

INTERCOLLEGIATE ATHLETICS

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David Wants to Be Goliath: Southern Mississippi's Attempt at Affiliation

Football has always been an important part of the mission of the University of Southern Mississippi. The fact that, with very few exceptions, the school has put a football team on the field as many years as it has been in existence underscores this supposition. Mississippi Normal College, as Southern Mississippi was first known, began classes on September 18, 1912. Football must have been on the minds of the administration and student body because less than a month had passed before the students played their first football game, a contest between Normal College and the Hattiesburg Boy Scouts at Kamper Park on October 13, 1912.

Using local and national newspaper articles and box scores, financial records of the institution, and interviews with surviving members of teams and school officials from its past, this paper traces the desire of Southern Mississippi officials to affiliate with a governing conference in athletics throughout its history. This is a story that parallels the university's more general history of seeking identification through affiliation. From the 1920s to the present, the thread of affiliation has intertwined with success against football powers across the country.

From Southern Mississippi's earliest days, its officials desired alignment with an athletic conference and in 1931 the university became a member of the Southern Intercollegiate Athletic Association. The institution began to experience success on the gridiron in the mid- to late 1930s culminating with a championship and undefeated season in 1941. After World War II, Southern Mississippi aligned itself with the Gulf States Conference and quickly became the marquee program in the league. Three championships in the first four years of the existence of the conference led Southern Mississippi to choose to leave and attempt to affiliate with the Southeastern Conference or the Atlantic Coast Conference.

The political and social factors associated with the failure of the institution to manage such an affiliation are also examined here. This failure left Southern Mississippi with a less than successful record on the field in the decade of the 1960s. However, the battle for respect and affiliation continued through the 1970s and has recently concluded with membership in Conference USA.

The consequences of not being aligned with a conference are also explored. Southern Mississippi has a history of scheduling the elite football powers and sometimes winning against these giants. These successes have resulted in many “Goliaths” choosing not to schedule Southern Miss. Therefore, scheduling has always been a complex problem for the football program at Southern Mississippi. Lost revenue and the recruitment and retention of players have also been problems for the institution throughout its history due to affiliation difficulties. The manuscript makes the argument that the football program thus reflects, as a microcosm, the university itself.