

This College Football Team Doesn't Want to Join the Big Leagues

North Dakota State University is the best team in the second-best division in college football. Why mess with a good thing?

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BloombergBusinessweek

August 24, 2016 — 8:00 AM EDT



Photograph: Benjamin Rasmussen for Bloomberg Businessweek

If you know anything about Fargo, it's likely the harsh winter and funny accent portrayed in the movie and television series that take their name from North Dakota's largest city. But residents want you to know a few other things: Fargo adds 10 people a day, says the mayor, and its unemployment rate is about 50 percent below the U.S. average. Spend a night, and someone will remind you that the Coen brothers shot their 1996 film mostly in Minnesota.

One thing Fargo's residents don't have to get defensive about? Their football team, the North Dakota State University Bison. Riding a deep tradition, smart local recruiting, and oil money from the western part of the state, the Bison have won five straight national titles—and they're a preseason favorite to win a sixth. The team's dynasty is unmatched in the 146-year history of college football's top ranks.



North Dakota State University's Carson Wentz was the No. 2 draft pick overall for the Philadelphia Eagles in 2016.

Photograph: Getty Images

You get attention when you're that dominant. The Bison—pronounced “BI-zun” in the North Dakota parlance—begin their title defense on Aug. 27 in front of a national audience on ESPN. The network's popular *College GameDay* show has twice traveled to Fargo, and *SportsCenter* broadcast live from the Fargodome. If that wasn't enough of a spotlight, the Philadelphia Eagles took Carson Wentz, last year's starting quarterback, with the No. 2 pick in April's NFL draft. No college town at NDSU's level gets half the attention. “The energy that creates and the exposure—that's positive in ways I can't even describe,” says Paul Richard, an NDSU graduate and executive vice president for Sanford Health's Fargo division, the city's biggest employer.

If you're thinking, “Didn't Alabama win the national championship this year?” you're right. To geek out for a second: NDSU plays in the National Collegiate Athletic Association's (NCAA) Division I, but in its second tier, the Football Championship Subdivision (FCS). Alabama and big-name programs like it play in Division I's top tier, the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS). If you're also thinking, “Why does this matter?” there's a reason.

Moving into the FBS, which the team has faced increasing pressure to do, would give the Bison the chance to play against the Alabamas, Ohio States, and Oklahomas of the college football universe, grab more media attention, and possibly rake in huge financial rewards—but it could also cost them money and championships. Stay put in the FCS, and the Bison should keep winning. ESPN stops by. The executive director of the booster program, Pat Simmers, continues to receive \$250,000 donations from fans who don't want to wait for season tickets. What's a ridiculously dominant small-town football team to do? It's a question with the potential to roil the Bison faithful and ruin this overachieving team's role as ambassador for an overachieving city. Matt Larsen, the

university's athletic director, who was hired to make this decision, says he's torn: "Our teams can compete at that level, but we need to ask, 'Can we afford to make the jump?' A lot of programs have moved up, looking for glitz, glamour, and glory, and sometimes it's not there."

Glitz, glamour, and glory aren't really the Fargo way. Dave Piepkorn, the deputy mayor, says jokingly: "On the East Coast or West Coast, nice cars are Ferraris. Here, whatever kind of car you have, if it starts in the winter, that's a nice car." A former NDSU offensive lineman, Piepkorn is an advocate of jumping. He owns a downtown lawn-care company two blocks from the Fargo Theatre, where 9,000 people packed in for *GameDay*'s 2014 visit. Each home game contributes about \$1.5 million to the local economy; FBS status would mean more people and more money. "You always have to look for the next level," Piepkorn says.

He's not alone in thinking this way, according to an unscientific poll of locals taken in early August. A construction worker on 1st Avenue says the team is ready, because the Bison have won five straight games against FBS teams in periodic interdivisional matchups. In a brewery, a recent NDSU grad from Michigan says he'd love to bet on the Bison in a game against the University of Michigan Wolverines, one of college football's most storied programs. It's a "no-brainer" that he'd take his friends' money, he says. They don't know just how well the Bison play.



NDSU players rest in a pickup truck during training camp in August.

Photograph: Benjamin Rasmussen for Bloomberg Businessweek

It's more complicated for Larsen. The New York transplant arrived in Fargo with his wife and kids in 2014 after rising to become chief financial officer of the athletic department at New York's Stony Brook University. He played wide receiver for the Seawolves and worked in the athletic department when the school's football team moved from Division II to I. He says he's asked about

the jump weekly—by fans, the media, even administrators. It's a natural question when a team wins games by more than 30 points, which has happened 14 times in the past three years. "It's easy to argue both sides," Larsen says. "This can't be emotional. It has to be a budgetary decision."

