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[Home](#) > [Sports](#)

Past week: [Thu](#) | [Fri](#) | [Sat](#) | [Sun](#) | [Mon](#) | [Tue](#) | [Wed](#) **Rochester Time:** 11:41 am

News

[Local News](#)

Sports

[Schedule](#)

[Columnists](#)

[Amerks](#)

[Bills](#)

[High School](#)

[Knighthawks](#)

[Rattlers](#)

[Red Wings](#)

[Rhinos](#)

Business News

[Living](#)

[Health](#)

[Opinion](#)

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Tigers go big time

First local team to play at top level

Jim Mandelaro
Staff writer

(December 16, 2004) — HENRIETTA — Albert J. Simone heard the question 12 years ago, on his very first day as president of RIT.

"Why aren't we Division I in men's hockey?"

His reply was that there were "other fish to fry," such as improving the dorms and academic programs. Upgrading the athletic teams wasn't at the top of his list.

But the question wouldn't go away. It was asked by students, alumni, faculty and people on the street.

Year after year after year.

"If it weren't for those people, we wouldn't be here today," a smiling Simone said Wednesday at RIT's Gordon Field House. "They certainly were persistent."

Rochester Institute of Technology announced it will move its highly respected men's hockey program from Division III to Division I, the pinnacle of NCAA competition, beginning with the 2006-07 season.

The Tigers will join the Atlantic Hockey Association, a 2-year-old league whose teams include Army, Canisius, Connecticut and Holy Cross.



JAY CAPERS STAFF PHOTOGRAPHER
Atlantic Hockey Commissioner Bob DeGregorio, left, Canisius' Tim Dillon and RIT President Albert Simone share a laugh Wednesday. [\[Day in Photos\]](#)

At a glance

The news: RIT men's hockey is moving from NCAA Division III to Division I in 2006-07 as a member of the Atlantic Hockey Association.

About Atlantic Hockey: RIT joins a 2-year-old conference whose members include American International, Army, Bentley, Canisius, Connecticut, Holy Cross, Mercyhurst and Sacred Heart. Current member Quinnipiac will join the ECAC Hockey League next year. Air Force is expected to join the conference.

Time frame: RIT will play 20 Division I games next season and join the Atlantic Hockey Association, but the Tigers won't



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"The wait is over," RIT athletic director Lou Spiotti told a few hundred people, including the members of the RIT men's and women's hockey teams.

be eligible for postseason play until the 2007-08 season.

"All those questions about RIT going Division I, all the rumors, all the articles, and all the years of waiting ... every single one of them has been answered.

"RIT hockey has arrived, and Rochester has arrived."

The Tigers, a perennial national power with NCAA titles in 1983 (Division II) and '85 (Division III), will become the first college program in area history to compete at Division I.

"It's a great day to smile," Spiotti said.

Simone had been an administrator at Division I schools Hawaii, Cincinnati and Boston for 30 years before coming to RIT in 1992. He had seen the ugly, greedy side of major college athletics and wanted no part of it at RIT.

"I still feel that way," he said Wednesday. "Look at what's in the papers today. Notre Dame's lack of values in firing its coach, and Ohio State in trouble again."

But Simone also realized there were benefits to fielding a Division I program, including more exposure and more media interest in a market thirsting for major-college sports.

This past summer, he sent a letter to Atlantic Hockey officials indicating his interest in joining that Division I conference.

Quinnipiac had announced its intention to join the ECAC Hockey League next year, creating an opening.

"The schools in Atlantic Hockey share our philosophies and values," Simone said. "We pride ourselves on having student-athletes who put academics first, and so do those schools."

Tim Dillon, a member of the AHA executive committee and the athletic director at Canisius, admits he had his doubts about RIT.

"My response at the time was, 'Who is RIT and why do we want them in our league?'" he said. "But I quickly learned of the

tradition, rivalries, fans and academic excellence."

Two weeks ago, AHA officials toured RIT and Blue Cross Arena and came away hugely impressed.

"They had everything we could hope for," AHA commissioner Bob DeGregorio said.

Friday, by a vote of 8-0, conference athletic directors voted RIT into the league.

The Tigers' first task will be to apply to the NCAA for reclassification. Because they will be Division I in only one sport, they are not allowed to offer full athletic scholarships.

"Recruiting is selling a product," said sixth-year coach Wayne Wilson, a former player and assistant coach at Division I Bowling Green. "We have a product with values on it: a degree at RIT, great facilities and the community as a whole.

"We're not going to be knocking heads with the Boston Colleges of the world, but I am confident we can compete in our conference and ultimately win our conference."

RIT, an excellent engineering school, is able to offer student-athletes a chance to take part in its co-op program, where they can work for local firms and gain experience and perhaps an inside edge toward a permanent job.

Student-athletes in the co-op program do not pay tuition, which removes a heavy burden from a person who is weighing offers from colleges that do award athletic scholarships.

Wilson pointed out that Holy Cross, which also does not offer scholarships, won the Atlantic Hockey title last year, earning an automatic bid to the NCAA Tournament.

RIT will double its hockey budget, hire two full-time assistant coaches (Wilson currently has two part-time assistants), add another sports information representative and hire a full-time trainer.

The Tigers will play 20 Division I opponents next year, but will not compete in the AHA. They will join the conference in 2006-07, but are ineligible for post-season play. They will be a full-fledged member with post-season

eligibility in 2007-08.

"There are pluses and minuses," said junior goalkeeper Dave Wrisley, the lone New York product on RIT's roster. "Nine of us will be seniors next year and we won't be able to play in the postseason. But overall this is excellent for the program."

Wrisley said much of RIT's success at Division I will depend on how skilled Wilson and his assistants are at luring talented players to the Henrietta campus.

"They'll have to sell (recruits) on the team and the school," he said.

The Tigers will continue to play most of their home games at Ritter Arena, their 2,100-seat on-campus facility, but some of the more prominent games could be shifted to Blue Cross Arena downtown.

Wednesday's news had many students across the RIT campus excited.

"It's great for us," said Doug Roik, a senior from Fulton, north of Syracuse. "It will bring more notice to RIT."

Roik says he would be more likely to attend an RIT hockey game against a Division I school than a Division III opponent.

"I hate to say it, but a more well-known team is just more interesting," he said.

The RIT women's hockey program could be looking at a Division I upgrade down the road, but right now the Tigers will remain at Division III.

"The men deserve it," said Kasie Strong, a senior right winger from Groton, Mass. "Hopefully other teams like ours will soon follow."

The biggest hurdle for the women will be finding a league. Only 30 colleges have Division I women's programs, and there is currently no women's Atlantic Hockey league.

"Four of our members do (Sacred Heart, Mercyhurst, Holy Cross and RIT)," DeGregorio said, "but you need six to have a league. It's in the discussion stage."

Rochester is currently the second-largest

market in the United States without Division I sports. Fort Lauderdale, Fla., is first, but that city is within a short drive to Miami, a hotbed for major-college sports.

Years of frustration are over for area fans, and the question that has hounded Simone since he stepped on campus has finally been answered with a resounding 'yes.'

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