

USIU Trustees Vote to Eliminate Athletics

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SAN DIEGO — The ax swung fast and came down hard Friday on U.S. International University when the school's board of trustees terminated its sports programs effective immediately. The only exception is men's basketball, which will be allowed to finish the 1990-91 season.

The action was the trustees' first in a move toward economic reorganization of USIU, which is facing a \$14 million debt in the United States and an additional \$8.5 million deficit between its campuses in Mexico City, London and Nairobi. Last week, the San Diego school, facing a foreclosure on a 70-acre parcel of its campus, filed for bankruptcy.

The decision to cancel USIU's 12-team Division I sports program came as no shock to department officials, but the announcement, which came after a three-hour meeting, still left Athletic Director Al Palmiotto and his coaching staff gravely disappointed.

"It's a dark day for the student-athletes, and it's a dark day for the students," said Palmiotto, who spoke to the trustees and made final, futile plea before the decision was rendered. "We've got to rebuild out of this. It's a dark day."

Palmiotto said he presented seven detailed proposals to USIU's acting president, Kenneth McLennan, last week. The proposals ranged from cost-cutting, schedule-reducing schemes that would preserve all 12 sports to other measures that merely would "save some sort of athletics at USIU."

McLennan, a former four-star general in the Marine Corps, suggested that sports at USIU could make a comeback and said in a prepared statement the university "will be reviewing the future of intercollegiate athletic competition" this spring.

McLennan declined further comment.

Palmiotto fought to save "the core" of an athletics program that gradually had grown since it stepped up to Division I in 1980. Palmiotto, a 21-year employee at USIU who has held many high-ranking positions on the academic side, said the loss of sports would have a crippling effect on morale and could hurt enrollment.

"I'm not defending athletics," he said. "I'm defending the survival of the university. Undergraduates feel this is an essential part of a college experience, and it is. You've got to be crazy to think that, especially in Southern California, a young student who comes to this place from all parts of the world doesn't think athletics is essential."

Palmiotto said the athletic department had run successfully on a tight budget and that the money the university saved would not be that substantial. He estimated the total operating cost of his

intercollegiate sports programs at \$354,000, and that money for scholarships, which will be honored for all athletes until the end of the school year, is estimated at \$1.2 million.

"It's not a dramatic budget," Palmiotto said. "I can see why they need to cut it. I can see that because of the preservation of the school and the faculty. And they've endured enough pain for a lifetime. And if (cutting) athletics can contribute to ease the pain, hell, we should ease the pain. And I think that's what they came to.

"I would have struggled so hard to try and save something that was so important to all of us and to all of the people who work here. This place has a resiliency. I'm sure they're going to come out of this. When I told them athletics is not dead at USIU, I think they were listening to me."

Palmiotto has helped steer USIU through troubled times in the past. He was named athletic director in 1975, when the school faced another financial crisis. In 1987, USIU terminated hockey, which at the time was its most popular and successful sport. A year later, the school canceled women's basketball. **From 1958 to 1979, USIU had a Division II football team that, for a time, played its games in San Diego Jack Murphy Stadium.**

"When you've built a program from scratch, when you've designed it and chose all the participants, it hurts," Palmiotto said. "It hurts when you start thinking of some of the kids who picked this particular university because it had everything they wanted."

The cutbacks affect 145 athletes and 18 staff members. Along with men's basketball, USIU has dropped women's volleyball, men's and women's tennis, cross-country, golf and soccer.

Its women's softball team, which finished 27-29 last year and knocked off eventual NCAA champion UCLA in February, was considered to be among preseason's top 20 in Division I this year. Its baseball team, which Coach George Kachigian said would be his best in five years, was set to play 15 of the nation's top-20 teams in 1991.

Kachigian, the only USIU coach who was awaiting the news at the school's athletic office Friday, was visibly shaken to learn his program was dropped completely. Like other coaches, he feared his schedule could be cut in half and long road trips would be eliminated, but he didn't expect to be breaking the worst news to his players this weekend.

"I expected cutbacks and the opportunity to be able to raise money ourselves and finish the season," said Kachigian, whose team just finished running a Christmas tree farm to raise money. "It doesn't make any sense. We worked our butts off in every aspect of it. We've brought in the right kind of kids and gained the respect of other top Division I schools. (The fund raising) was just now starting to pay some dividends."

Kachigian said the operating cost for baseball was an estimated \$24,000, approximately the same amount of money his players put into the school through their own tuition and financial aid.