

THE EASTERN SOUTH DAKOTA ATHLETIC CONFERENCE

A HISTORY OF THE ESD (established in 1927)

In September of 1924, Principal L. M. Fort of Mitchell High School pursued the idea of forming a high school basketball conference with the larger cities in eastern South Dakota. On November 24, 1924, representatives of eight high schools met in Sioux Falls to form the South Dakota Big Eight Basketball Conference. The charter members of the league were Aberdeen, Brookings, Huron, Madison, Mitchell, Sioux Falls, Watertown and Yankton. A basketball schedule was approved for the 1924-25 season with the conference divided into a northern and southern division. Madison was crowned as the first basketball champion in March of 1925.

On March 19, 1927, the conference was reorganized with the adoption of a constitution and bylaws by member schools. The constitution changed the name of the conference from the Big Eight to the Eastern South Dakota Athletic Conference, but the conference is commonly referred to as the ESD.

In March of 1927, Redfield High School joined the conference, increasing the membership to nine schools. Huron earned the first basketball championship of the ESD in 1928. In March of 1928, track & field and football were added as conference sports. The first ESD Track Meet was held in Sioux Falls in May of 1928 with Sioux Falls High School being crowned as the champion. In the fall of 1928, Watertown won the first ESD football title.

In May of 1928, the conference agreed to limit its membership to a maximum of ten schools. Membership was sought by Vermillion, Flandreau Public, Salem and Clark. Vermillion High School was selected as the league's tenth member on May 26, 1928. The ESD remained as a ten-team league through the 1930-31 school year. In the spring of 1931, however, Redfield withdrew from the conference. Vermillion followed in the spring of 1932.

In the spring of 1935, Madison requested permission to be released from the ESD football schedule, but remain a member school in the sports of basketball and track. Their proposal was denied, and Madison withdrew from the league. Madison was allowed to re-enter the conference in all sports in the spring of 1939.

The ESD was to continue as an eight-team conference from 1939 through 1953 with continuous membership from all of its charter schools. The ESD has been a leader in South Dakota interscholastic sports throughout the years, and has generally – but not always – enjoyed a positive relationship with the South Dakota High School Activities Association (SDHSAA).

As a result of the qualifying process for the new two-class system in 1936, the ESD requested the SDHSAA Board of Control permit the ESD to conduct a conference basketball tournament, rather than participate in the new State "A" Basketball Tournament. After much discussion about the method of qualifying, the conference dropped its requests and agreed to participate.

With no progress made on ESD concerns, the conference renewed its demands in 1939. With no relief from the SDHSAA, the ESD schools voted unanimously to boycott the state tournament. In addition to qualifying, the size of tournament squads was also an issue. The ESD dressed ten players during the regular season, but the athletic association only allowed a tournament squad of eight. Rather than compete in the 1939 State "A" Tournament, the ESD held a conference tournament, and filled the new Aberdeen Arena. Aberdeen Central won the tournament despite the fact they would not have qualified for the State "A" according to SDHSAA guidelines. The state tournament was played with only four teams in front of small crowds.

The ESD returned to the state event in 1940, but only after the Board of Control agreed to several changes. Per diems for teams were increased, and coaches were allowed a voice in the selection of tournament officials. Of greater significance, Class "A" was realigned to 32 schools, and the tournament was expanded to a three-day event.

Following the 1952 football season, Sioux Falls Washington asked to be excluded from the football schedule. Their request was approved, but both Vermillion and Flandreau Public later declined an invitation to complete the football schedule. After the silver anniversary year of the conference, its largest member no longer competed for the football title. In the fall of 1954, the league voted to allow Washington to compete in only ESD basketball, until such time that another school was accepted for membership in all sports.

Pierre High School applied for admission to the conference in the spring of 1960, but its application was rejected because it declined to participate in ESD basketball. In the fall of 1964, the new Lincoln High School in Sioux Falls requested membership in the ESD, under the same terms as Sioux Falls Washington. Lincoln's request was denied because it did not conform to the bylaw that required that new member schools must participate in all conference sports.

Following the 1964-65 school year, Pierre once again applied for ESD membership in all sports. Pierre's application forced Washington to either participate in all conference sports or to withdraw from the ESD. Washington's refusal to participate in all sports ended its 39-year relationship with the conference, effective the 1965-66 school year. It also "opened the door" for Pierre's admission to the ESD in the fall of 1966.

During the modern era, other schools also expressed interest in joining the ESD. Sioux Falls O'Gorman, Vermillion and Winner applied for admission during the spring of 1975. All requests were denied because the conference was not interested in expansion beyond eight schools. The new ESD – with Pierre in and Washington out – remained intact until the conclusion of the 1981-82 school year. At that time, Madison withdrew from the conference, because its request to not participate in ESD wrestling was denied.

In 1989, rapidly growing Brandon Valley applied for membership to the ESD. Brandon Valley was accepted into the conference in 1990, and gradually began competing for championships until it became a full member during the 1992-93 sport seasons.

During its early history, the ESD was a three-sport conference. The decade of the 60's, however, became a time of sports expansion for boys' teams. In the 1962-63 school year, golf and tennis

became conference boys' sports with Huron winning the first golf tournament and Washington earning the first tennis championship. In 1964, wrestling was first contested and Watertown won the title. Boys cross country was added in the fall of 1965 with Washington crowned as the first champion.

The sixties were also the decade of the Civil Rights Movement. Women were one of the underrepresented groups that benefited from new opportunities. Title IX of the Civil Rights Amendments of 1972 prohibited gender discrimination in educational institutions. As a result, girls burst upon the sports scene with great success. The ESD soon became a "pioneer" in girls' sports in South Dakota.