Right now, Larsen's budget is \$22 million. The nation's top programs have kitties in excess of \$120 million, built largely on the billions networks pay for broadcast rights. Each school in the Southeastern Conference—the one Alabama plays in—raked in \$31.2 million last season, mostly from TV. North Dakota State won't be paid to have ESPN broadcast its opener—nor any of its contests against Missouri Valley Football Conference opponents—mainly because there aren't enough eyeballs on its games when FBS games are being broadcast at the same time. Moving up to the FBS wouldn't guarantee that revenue will pour in, but if NDSU established itself, it could make millions.

Getting anywhere near being established would take more than a few buffalo nickels. There's paying coaches FBS-caliber salaries, offering students an FBS-caliber experience, and, most costly, building FBS-caliber facilities. "To do it the right way, making the move would mean doubling the athletic budget," Larsen says. That money won't come from tax revenue or the school: The state's economy is influenced chiefly by oil and agriculture prices, both of which are in a downswing. NDSU's new \$50 million athletic complex was privately funded, as was a \$5.5 million indoor track-and-field venue. "They're very good stewards of their money," Mayor Tim Mahoney says.

Even so, there's no escaping that an FBS move would require a new stadium. This means NDSU would need more buy-in from donors. The booster program has raised a record \$4.5 million so far this year, Executive Director Simmers says, because of growing ticket demand. By contrast, Florida State University's boosters generate 10 times that annually. "I could sell out 30,000 tomorrow, but that's not enough for an FBS program," he says. "We'd likely need at least 40,000 seats." The 40,000-seat stadium the University of Houston is building will cost \$120 million. So those Bison boosters would have a lot of banquets to plan.

Larsen knows there are no guarantees, no matter what decision he makes. Boise State University was only a decade into FBS life when it stunned the Oklahoma Sooners in the 2007 Fiesta Bowl. Now the program is perennially ranked in the Top 25 and last year received a \$9.4 million payout. But two years after the University of Massachusetts at Amherst stepped up in 2012, an internal report found costs had outstripped projections, with students and taxpayers kicking in an extra \$2.1 million. The Minutemen are 8-40 since the move, home crowds average less than the NCAA's minimum requirements, and the team is no longer affiliated with a conference. UMass architecture and history professor Max Page, who co-authored the 2014 report, says, "Just don't do it."

Financial uncertainties make Larsen's decision tough, but there are other factors. Fargo doesn't part easily with tradition. Abandoning outdoor Dacotah Field for the city-owned Fargodome in 1993 took convincing, as did the move to Division I from II in 2004. Many in the city worried about cost and whether the team could compete. One tradition that would be lost forever is the annual pilgrimage to Frisco, Texas, for the FCS title game. An app called BisonTracker keeps tabs on the 20,000 fans journeying to "Fargo South"; the first to hit the state line plant a Bison flag. Another might be lunch: After the first half of a mid-August practice, linemen pile onto the bed of a pickup—pads, cleats, and helmets—and drive off to get lunch at a dining hall; it's a scene more reminiscent of high school than college. At the University of Oregon, on the other hand, a new 145,000-square-foot facility has a cafeteria that feeds all its athletes.



Matt Larsen, athletic director for North Dakota State.

Photograph: Benjamin Rasmussen for Bloomberg Businessweek

Unwinding these traditions could threaten the sense of community Fargo has worked hard to build. Downtown Fargo has benefited in recent years from its close ties to NDSU, beginning in the mid-2000s, when the university moved its architecture and business programs into the heart of the city. That brought in young people, which in turn created demand for new bars and restaurants that breathed life into the once-staid part of town. A move to the FBS could put distance between the Bison and their city, subtly undermining the university's relationship with its hometown if all that glitz, glamour, and glory materialized.





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Technically, the Bison would have to be invited up to the top tier, and though Larsen says he hasn't received a formal offer, he says he's spoken with a few commissioners. He's cagey about details, however, and commissioners of the five smaller FBS conferences who might be most inclined to make an invite either declined to comment or didn't return calls seeking comment on any Bison rumblings. Some players have no hesitation about speaking out,

including 6-foot-3, 245-pound linebacker Nick DeLuca, who was playing for NFL scouts at the mid-August practice. "We're at the top of FCS right now," he says. "Why change that?"

It's a question Larsen ponders, as well, while watching the team practice from his sparse corner office in the new athletic complex. "Now that I've been here two years, having been through two national championship runs, having the last six playoff games at home, in the Fargodome, sold out, on ESPN," he says, "that's tough to trade."

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