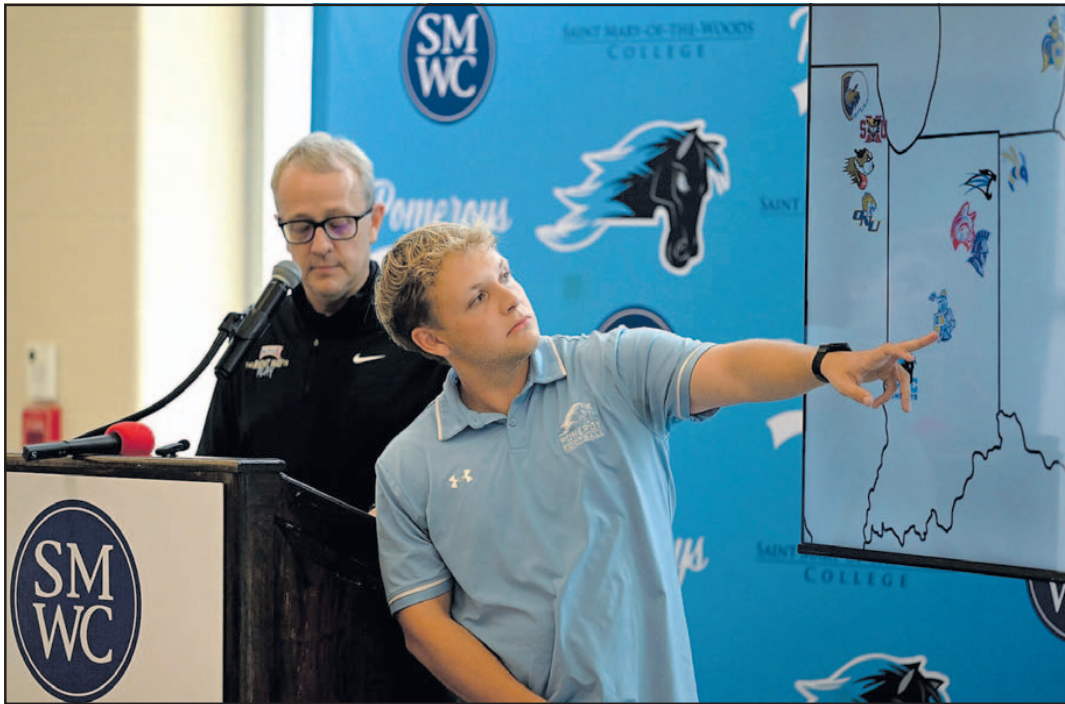


# POMEROYS MOVING ON UP



Tribune-Star/Joseph C. Garza

Saint Mary-of-the-Woods Associate Vice President for Athletics Kevin Lanke (left) explains the expanse of the Mid-States Football Association, the new league SMWC will join in 2026. Pomeroy's assistant football coach Griffin Olson points out the league's other member schools during Thursday's announcement in Knoerle Center.

## Woods sees 'full-scale' football as enhancing its college experience

**F**ifteen years ago, Thursday's announcement inside Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College's Knoerle Center would've seemed wildly improbable.



**MARK  
BENNETT**

"A lot of incremental steps" gradually made Thursday's news understandable, even likely. Still, it's a big step. The liberal arts college that was an all-women's institution for 174 years before going coed in 2015 is moving its football program from the smaller-scale sprint football version to a "full-blown NAIA program." That change starts in the 2026 season.



Tribune-Star/Joseph C. Garza

Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College sprint football head coach, Blaine Powell, watches the offense run a play during the Pomeroy's practice on Sept. 6, 2022 at SMWC.

National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics football is comparable to that played by NCAA Division III or even some Division II schools. By contrast, SMWC's current program – on the brink of its fourth season – features players 180

pounds or less. The Pomeroy's compete in the Midwest Sprint Football League. One year from now, SMWC will become a member of the Mid-States Football Association, facing opponents such as Marian and Saint Francis of Indiana and Saint Xavier in Illinois – programs that have won a combined nine NAIA national titles.

It's one of the strongest conferences in NAIA football, which includes 97 colleges nationwide.

On the NAIA scale, "this is the equivalent of an ACC or a Big 12," said Kevin Lanke, SMWC's associate vice president for athletics.

That's not bluster. Lanke knows college athletics and came to The Woods in 2023 after a successful 25-year stretch at Rose-Hulman, a healthy NCAA Division III school.

