

I-A...It's Time to Play

By RYAN ANDERSON
Central Florida Future

The University of Central Florida Golden Knights football team ventures into the uncharted waters of Division I-A this year, joining the ranks of the University of Florida and Florida State in the NCAA's most prestigious division of athletic competition.

"These are exciting times for all involved with the UCF program," UCF head coach Gene McDowell said. "From the casual fan all the way to the biggest boosters the enthusiasm should only continue to increase as we head into the years of I-A competition."

In order to be approved by the NCAA to play Division I-A football, the Golden Knights had to meet several criteria. The first criterion the Knights met was that they play their home games in a stadium which held at least 30,000 people. The Florida Citrus Bowl holds over 72,000. Another criterion was that the Golden Knights attract an average of 17,000 fans during one of the four years prior to the move to I-A. In 1994, the Knights averaged 23,000 people per game.

"We feel that when all of the factors are taken into consideration, the time is right for the Golden Knights to join the ranks of Division I-A college football," McDowell said.

The Knights open the season against Division I-AA William and Mary Thursday night at 7 :00 at the Florida Citrus Bowl. Following their opening home game, the Golden Knights will make their Division I-A debut with four consecutive road games against I-A teams South Carolina, New Mexico, Ball State, and East Carolina.

As part of the Knights move to Division I-A, 22 additional scholarships, totaling \$140,000 have been awarded. In addition to the extra scholarships, three new football coaches have been added to the staff, bringing it up to the allotted number of coaches allowed under NCAA regulations.

Besides increased scholarship revenue, the move to Division I-A will generate money for the school through road game guarantees, increased season ticket sales and increased booster revenues, according to a plan submitted to the Board of Regents. In addition, benefits not as easily calculated in dollars will also result from the move.

"I expect our move to I-A will improve our perception throughout the region and thus enhance our chances of recruiting the best student-athletes in all of our sports," UCF Athletic Director Steve Sloan said.

The process of moving to I-A began in 1989 when a long-range planning committee was formed to study whether the Golden Knights should make the move to I-A football.

On April 12, 1993 UCF President John Hitt announced UCF's plans to move to Division I-A by 1996. UCF's bid to join the NCAA's top division was approved on June 21, 1995.

With the Golden Knights move to Division I-A, Florida is now home to four schools with football teams in that division. That I-A 'gridlock' is causing at least one Florida college football fan to say four is a crowd.

"I feel that Division I-A has been saturated with three Florida schools already participating at that level," Ben O'Steen said. "I would much rather see UCF stay in the smaller classification and work to become a powerhouse in that division. The fan participation would then come from the UF, FSU and Miami fans along with the UCF supporters."

However, not everyone shares O'Steen's belief that Florida can't support another Division I-A football program.

"I think it is great that UCF is making the move to Division I-A," UCF alumnus and season ticket holder Zach Quandt said. "I'm looking forward to watching us perform at the new level."

After playing Division I-A teams Florida State and Hawaii last season in preparation for the move to I-A, the Golden Knights will continue to ease into Division I-A play with a transitional schedule this year that mixes I-A teams South Carolina and Georgia Tech with I-AA teams Samford and Illinois State. But the Knights have little time to prepare before the 1999 season, when the team opens with Purdue, Florida and Georgia Tech, plus Georgia and Auburn later on.

"Scheduling can be a problem as you make the transition from I-AA to I-A," Sloan said. "We do have the advantage, however, of being in Orlando and playing in the Florida Citrus Bowl. This gives us the ability to compile a competitive schedule without conference affiliation."

Last year, in preparation for the move to I-A, the Golden Knights unveiled a new logo and mascot to usher in the new era at a press conference at the Hard Rock Cafe in Orlando. At the unveiling, Sloan stressed the importance a logo can have on a football team's image.

"As UCF advances to the next level of collegiate athletics, it's important to have a marketable and highly recognizable logo," Sloan said.

With a new logo and a Division I-A program, the UCF athletic department hopes to capitalize on the highly lucrative market of team apparel and other team related merchandise. UCF hopes to copy the success of other I-A powerhouses in Florida in the area of sports merchandising giving the blue and orange of The University of Florida a little competition from the black and gold of UCF.

The football program at UCF began as a Division III team. The Golden Knights played in Division III from 1979 to 1981 before moving to Division II from 1982 to 1989. Most recently, the Golden Knights played in Division I-AA from 1990 to 1995. The Golden Knights have an overall record of 97-86-1 going into the inaugural Division I-A season.

When the Golden Knights take the field this season it will mark the end of one successful era of football and the beginning of another.