

Improving the Game



A MAJOR REALIGNMENT OF

the Canisius College Department of Athletics is in store following an October 31 announcement that the college is discontinuing eight NCAA Division I varsity sports and reallocating the savings from those programs into the college's remaining athletic programs. Canisius President Rev. Vincent M. Cooke, S.J., announced that the college's Board of Trustees had unanimously approved a recommendation by the administration to reduce the number of varsity sports from the current number of 23, which is equal to the largest number offered by any other school in the college's conference, the Metro Atlantic Athletic Conference (MAAC), to a more manageable 16 sports.

The sports eliminated are: football, men's and women's indoor and outdoor track, men's and women's tennis, and rifle. The college will continue to offer: men's and women's basketball, men's and women's lacrosse, women's swimming, men's golf, men's and women's cross country, baseball, softball, men's and women's soccer, ice hockey, volleyball and synchronized swimming. Men's



swimming will be added to the line-up.

The seeds of change were sown two years ago when the NCAA was conducting its NCAA Athletics Certification. "What the NCAA review team members told us was that Canisius was running an athletics program that was too large and too under funded," says Father Cooke. "Simply stated, we were not supporting our athletic programs at a level commensurate with NCAA Division I philosophy."

The NCAA's peer review team recommended that Canisius analyze and address several specific issues including part-time coaches for major sports, salaries, scholarship levels, operating and recruiting budgets, gender equity and the process in which the college elevates club sports to varsity sports.

The NCAA was not the only problem. "Many of our student-athletes also were not happy with the level of support for their programs," says Timothy J. Dillon, the college's director of athletics. "They complained about the very same things that the NCAA cited."

Knowing that many students-athletes were unhappy did not sit well with Father Cooke who prides himself on bringing a real focus on quality to Canisius College. "Whether it is a classroom, a residence hall or an athletic field, we want to provide a quality experience for our students," says Father Cooke. "If we cannot do something in a high quality way, we have to ask ourselves whether we should be doing it at all."

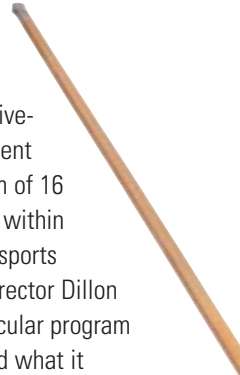
The athletics program had clearly grown larger than the college's ability to support it in a high quality way. So there were two choices: keep all 23 sports and spend enough to support each program at a level commensurate with Division I or trim the program down and use a combination of the savings from discontinued sports plus a smaller amount of annual budget additions to improve the remaining sports.

The difference between the two options was substantial. Retaining all 23 sports would have required a minimum of \$2 million in operating budget additions over the next five years to make those programs competitive. Reducing the program to 16 sports will involve approximately \$1 million in operating budget additions over the next five years.

But it was not just a question of money. The college also had some unresolvable facility issues. Canisius offered tennis, but had no tennis courts. It offered track and field, but had no track or jumping facilities. And unlike the situation with the college's hockey team, which has found a home with very favorable terms at Buffalo State College, there were no easy answers for tennis and track.

A third factor was competitiveness. One goal of the realignment was to make the entire program of 16 sports consistently competitive within the MAAC. In assessing what sports would be retained, Athletics Director Dillon had to consider how far a particular program was from being competitive and what it would take for it to be competitive. "That's not to say that winning is the only goal," says Dillon. "But success on the field or on the court contributes to the perception of quality of the experience. In that sense, we want our student-athletes to be successful and to feel positive about the experience."

A complicating factor was the MAAC mandate that requires member schools to offer 14 core sports. Of the 23 sports in the Canisius program, men's and women's track and field, football, hockey, synchronized swimming and men's and women's lacrosse were not core sports. The remaining programs were off limits, except for the one exemption allowed each school on the men's and women's side. Prior to the realignment, Canisius exercised its exemption for men's swimming. Under the new structure, the exemption will be exercised for men's and women's tennis while men's swimming will be restored.



"That left a relatively small number of sports from which to reduce the scope of the program and achieve the necessary budget savings to make it competitive," says Dillon.