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# Bennett

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Why make such a leap in football? It could further boost the school's enrollment, expand awareness of the college into new cities and regions, and increase academic opportunities for all Woods students, SMWC leaders said Thursday.

"This really gives us an opportunity to grow in [various] ways and bring in new students in the future," Woods President Brennan Randolph said.

NAIA level football offers an atmosphere that appeals to students, said Jakeb Skinner, a senior ready for his fourth season on The Woods football team.

"That adds to the college experience," said Skinner, a business administration major from Sullivan.

SMWC will be competing in the Mid-States Football Association, which includes 13 colleges in four states and centered around metros Chicago, Detroit and Indianapolis. Those schools are split into two MSFA divisions (the Midwest, which will include The Woods, and the Mideast).

So, theoretically, potential students could watch Woods teams play in those cities, get curious and consider SMWC as a possible destination for college, whether they play sports or not.

Teams that win the Mid-States championship automatically advance to the 24-team NAIA playoffs. A berth in that tournament could expand that exposure.

"The year that SMWC wins the Mid-States league, that's a playoff spot," Lanke said, grinning with optimism.

The number of student-athletes on The Woods team would grow from the current 70 as a sprint-football program to between 105 and 110 at the NAIA level. Woods players get partial scholarship funds, but not full-rides. So, the addition of 40 student-athletes for a higher level football team can help pay for the cost of not only two additional coaches and other staff needed for the larger roster, but also aid other athletic programs and academics, Lanke said.

"We're not going to take from other parts of campus to fund this," Lanke said.

Blaine Powell is the man who'll be coaching The Woods' enhanced football program. He's also the current coach of the sprint-football team. He's also been the coach since SMWC first stepped its toe into the college football world in 2022, a move that then-athletic director Ron Prettyman helped facilitate.

Powell's built a strong resume in three seasons. His teams have won 20 of their 24 games, reached the Midwest Sprint Football League title game three times, won that championship once, and has never lost a road game.

Powell is "the right coach" to take on the jump to NAIA, Lanke said, given that he's "a wonderful recruiter, not just for this program but also the campus."

Indeed, Powell understands the commitment students must make academically. He worked as a coal miner for 22 years, then made a major life choice.



Tribune-Star/Joseph C. Garza

Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College's Derron Hazzard runs into the end zone and scores during the Pomeroy's game in the Midwest Sprint Football League championship against Calumet College of St. Joseph on Nov. 9, 2024 at West Vigo's Jay Barrett Field.



Tribune-Star/Mark Bennett

Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College football coach Blaine Powell addresses an audience inside Knoerle Center on campus for Thursday's announcement that the Pomeroy's are moving up to the NAIA level.

"I stopped mining in 2019 and went back to school," the 52-year-old Powell said Thursday, as his players and several former players chatted enthusiastically after the announcement. Powell began coaching The Woods amid his studies, kept going and earned his bachelor's degree this spring.

Now, he'll begin recruiting players without being limited to those lighter than 180 pounds. In his eyes, that's the biggest difference.

"Not really much changes for us. We've just got to get a lot bigger," Powell said.

Bigger applies to a few other impending differences, though. In addition to the likely 10 games against fellow Mid-States and NAIA programs, The Woods' 11-game regular-season schedules could likely include a NCAA Division I opponent. Maybe a DI team from the Football Championship Series ranks, one notch below the power-conferences? Maybe the crosstown Indiana State Sycamores?

"I'd love to," Powell said, smiling wide. "We'll always try to look for a money game. We'll play anybody anywhere anytime."



Tribune-Star/Mark Bennett

Saint Mary-of-the-Woods College is moving its football program up to the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics level, and will compete in the Mid-States Football Association, a league that has won nine national NAIA titles in the past 30 years.

A "money game" refers to a larger school paying a smaller program a guaranteed financial amount to play.

Likewise, Woods teams will need to find a permanent home field. The Pomeroy's have been playing their home games at West Vigo High School under an agreement with the Vigo County School Corp., an arrangement for which SMWC is grateful, Lanke said.

Still, plans are forming for an on-campus football facility.

"We have a vision for it. A plan. A drawing," Lanke said coyly. He couldn't elaborate further.

Changes over the past decade have helped increase the school's on-campus enrollment by nearly double, reaching 650 students today, Lanke said. SMWC added men to that number in 2015. Men's sports began joining the existing roster of women's sports. The sprint-football program debuted in 2022. The jump to NAIA football is a year away. A decision about an on-campus playing facility will come through the 2025-26 year.

"It's the end of a lot of incremental steps that got us to this point," Lanke said.

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