

# Mountain West Conference

## USAFA and the



By Lt Col (Ret.)  
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In 1979, as part of my master's degree program, I researched and wrote a paper entitled "Marketing the Air Force Academy Football Team." It addressed the difficulties of publicizing and selling tickets when the program was enduring those lean times. Speaking strictly from the football program perspective, the paper lamented the lack of "the publicity and prestige that goes with being affiliated with a conference." Benefits of conference affiliation for football also include league-related revenues and guaranteed bowl game opportunities.

Shortly afterward, Air Force joined a conference. Again speaking strictly from a football perspective, it has been a success, with the realization of all the benefits mentioned above. The football team has done very well, earning national rankings and bowl victories. The team's finish in the upper half of the Mountain West Conference (MWC) in each of Troy Calhoun's four seasons, as well as participation in

four straight bowl games, reflect very positively on the Academy.

With all that said, however, I believe it is long past time to look at the Academy's participation in the MWC from not strictly a football perspective. To be sure, some of the above-described benefits, particularly the financial ones, have accrued to the benefit of the other athletic programs, but at what cost?

While most USAFA teams do well in the non-conference portions of their schedules (over which they have control), once they get into conference play, they struggle. A brief look at the records of a few of the other Air Force teams in the MWC shows how dire the situation is. The women's volleyball team lost 74 straight conference matches between 2005 and an October 2010 victory over San Diego State. The team has won only two of its last 110 league contests. Also in October, the women's soccer team



**Previous page, L to R: Falcon mid-fielder C1C Kyle Moses (U.S. Air Force Photo/Mike Kaplan) Falcon guard C3C Desiree Wilson (U.S. Air Force photo/J. Rachel Spencer) Falcons quarterback C2C Tim Jefferson (U.S. Air Force photo/Bill Evans) Above, L to R: Outfielder C1C Nathan Carter (U.S. Air Force photo/Mike Kaplan) Falcon guard C1C Evan Washington (U.S. Air Force photo/Bill Evans) Volleyball player C1C Nichole Stilwell (U.S. Air Force photo/J. Rachel Spencer)**

broke a 41-game conference winless streak that had dated back to 2003. Women's basketball entered 2011 conference play with a two-plus year, 34-game regular season conference losing streak going (they have won three conference games this year). The men's basketball team has barely exceeded the women's team's record recently, with six regular season conference wins the past two seasons combined. The teams have a combined 9-63 regular-season conference record since the beginning of the 2008-2009 campaign. Writing in the March 8, 2010, issue of the *Colorado Springs Gazette*, Jake Shaller reports that, "During the past two college basketball seasons, no Division I school has won fewer men's and women's conference games than Air Force." It is true that the men's basketball team enjoyed a five-year burst of success a few years ago, but that increasingly looks like an aberration. Baseball has not finished out of the confer-

ence cellar since 2002, when many current players were in elementary school. The team has an 18-183 conference record in that time span. Both tennis teams, men's golf and women's swimming/diving finish at or near the bottom of the conference standings year after year.

Pointing out this futility is in no way intended to be a knock on any of the coaches or players, who represent the Academy with tremendous effort, grace, and skill. Academy coaches and athletes have earned our praise and our pride. No athletes in the country compete harder or with more class than ours, fighting until the very end of every contest. I am second to none in my appreciation of their desire and their commitment. They are just, quite literally, out of their league.

The MWC has a rule that if the conference contests a sport, all schools that field a team in that sport must play in the conference. That ties the Academy to

the conference, even for sports in which we cannot effectively compete. When the conference does not contest a sport, however, member schools are free to make their own arrangements. It is with these teams that the Academy's greatest (non-football) athletic success stories have come: Hockey won the Atlantic Hockey Association championship three straight times between 2007 and 2009, each time earning a spot in the 16-team NCAA tournament. In 2009, they were an overtime goal from reaching the pinnacle of hockey, the Frozen Four. Water polo, men's soccer, and lacrosse all play in other conferences and have been competitive. Men's and women's fencing compete as independents, and in 2009-2010 boasted five nationally ranked fencers, including the fifth ranked man in epee.

