

# Grimsby fighting for high school football survival

By BERNIE PUCHALSKI, Standard Staff

When the Niagara Region High School Athletic Association decided to include AAA and AAAA schools in the same football league last year, Grimsby Secondary School knew it was in trouble.

"We were the weakest football program in the county and you're going to put us up against the giants?" Grimsby coach Mark Gilbert said.

Gilbert and Grimsby principal Jim Heywood expressed their concern to the NRHSAA and it was decided Grimsby would play a series of exhibition games against AA schools last year to prepare the team for competition at the AAA/AAAA level in 2011.

The Eagles ended up playing five exhibition games, including one against Burlington Trafalgar. Gilbert said Grimsby tied Centennial, beat Beamsville and lost a close game to St. Catharines Collegiate. They were supposed to play Holy Cross, but Gilbert called it off.

"We never did get blown out and I didn't want to leave them with that taste in their mouth," he said.

Meanwhile, the rest of the AAA teams forced to play the top AAAA programs were getting blown out by halftime. By season's end, only Sir Winston Churchill showed itself capable of staying in the game with the best of the AAAA schools.

In the off-season, it was back to the drawing board for the NRHSAA football committee and it returned a recommendation to have separate AAA and AAAA football leagues.

This fall, the AAAA loop will include Denis Morris, St. Paul, Lakeshore Catholic, Blessed Trinity and Notre Dame, and the AAA league will be made up of Churchill, Governor Simcoe, St. Mike's, A.N. Myer, Stamford and Grimsby.

"We intend on playing a triple A schedule and the way I see it is we're fighting for our football lives here," Gilbert said. "If it doesn't go well this year, I don't know it can be fixed or put back together again."

The team ended last season with 35-40 players, but many were Grade 9s and 10s who didn't play much. Gilbert hopes his team can compete.

Prior to taking a break last season, Grimsby had put together a 4-29 record the past five years, including an 0-6 record in 2009 and an 0-7 mark in 2006. The previous five years, the team went 7-23-1.

"The Grimsby football program has lost so many games over the years," Gilbert said. "You just won't draw kids to a program that they know is going to lose."

"Now you're at the helm of a sinking ship and it's difficult to right that ship."

He is looking for commitment from his players to turn Grimsby's fortunes around.

"You have to come to practice every night and you have to be dedicated. It takes one full generation of high school kids — Grade 9 to 12 — and they have to be with you for four years to turn it around."

Commitment is not something Grimsby has had the last while.

"If you don't get that buy-in, it will be tough to resurrect. They've had coaches from outside of the school trying to do it and if you're not with the kids every single day and you don't see them in the halls every day and know them personally, they're just not going to be there for you.

"They're going to miss practices and they're going to get blown out of games."

The AAA league will play each other once during the regular season and the top two teams will get a bye into the semifinals. The other four teams will play in the quarter-finals.

For Churchill, the AAA league was its only destination this season.

"We loved it last year, but those schools are really organized with their scouting and filming," Bulldogs head coach Peter Partridge said. "I have a lot of respect for their programs, they're some of the top ones in the province, but at this stage we can't compete."

Partridge was a member of the football committee that suggested the split of AAA and AAAA schools.

"It's the fairest way and you don't have a school of 1,200 beating up a school of 900," he said.

The AAAA teams will play a home-and-home, eight-game regular season before heading to the playoffs. The winner of the AAAA league will advance to the Golden Horseshoe Bowl playoffs.

At the AA level, Beamsville, Centennial, Eden, Holy Cross, St. Francis and St. Catharines Collegiate return for another year. Governor Simcoe moves to the AAA league because of its October 2010 population numbers. Westlane (2010 population of 662), no longer willing to slug it out with higher-population schools, joins the league for this season.

New football convenor Sandy Wilkes expects a similar schedule to last year, where everyone played each other once and there was a bye week for each team during the regular season.

In the A league, West Park, Thorold, South Lincoln, Eastdale, Port Colborne and Ridgeway-Crystal Beach are back from last season and Fort Erie makes its return to A ball after a one-year absence.

Fort Erie (2010 population of 506) was supposed to play in the junior transitional league last season, but things fell apart at the last minute. In its place, the team formed an exhibition squad with a half-dozen seniors mixed in with a mostly junior team, Fort Erie coach Luc Gerritsen said.

"Our intention is to go Varsity (A league) and we will be going head to head with Ridgeway," he said.

He will head into the season with 15 returning players from last year's exhibition squad and three Fort Erie players who suited up for Ridgeway-Crystal Beach last season.

"I know I'm in a rebuilding phase," Gerritsen said. "We were the big team and even though we were a single A team, no one wanted us to be in the single A league. They forced us to go up a league.

"Every team goes through it. Everyone rides the wave when you can and eventually there's going to be a bottom fallout. We had our bottom fall out and now it is time to start time to rebuild."

He anticipates school amalgamations in the near future and would have liked to have seen Ridgeway-Crystal Beach and Fort Erie combine to offer junior and senior football programs. Port Colborne could also be involved in amalgamation, pushing the resulting school to the AAA or even AAAA level.

"If we're going to be up in that league, we need to put something together that gives kids playing experience now; where Grade 9s and 10s are playing and getting the brunt of the reps. That was what I wanted to happen last year but for whatever reason to numerous to mention, it didn't happen."

Also changed from last year is the transitional junior football league has been disbanded because of a lack of numbers. Schools not wanting to play in the existing junior league can set up their own exhibition games.

Churchill plans to play in the junior league this year and Partridge expects interest to be high.