Of the eight discontinued sports, football attracted the most attention. In 1975, Canisius reinstated varsity football as a Division III program and quickly established some natural local rivalries with schools such as University of Rochester, Alfred, Brockport, Ithaca and Buffalo State. As a non-scholarship program with limited travel, costs could be contained.

That all changed in 1993 when the NCAA changed its rules and mandated that universities that offered Division I basketball must offer Division IA or IAA football. Since Canisius was committed to a Division I athletics program, including basketball, it had no choice. It was forced into Division IAA football. The MAAC schools that wanted to offer football reached a compromise. Division IAA football in the MAAC would be non-scholarship, meaning that MAAC schools would be playing at a higher level but with essentially a Division III approach.

The differences between Division IAA and Division III are great. As a Division IAA program, Canisius was subject to all of the NCAA recruiting restrictions applicable to the top programs in the country. But the level of the program attracted many players who were also looking at solid Division III programs, where there were no recruiting restrictions. In Western New York, the primary recruiting territory for Canisius, that was a disadvantage.

Michael Harrington '87, sports reporter for *The Buffalo News* and former sports editor of *The Griffin*, remembers well the Division III glory days in the 80s. The problem with Division IAA football at schools like Canisius, according to Harrington, is that "it's IAA football without any goal, because you are never going to make IAA playoffs playing non-scholarship football against scholarship IAA schools. So it was suddenly a football program without any real goal, tangible goal, to shoot for and I think that was really damaging for it in the long run."

Canisius is not the only member of the conference rethinking its commitment to football. In early December, St. John's

University, which had returned to the MAAC last fall after a stint in the Northeast Conference, abruptly decided to discontinue its football program. Other schools in the conference are reportedly reconsidering football.

Football alumni are not happy with the decision and approximately 200 of them weighed in with Father Cooke, Dillon and the college's Alumni Office after the announcement was made. Among them was Syracuse

attorney and former Griffin wide receiver Michael Vavonese '80 who disagrees with the decision to eliminate any sports but especially football. "The people that I talked to are upset about that because we think with our input they might have realized how devastating a decision this was," he says.

Approximately 50 football alumni met with Father Cooke after the announcement and before the team's last home game to express their disagreement with the decision. The college's Board of Trustees has since declined to take up the issue again and has indicated that the decision is final.

Father Cooke acknowledges that the decision has caused pain among those connected with the affected programs – current students, parents, coaches and alumni. "It is regrettable that this decision has caused so much pain," says Father Cooke. "I fully understand the depth of feelings of those connected with the programs."

"On the other hand," he continues, "We could not continue the way we were going. We simply had to upgrade the entire program and given all of the competing demands for resources at the college, this was the best alternative."

Just how will this realignment make the athletics program more competitive? The first change will be in the number of full-time head coaches at the Koessler Athletic Center. Just three years ago, Canisius had three full-time head coaches. By July, there will be 11 full-time head coaches. In sports like women's volleyball, soccer or lacrosse, the presence of a full-time head coach means a great deal. A full-time head coach is present

year round to work on recruiting, conditioning and tending to academic and other needs of student-athletes.

"We've already taken a big step forward with Coach [Meagan] Dougherty, but this will help her bring in better players that will push us to the next level and make us a better team," says Maria Violante '03, a defender on the women's soccer team.

More money will be directed to athletic scholarships; that is, scholarship aid available to the coaches to give to the best athletes. "My first impression of the Canisius program was that we were spending a lot of money on financial aid for student athletes," says Dillon. "The problem was that we were awarding it on a combined basis of athletics, academics and financial need. That made it very difficult to recruit the best athletes. Putting more money into direct athletic scholarships makes it somewhat easier for the coaches."

That's not to say that academic quality is no longer a concern. "For the fifth semester in a row, our student-athletes were above a 3.0 grade point average," says Dillon. "And they consistently graduate at a better rate than the rest of the student population. We will continue to focus on the 'student' part." Operating budgets for the sports will also improve, enabling the college to improve the overall quality of the experience. A baseball alumnus wrote to Father Cooke shortly after the realignment was announced and in his letter described the shortcomings of the college's baseball program. He told of being required to raise his own money to go on a spring Florida tour, of inadequate accommodations and meal money.

"This is exactly the type of thing we are trying to address," says Father Cooke. "We want Canisius students to look across the field at the other schools and conclude that they are being treated fairly by Canisius." ■