I recall that in earlier days, Academy literature proudly trumpeted the fact that cadet student-athletes won X% (usually in

the 65-75% range) of their intercollegiate contests. This claim spoke to the success of the Academy in producing not just top-quality graduates, but winners. We don't seem to see that statistic any more. It has been replaced with the simple statement that "The intercollegiate program has 17 men's and 10 women's NCAA sanctioned teams." Granted, nowhere in our mission statement or objectives does it say we should produce winning athletic teams. The Academy exists to produce leaders of character for the nation. Participation in intercollegiate sports is one of many programs at the Academy that allows cadets to demonstrate leadership, maintain physical fitness, and represent the school. Regardless of the won-lost records, I believe that the intercollegiate cadet-athletes are better for the experience. Anecdotally, the large numbers of former USAFA athletes who go on to become leaders (to include our current Superintendent, Commandant, Dean, Director of Athletics and Prep School Commander), bear this out. But while winning isn't everything, it is something. No less an authority on the subject than General Douglas McArthur famously said, "On the fields of friendly strife are sown the seeds that on other days and other fields will bear the fruits of victory." Learning to lose repeatedly and gracefully is not necessarily helpful.

To many sports fans, USAFA athletics begin and end with football. The perpetual difficulty of the other sports teams (if they are even aware of other Air Force teams' records) is apparently an acceptable price to pay to have the football team in a top conference. That, in my opinion, is too narrow a focus.

Please don't think I am a disloyal, renegade Academy sports hater. I've been a supporter of Air Force athletics since my youth. I was a football manager all four years as a cadet. I am a lifetime member of the Air Force Academy Athletic Association. My wife Paula and I have basketball and hockey season tickets, and attend as many soccer and football games as our soccer-playing daughter's schedule allows. Paula and I have funded in perpetuity the Outstanding Men's Basketball Player Award presented each year at the Cadet Individual Awards Ceremony. My interest lies in the Academy doing what is best for *all* of its athletes, not just the football players. We

sponsored a female soccer player, Class of 2009, who went through her entire cadet career without tasting victory in a conference game. That shouldn't happen.

While the Academy earns prestige from being in the Mountain West Conference, the Mountain West Conference gains even more prestige from having Air Force as a member. As I said earlier, no program competes with as much grace and class as Air Force. Conference leaders can be confident there won't be embarrassing scandals or NCAA recruiting violations coming from our campus. Perhaps most importantly from the Mountain West's perspective, our graduation rates bring the conference averages *way* up. For all these reasons and more, the Academy needs to use its leverage and more aggressively advocate for its best interests, rather than blindly accepting the league's rules. We should request relief to allow some of our teams to either play a reduced conference schedule or be released to play elsewhere. I've been told that we tried this with the baseball team a few years ago and were rebuffed. We need to ask again. If rejected again, we should consider leaving the conference. This would certainly be a blow to the football program, but we should be able to maintain our core rivalries with Colorado State University, Wyoming, and other MWC schools. We could also go back to a more national schedule befitting our status as a national school. Bowl game invitations might be harder to earn as an independent, but Navy has shown it is doable. (In truth, there are now so many bowl games that simply becoming bowl eligible by winning six games virtually guarantees post-season participation.) Unfortunately, leaving the conference would likely decrease Athletic Department revenues, but it just might be worth it. All options should be carefully considered. These include becoming an independent, joining another conference, or even requesting a waiver to return the women's programs to NCAA Division II (where they enjoyed great success in the '80s and '90s).

Conference membership is in flux now throughout the nation. In the Mountain West Conference alone, BYU (going independent for football, to the West Coast Conference for all other sports), Utah, and TCU are leaving. Boise State, Fresno State, Nevada and Hawaii are slated to

join over the next couple of years. Air Force is frequently mentioned as a candidate for movement to another conference (Big 12, PAC 10). Again, while such a move might add prestige and luster to the Air Force football program, it would probably worsen the plight of USAFA's other sports teams. With other schools making moves that are best for them, why shouldn't the Academy seek an arrangement that benefits all of its athletes?

Actually, the Mountain West Conference may have provided the perfect solution. In December 2010, MWC school presidents approved bringing Hawaii into the conference as a football only member. That precedent seems to render their old rules moot, and Academy officials could follow-up with negotiations for a similar arrangement.

Are the Academy's other athletic teams, particularly the women's teams, being sacrificed at the twin altars of football and money? It seems that they are. Should the Academy pull out of its current arrangement with the Mountain West Conference? I can't declare unequivocally that leaving the conference outright would be in the Academy's best interests, but, certainly, if the football team had a conference record approaching any of the teams' records described above, people would at least be seriously contemplating these questions. ✓

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*In addition to his extensive non-fiction writing, Colonel Simon is the author of two novels, On The Dead Run and Service Before Self.*

*NOTE: The views expressed in this article are solely those of the author, and do not reflect the official position of the Air Force Academy.*

*Statistics current as of January 1, 2011*