

Print Page

By JAY SCHWAB - jschwab@kcchronicle.com

Upstate 8 excited for additions

Editor's note: This is the first in a three-part series spotlighting the coming addition of Batavia and Geneva to the Upstate Eight Conference. On Friday, we'll examine how adding Batavia and Geneva will affect the structure of the conference, and on Saturday we'll look at how Batavia and Geneva are expected to stack up competitively with their new conference-mates.

For Batavia and Geneva, it practically was a no-brainer.

Joining the Upstate Eight Conference made sense on many levels, not the least of which being the schools were running out of time and options as their current conference, the Western Sun, dissolved around them.

For existing members of the Upstate Eight, adding Batavia and Geneva was more luxury than necessity. Nonetheless, current UEC members – especially the two St. Charles schools – say they expect the expansion to be mutually beneficial, not just a life preserver thrown to Batavia and Geneva.

"I couldn't be more excited at the end of my career to have those two on board," St. Charles East athletic director Jerry Krieg said. "They're both fun to play, they're always good games. Neither one of those will feel inferior, I guarantee it."

Although both Batavia and Geneva still need final school board approval – likely to take place this month – it is widely considered a given the two will join the Upstate Eight in 2010 after one final season in the Western Sun.

St. Charles North AD John Rutter said the addition of Batavia and Geneva will "absolutely" have a stabilizing effect on the UEC. Rutter said adding two respected programs that enhance the conference's rivalries should motivate UEC members to stay put for the foreseeable future.

"I think [we] gain two more communities very strong in athletics, very strong in community attendance at events and support throughout the community," Rutter said. "We would love to have that be a part of our league."

The central location of Batavia and Geneva – current UEC schools stretch from Aurora and Naperville to the south and Elgin and Roselle to the north – make the schools a solid logistical fit, South Elgin AD John O'Brien said. And despite becoming the UEC's smallest schools, Batavia and Geneva are expected to strengthen the conference competitively.

"I think they'll compete just fine," St. Charles North boys soccer coach Eric Willson said. "I know to a certain extent the size of your school is going to play a factor in the athletes you produce and success you have but that's only to a certain extent. Schools like Batavia and Geneva can compete with anyone."

Still, there are a few potential drawbacks for current UEC members.

While supportive of Batavia and Geneva coming aboard, St. Charles East girls volleyball coach Jennie Kull is reluctant to give up annual showdowns with large-school powerhouses Neuqua Valley and Waubonsie Valley.

Several details for the new conference still are being worked out, but the basic plan is to split the UEC into two seven-team divisions based on enrollment. Batavia, Geneva, St. Charles East, St. Charles North, Elgin, Larkin and Streamwood would be in the smaller-school division while Bartlett, Lake Park, South Elgin, East Aurora, Neuqua, Waubonsie and new Metea Valley will compose the large-school division.

Most of the games will be intra-division, with some crossover contests.

"I don't want to lose that competition with Neuqua and Waubonsie – that's really important to me," Kull said. "I want to make sure we can keep those on our schedule."

Travel is also a potential sore spot for the non Tri-Cities schools in the smaller-school division, especially considering the dense traffic in the path to the three Valley schools. The UEC's original expansion plan of adding only Metea Valley called for two divisions based on geography, not enrollment.

"That's the biggest concern I have is travel," O'Brien said. "Bartlett and South Elgin and Lake Park are going to be constantly making long trips. ... It's a concern, but it's not a big concern. We're happy to compete against good programs, and that's the bottom line."

If any school has cause for a lukewarm reaction, it might be East Aurora. It figures to have increased trouble once separated from Elgin, Larkin and Streamwood, some of the other UEC schools that struggle in several sports.

Wendell Jeffries, who coaches East Aurora's boys basketball and girls badminton teams, said he likes the fan support Batavia and Geneva will bring to the conference, but is concerned for his fellow Tomcats coaches.

"I'm just so fortunate to be coaching two of our stronger sports when it comes to winning but our other sports haven't been as successful, like softball, girls soccer," Jeffries said. "Boy, they're really going to be up against it in this conference with the heavy-hitters."

So far, though, whatever anxieties exist have been overshadowed by excitement about the coming changes. That goes double – make that quadruple – around the Tri-Cities, where St. Charles North boys basketball coach Tom Poulin said fans can expect high drama come the fall of 2010.

"It's going to make for a great time and an awful lot of memorable moments for everyone involved," Poulin said.

Copyright © 2009 The Chronicle. All rights reserved.