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In First for a U.S. Territory, UVI Joins NAIA's Gulf Coast Athletic Conference

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From left to right, UVI Athletic Director Dr. Jerel Drew, CAC Commissioner Dr. Kiki Baker Barnes and UVI President Dr. David Hall pose for a photo. By. THE UNIVERSITY OF THE VIRGIN ISLANDS.

The National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics' (NAIA) Gulf Coast Athletic Conference (GCAC) has extended a membership invitation for the University of the Virgin Islands to join the league beginning in the 2023-24 academic year, announced in a press conference on the university's Orville E. Kean Campus on St. Thomas Wednesday.

"This is a monumental day for the GCAC and University of Virgin Islands," said GCAC Commissioner Dr. Kiki Baker Barnes. "The addition of UVI is in line with our conference

strategy to increase membership. I'm excited about increasing the GCAC footprint into the Caribbean market. I believe that expansion is a great way to expose others to the excellent institutions that comprise the GCAC."

The Buccaneers become the GCAC's ninth member.

"As UVI's Athletic Programs continue to grow, our new membership with the Gulf Coast Athletic Conference underscores our commitment to providing excellent opportunities for our student athletes to compete on a national level with teams from other distinguished schools," said UVI President Dr. David Hall. "We are proud to be affiliated with the GCAC, the only HBCU Conference in the NAIA, and to be a part of the gathering of such talented students and athletes."

"Two years ago, I embarked on a mission for UVI Athletics to embrace the HBCU experience and we are proud to officially be members of the GCAC," said Dr. Jerel Drew, University of the Virgin Islands Director of Athletics. "During that time, we hosted the first ever University of the Virgin Islands HBCU Basketball Classic, a successful showcase of HBCU Athletic Excellence and a first for the territory. We now have the opportunity to compete nationally with our HBCU peers in a historical conference that embodies HBCU Pride."

According to UVI, joining the GCAC is another milestone for UVI athletics. The Buccaneers have a long history of intercollegiate athletics competing in the Liga Atlética Interuniversitaria in Puerto Rico; UVI joined the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics less than a decade ago.

"We are truly excited for this opportunity and would like to thank Dr. Barnes and all GCAC constituents who were key in this opportunity," said Drew.

A First for the territories

UVI joining the Gulf Coast Athletic Conference will also be a notable footnote in the history of American intercollegiate athletics. No four-year institution in a U.S. territory has competed in an athletic conference affiliated with the NAIA or NCAA in more than a century, according to the release.

Rudimentary research indicates that schools with intercollegiate athletics, prior to Hawai'i being admitted to the union in 1959, played as independents in either the NCAA or NAIA. Meanwhile, both four-year universities in Alaska began fielding intercollegiate athletics after statehood was granted in 1959, UVI said.

Furthermore, major college athletics programs with long histories dating back to the 19th century played as independents prior to the U.S. granting statehood to Oklahoma (1907), Arizona, and New Mexico (1912).

A Perfect Fit

The GCAC will be a natural fit for the Buccaneers, according to UVI. Since 2010, historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) have made up the entirety of the league's membership; Dillard University in New Orleans, La., and Tougaloo College in Tougaloo, Miss., were founding members of the GCAC in 1981.

Other Gulf Coast Athletic Conference members include Fisk University (Nashville, Tenn.)."

Oakwood University (Huntsville, Ala.), Philander Smith College (Little Rock, Ark.), Rust College (Holly Springs, Miss.), Southern University at New Orleans–New Orleans, and Wiley College (Marshall, Texas).

UVI will be one of two public institutions in the GCAC along with Southern University at New Orleans.

The GCAC is one of five HBCU conferences and the only such conference in the NAIA.

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