

Two in, two out in Varsity 1 League

Posted By **BERNIE PUCHALSKI** , **STANDARD STAFF**

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The constant evolution of high school football in Niagara will enter yet another era this fall.

The biggest changes will occur in the Varsity 1 League and those changes will have a direct bearing on the Varsity 2 loop.

The Premier League remains unchanged from last season.

Varsity 1 will lose two teams, with St. Catharines Collegiate and Fort Erie dropping down to Varsity 2, and gain two teams with Ridley College and Eden entering the fray.

Lakeport played its last football season last fall in Varsity 2 and team will now play under Eden's name and colours in Varsity 1. Niagara District will field a team in Varsity 2.

The Varsity League will be divided into three divisions: East, made up of A. N. Myer, Stamford, Westlane and Centennial; West, made up of Grimsby, Beamsville, Sir Winston Churchill and Governor Simcoe; and Central, made up of Eden, Ridley College, Holy Cross and St. Francis.

The teams will play each other once within the division and have three games against teams outside their divisions.

"They will play teams this year that they didn't play last year," football convener Rick Willis said.

The three division winners make the playoffs, along with five wild-card teams. How the wild-card teams are determined has yet to be decided.

St. Catharines Collegiate was 0-7 last season and 9-25-2 the previous five years, but that's not why it's leaving Varsity 1, according to head coach Chris McBride.

"We are competitive with some of the old Varsity teams, but some of the newer teams that continue to have junior and senior teams and large populations, make it fairly unsafe, in my opinion, for our kids to compete."

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McBride says his players didn't mind losing, but were worried about getting hurt.

"The last two years, certain kids have taken it upon themselves to run around the field and head butt and try and injure other players because they know how to hit and how to do things in ways that they won't get caught by referees."

To McBride, that flies in the face of the purpose of high school athletics.

"It's not supposed to be about wins and losses. It's just supposed to be about competition, safety and enjoyment. And I didn't find any of those three were being met at Varsity Division 1."

Like St. Catharines Collegiate, Fort Erie has struggled in recent years at Varsity 1. After making the semifinal round in its first year of Varsity League play, Fort Erie has gone 1-13.

Like Collegiate and Fort Erie moving to Varsity 2 for a more level playing field, Ridley College is looking for the same thing by opting out of Canadian Independent Schools Athletic Association action to play in the Niagara loop.

"CISAA is very competitive and it's largely the boys schools like Upper Canada, St. Andrew's and St. Mike's," said Don Rickers, Ridley's director of external relations. "We just have a real hard time matching up with them now."

"For us trying to match up with St. Mike's in Toronto right now, it's like a Catholic all-star team when you're playing them. They just hand us our heads and you start to get into the injury concerns."

The problem is exacerbated by Ridley's smaller population and the fact it offers a large variety of sports for athletes to compete in, such as fall soccer.

"Right now, we're kind of looking at all the sports we offer, and we're wondering if we're offering too many because we've diluted things a little bit," Rickers said.

With fewer than 500 students, Rickers still believes Ridley College will match up well with the larger schools in Varsity 1.

"We will play them and see if it's a good fit. If we're competitive this year, we will stay in Varsity 1. If we don't do well, we would have to look at going down to the next level. We want to play at the most competitive level that we're capable of playing."

Varsity 2 will now be made up of Fort Erie, St. Catharines Collegiate, Niagara District, Thorold, Port Colborne, West Park, Eastdale and South Lincoln. The squads will play each other once during the regular season and the top four teams will make the playoffs.

Niagara District had 31 players commit to playing football this fall, excluding students entering Grade 9. There were an additional 10 students who have expressed an interest in playing but haven't yet committed.

"We're in the process of building towards being part of the league this year," Niagara District principal Mike Cockburn said.

The Premier League will include Notre Dame, Lakeshore Catholic, St. Paul, St. Michael's, Denis Morris and Blessed Trinity.

The teams will play each other once in the regular season and the top two teams will advance to the semifinals. The third-place team will play the sixth and the fourth-place team will play the fifth in the quarterfinals.