



## **BREAKING NEWS: Whitman drops skiing as varsity sport**

**The college president said today skiing will become a club sport.**

Updated: Tuesday, March 10, 2009 2:57 PM PDT

By **JIM BUCHAN** of the Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

WALLA WALLA — In a move that school officials believe will reduce athletic budget expenditures by approximately \$200,000, Whitman College announced Tuesday that it is dropping its varsity alpine and Nordic ski programs effective immediately.

Since the Missionaries' ski season ended over the weekend with members of the Nordic team competing in the U.S. Ski & Snowboard Association's national championships in Winter Park, Colo., the impact of Tuesday's announcement won't be fully felt until the 2009-10 school year.

But beginning next year, skiing at Whitman College will be conducted as a club sport similar to how it operated prior to 1990. That's when Tom Olson took over the program and the college began pumping more money into it, helping it become the dominant force in the Northwest Collegiate Ski Conference.

Then, in 2002, the Missionaries raised the ante again by moving up to the NCAA-affiliated Rocky Mountain Intercollegiate Ski Association.

In a written release directed to members of the Whitman community Tuesday morning, president George S. Bridges explained that the decision to no longer fund the ski team as an NCAA member was in large part related to the nation's economic downturn.

Bridges outlined that the cost of operating the ski teams exceeded by far that of any other varsity sport on campus. For example, this year's per-student cost for the ski program was \$5,625 (excluding staff salaries), which more than doubled that of the next highest varsity program, basketball, which was \$2,600 per student, salaries not included.

And a large portion of the difference was due to travel costs. In order to compete at the NCAA level, Whitman skiers were required to make multiple flights outside of the Northwest each year.

Whitman athletic director Dean Snider said the college's ski program consumed 95 percent of the overall athletic department travel budget.

"It has been very difficult for me to be involved in this process," Bridges said in a Tuesday telephone interview. "I am a skier, so it's very difficult. But we have to balance our budget and meet our fiscal responsibilities."

Bridges said that enrollment at Whitman College has not suffered because of the economy. In fact, he said, enrollment numbers were up.

"But 30 percent of our budget is driven by our endowment," Bridges said. "And our endowment, just like every other college in the country, has experienced a significant decrease in value. So we have less money to pump into our operating budget."

The school has already implemented budget cuts in some other departments, explained Ruth Wardwell, the school's director of communications.

And skiing was apparently an obvious target within the athletic department.

While all other varsity sports at Whitman College participate in the NCAA Division III Northwest Conference, the school was one of only nine in the entire western United States that offered NCAA varsity skiing. And that's all NCAA divisions combined.

Compounding matters, Whitman was the only school among the nine that did not offer athletic scholarships. And that made it difficult for the Missionaries to compete.

While Whitman was a powerhouse during its years as a member of the Northwest Collegiate Ski Conference, the Missionaries enjoyed far less success after moving up to the NCAA level in 2002.

"Despite tremendous efforts in recruiting and coaching, Whitman's recent transition to NCAA competition in skiing has been more difficult than anticipated or desired," Bridges wrote in his release. "The challenge of competing in the (NCAA) Western Regional has been extraordinary; many of the competitors in the region are attending universities on full scholarships and are recruited internationally. Our skiers and coaches have acquitted themselves well, even under these circumstances."

But, Bridges went on, trying to become "truly competitive" against the NCAA schools was neither realistic nor necessarily desirable.

"Doing so," he wrote, "would require a permanent infusion of new resources and athletic scholarships to recruit and retain some of the most capable collegiate skiers from the U.S. and other countries. Making this commitment would require resources that Whitman doesn't have and a philosophical shift that we are unwilling to make

"And it would conflict directly with the mission of Division III athletic programs — the level at which all of our other varsity sports compete."

Bridges said that he did not anticipate that any of the skiers on this year's team — 17 in all, eight alpine and nine Nordic — will leave Whitman. In the event some choose to transfer, the college will help them with the transition, he said.

The president said that he is hopeful that the majority will elect to ski for Whitman College at the club level in 2009-10.

"I fully expect that skiing, like many of our outstanding club teams, will remain a vital and a successful part of Whitman athletics long into the future," Bridges wrote.

As for Whitman's two ski coaches — Olson for the alpine team and Calisa Schouweiler for the Nordic skiers — Bridges said Whitman will actively support them as well as they seek to find employment elsewhere.

Attempts to contact the coaches for their comments on the school's decision were unsuccessful.

Finally, Snider emphasized that the decision to eliminate varsity skiing at Whitman College should in no way suggest that the school's overall plans to bolster athletics at the college were in jeopardy. To the contrary, he suggested that a more equitable travel budget was one example of where other varsity sports could benefit from Tuesday's difficult decision.

"We've seen a great resurgence in some of our other programs," Snider said. "This could be an opportunity for us to bring in nationally competitive schools and for us to travel to key places.

"This change is consistent with our lines of enhancing athletics at Whitman College."

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You can read the letter [here](#).