Girls entered ESD competition in the spring of 1974 when Aberdeen Central won the first track & field championship. During the 1974-75 school year, gymnastics, golf and tennis were added as ESD sports. The Brookings girls dominated by claiming top honors in all three new sports. Basketball became an ESD girls' sport in the fall of 1975 with Watertown earning the first championship. Watertown also won the first girls' cross country meet in the fall of 1976. After a lull in the expansion of girls' sports, volleyball was adopted by the conference during the 1991-92 school year with Watertown once again winning the first championship.

In the mid-nineties, the ESD was firmly established as one of the great interscholastic athletic conferences in the region. The conference was recognized for general competitiveness in all boys' and girls' sports. But in its 70th year, the very existence of the conference was threatened because of the difficulties of other South Dakota "AA" high schools, and the attempts of the SDHSAA to solve those problems by mandating state-wide scheduling.

In the fall of 1994, Lincoln, Roosevelt, Washington and O'Gorman were forced to consider ending their 25-year membership in the Sioux Interstate Conference because they could not participate against the Sioux City, Iowa schools in all girls' sports due to "non traditional" girls seasons in South Dakota. As a result, the Sioux Falls schools made formal application for membership in the ESD. The application was denied with the following resolution:

Whereas the Eastern South Dakota Athletic Conference is rich in tradition and success, and comprised of eight schools, similar in demographics Therefore, the ESD Athletic Directors resolve to maintain the present membership of the Conference Be it Further Resolved that the ESD Schools are, however, receptive to increasing non conference competition with the Sioux Falls Schools. In rejecting their admission to the conference, the ESD encouraged the Sioux Falls Schools to approach the "AA" schools in West River with the concept of a new 8-team conference.

During the fall of 1996, the independent "AA" schools – Central and Stevens of Rapid City, Spearfish and Sturgis – in West River asked the SDHSAA for assistance in football scheduling. As a result, the Board of Directors made a motion to approve inter-regional scheduling for AA football. This new schedule would have limited ESD schools to 5 conference opponents. The ESD schools reacted strenuously to this threat to the conference, and insisted that any plan must include a full round robin of ESD contests so a true champion could be crowned and rivalries maintained.

After several attempts at reconciliation proved futile, the Superintendents and Athletic Directors of the 16 “AA” high schools participated in a meeting in Pierre. The result was a mutually beneficial compromise that maintained the integrity of the ESD Athletic Conference, created a new AA conference of Sioux Falls and West River schools and increased non conference scheduling between the two conferences.

With great pride, positive relationships and unity, the ESD celebrated its Silver Anniversary of Girls Sports during the 1997-98 sports seasons. During that school year, the ESD enthusiastically reaffirmed its commitment to gender equity in interscholastic sports.

During the 2002-03 school year, girls basketball and volleyball switched to the “traditional seasons” used by other states, and the conference led the way with the approval of a double round robin schedule for ESD volleyball.

In 2005, a SDHSAA Ad Hoc Committee was formed to examine girls’ sports participation. In February of 2006, the committee reported “a consistent disparity in participation of male and female student athletes,” and “that a significant number of member schools may not be in compliance with Title IX requirements.” The committee further recommended that “the SDHSAA formally recognize the following additional athletic activities for female participants by the 2007-08 school term: softball, dance/drill team, soccer and competitive cheer.”

The SDHSAA Board of Directors sanctioned competitive cheer and dance in January of 2007. At the next ESD meeting, the conference assumed a leadership role by adopting competitive cheer and dance as girls’ sports for 2007-08. At the ESD Tournament, Brandon Valley won the first cheer title and Yankton earned the first dance championship.

Another SDHSAA Ad Hoc Committee was formed to consider the addition of other girls’ and boys’ sports. In November of 2007, the SDHSAA Board of Directors sanctioned boys’ soccer in the fall season and girls’ soccer in the spring for the 2010-11 school year. As a result of resistance from the “AA” schools, the SDHSAA Board eventually repealed that action and voted to sanction both boys and girls soccer, effective the 2012-11 school year. Discussions continue concerning school sponsorship and ESD adoption of additional sports.

The 2013-14 school year saw the addition of Harrisburg to the ESD Conference. They will compete in the following ESD activities: (Fall) Football, Volleyball, Cross Country, Boys Golf, (Winter) Boys/ Girls Basketball, Wrestling, (Spring) Boys/Girls Track & Field.

The 2015-16 school year saw the addition of Rapid City Central & Rapid City Stevens to the ESD Conference in Football Only Class AAA.

Significant challenges – gender equity, sponsorship of additional sports, funding, facilities, classification, conference affiliation, travel, scheduling, etc. – will continue to confront the “AA” schools in South Dakota, but the ESD schools will consistently respond by making decisions with a genuine concern for its student athletes and member schools.

Six of the eight schools have been members of the conference since its inception in 1924 as the South Dakota Big Eight Basketball Conference. Few high school conferences can claim that longevity and continuity. All current members appear to be permanent fixtures of the conference. The ESD boasts many healthy rivalries, characterized by good sportsmanship. The conference has also enjoyed great competitive success in all sports at the state level. Such a heritage demands that the ESD continue as a leader in South Dakota interscholastic athletics.

The Current ESD Schools: Aberdeen Central, Brandon Valley, Brookings, Harrisburg, Huron, Mitchell, Pierre, Watertown & Yankton.

(Rapid City Central and Rapid City Stevens – Football Only Class AAA)

During the 2015-16 school year, the conference and its member schools commemorated the 89th Anniversary of the ESD. We look forward to celebrating many more years as the

“Premiere Athletics Conference in South Dakota.”