition is ordered.

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the CIS, build a good program and we had a real great competition, then it'd be a great crosstown rivalry."

Grant MacEwan aside, there are four other schools that are on the horizon of CIS membership in the Canada West division: SAIT, and Mount Royal out of Calgary, UNBC in Prince George, and UBC-Okanagan.

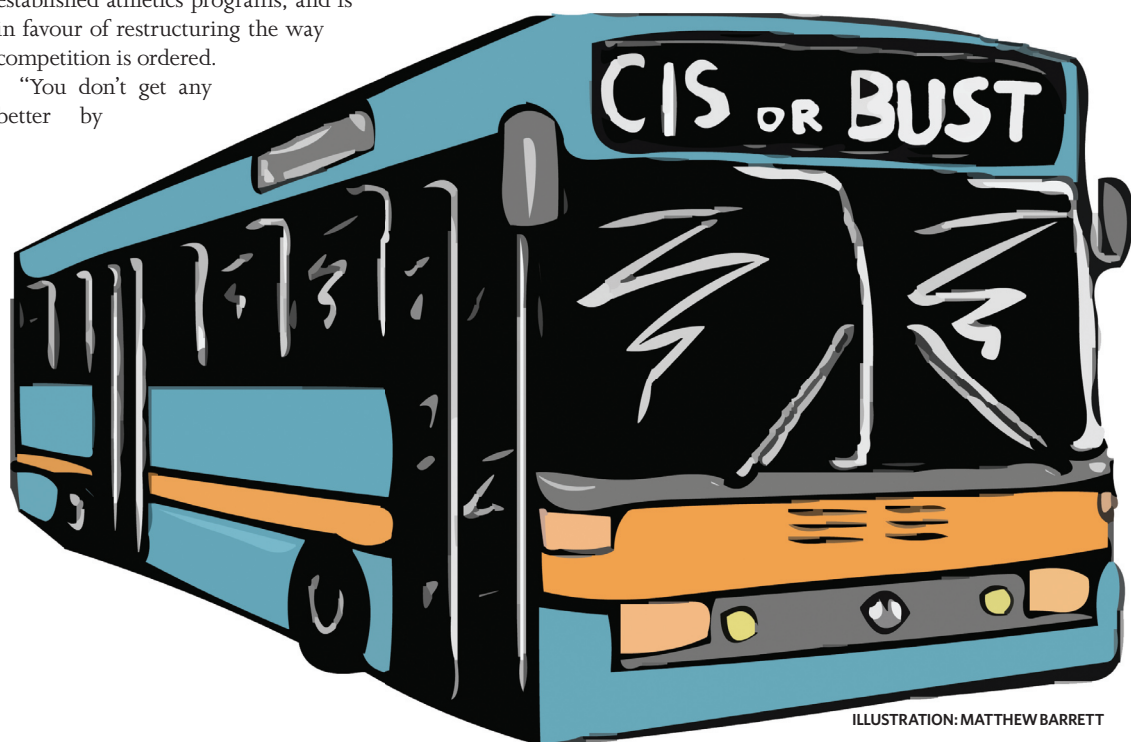


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CANADA WEST TIMELINE

Formed in 1971, Canada West has six charter members:

University of Alberta	University of Saskatchewan
University of Lethbridge	University of Calgary
University of British Columbia	University of Victoria

Other members that have joined since:

1999 Trinity Western University	2002 Simon Fraser University
2001 University of Manitoba University of Regina University of Winnipeg	2005 Brandon University Thompson Rivers University
	2006 University College of Fraser Valley