Written by Jackie Finlan
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USA Rugby announced the formation of the first women's DI college conference, following in the footsteps of its male counterparts. Within the Pacific Mountain Rugby Conference, the 16 teams are divided into three divisions and represent seven of last year's DI national championship participants.

The North Division groups former Nor Cal (Stanford, UC Davis, Chico State, Cal) and Pacific Northwest (Oregon, Oregon State) teams into a league. Oregon and Oregon State benefit greatly from the expanded competition, considering their former league consisted of a home-and-away series to determine which team moved onto regional playoffs. But even big dogs like Stanford are enthusiastic about the expansion.

"We are excited about joining the North Division for next season," Stanford assistant coach Heather Smith said. "It offers us a more competitive league schedule. In addition, this league allows us to play our traditional rugby rivals in Chico State and UC Davis, as well as battle our Pac-12 rivals in Cal, Oregon, and Oregon State ... and eventually Arizona State, Colorado and UCLA through cross-division play."

Each division is responsible for its own schedule. The East division (Air Force, Women's Cougar Rugby, Colorado, Colorado State, New Mexico) will play in the fall, while the North and South (Arizona State, UCLA, UC Santa Barbara, UC San Diego, Claremont) divisions will play in the winter. Currently, crossover games aren't mandated, and the playoff structure has yet to be determined.

"How we address crossover games and our league playoff structure will be greatly influenced by the decisions made in the coming weeks by the Women's Competitions Committee," Smith said. "If the committee makes the round of 16/8 regional, like D1 Men, then a combination of automatic seeds and one playoff weekend for at-large bids would make sense. This is a union of 16 teams from five LAUs and three territories. We represent seven seeds from 2011 Nationals. Hopefully the committee will honor that."

In addition to the Oregon schools, Women's Cougar Rugby stands to benefit greatly from the restructure. Instead of playing local DII and U19 squads during its buildup to nationals, WCR will face the ultra-competitive teams from the Eastern Rockies union. The South division's Claremont Colleges has bumped up from Southern California's DII, while former DI Nor Cal teams UC Santa Cruz and Sacramento have opted to return to DII play.

"Having the top teams in the west connected in this way is important since we are so geographically spread out," Smith said. "It definitely will help to grow the game on this coast to have our schools, coaches and players connected. It should also allow Ellen Owens, as West Women's Rep, to set a foundation and help other teams move up to D1 level in terms of organization and level of competition. Hopefully we'll see schools from Washington State in our league at some point."

Pacific Mountain Rugby Conference
North Division: California, Chico, Oregon, Oregon State, Stanford, UC Davis
South Division: Arizona State, Claremont Colleges, UCLA, UC San Diego, UC Santa Barbara
East Division: Air Force, BYU, Colorado, Colorado State, New Mexico