

Time to tackle flawed football system is now

By **BERNIE PUCHALSKI**

Five weeks into the AAA/ AAAA high school football season, it has become painstakingly obvious the new league is a complete and utter disaster.

As someone who has covered high school football in Niagara for 15 years, I was a vocal critic when the Niagara Region High School Athletic Association decided to base its football leagues on the populations of member schools -- a formula used successfully in most other high school sports -- but not even I predicted the degree of disparity in the calibre of play between the best of the former Premier League teams (Notre Dame, Denis Morris, Lakeshore Catholic, Saint Paul, Blessed Trinity and Saint Mike's) and the former Varsity 1 schools (Sir Winston Churchill, A.N. Myer, Stamford and Westlane) who moved up to the higher division.

A.N. Myer, a perennial playoff team at the Varsity 1 level, has been outscored 218-0 in its four games against Premier League squads. Stamford, a multiple finalist at the Varsity 1 level, has been outscored 81-12 in two games.

Westlane, which could have played in the lower league with a population of 643 students in September 2009, opted to play in the higher loop to maintain its logical rivalries with fellow Niagara Falls high schools. It has been outscored 123-51 in three games.

Sir Winston Churchill, whose three straight titles in the Varsity 1 league were, in my eyes, the main reason why the population-based leagues were deemed necessary in the first place, is the only school to record a victory over a former Premier League team. Its 17-0 victory over Denis Morris, a school that has struggled at the Premier League level on and off for the past decade, was a big victory for the school, but it cost the Bulldogs three of their best players lost to injury. Even with those three players healthy, it's hard to imagine them competing with St. Paul, after watching a 63-8 pasting administered by the Patriots last week.

A major factor in the early-season blowouts is teams getting used to playing the brand of three-down football played the past several seasons in the Premier League. In hindsight, it would have been an excellent idea to give teams a year to get used to three-down football before moving them up to the AAA/AAAA league.

But that's only part of the problem. The biggest difference is the football culture that exists between former Varsity 1 and Premier League schools.

"If you think you're going to coach in Premier by coming in in September, you're not unless you got great players," St. Paul coach Rick Oreskovich said after the debacle at Churchill.

"On offence, we do this 12 months of the year."

Having dealt with the former Varsity 1 coaches for several years, I'm confident that they -- and certainly their wives and children -- have no interest in being football coaches 12 months of the year. They have no interest in watching hours and hours of game film and the intense pressure Premier League coaches feel to win.

That's one reason why the best Premier teams are merciless in the way they run up the score against their opposition. They need to maintain their sharpness, and pulling back on the reins isn't conducive to being at your best. The goal of Saint Paul's no-huddle offence is to score 50 points at halftime and God help anyone who gets in their way.

In the old Varsity League, there was an understanding that you didn't throw the ball once you built a big lead, but there's no such gentlemen's rules in the new loop.

Oreskovich suggests that having junior football programs will help the former Varsity squads compete in the new league, but that wasn't the case for Denis Morris, St. Francis or Holy Cross before the latter two joined the Varsity League.

What's even scarier to contemplate is that Governor Simcoe's September 2010 population will force it into the AAA/AAAA league in 2011 and the Redcoats have yet to win in the AA loop this season. Grimsby, a school that hadn't been competitive in the Varsity League for most of the past decade, is preparing to get crushed in the higher league next season by playing a series of four exhibition games against AA schools this year.

Gee, I wonder how that is going to work out?

My biggest problem with the whole leagues-based-on-population argument is that it was an attempt to fix something that wasn't broken. Yes, Churchill won three straight league championships, but it was fortunate to win two of them. Why was it so unfair for Churchill to play schools like Holy Cross (143 fewer students than Churchill in 2009) and St. Francis (220 fewer students in 2009), but it's perfectly OK for Churchill to play Notre Dame (325 more students than Churchill in 2010), Denis Morris (278 more students in 2010) and Lakeshore Catholic (182 more students in 2010)? Holy Cross, with an enrolment of 892 students in 2010, is now only eight students away from having to play against schools with 500 more students.

I've witnessed coaches move their teams to lower leagues, not to win championships, but to be competitive and keep interest alive at their schools. St. Catharines Collegiate moved to Varsity 2 from Varsity 1 in 2009 and was a .500 club. Fort Erie moved down a level and still wasn't competitive. If things don't change, how many kids do you think Myer will have out for tryouts next fall? With a September 2010 population of 941, it's stuck in the AAA/AAAA league.

So what is the solution? Given all the verbal sparring I've engaged in with coaches in favour of the new system, it's obvious going back to the way things were is not an option. The solution suggested to me by a teacher/coach I respect is to have the highest league divided into AAA and AAAA leagues, with the

AAAA league champion moving on to the Golden Horseshoe Bowl playoffs. AAA schools would have the option of playing up a league.

Lakeshore Catholic, Notre Dame and Denis Morris would automatically be in this league because of their 2010 populations and Denis Morris, even if it had the option, has repeatedly stated it has no interest in playing at a lower level to boost its win/loss record. Saint Paul, Saint Mike's and Blessed Trinity would all opt to play in the higher league because they have coaches who relish the challenge. And it also can't be overlooked as a recruiting tool to attract students to their schools.

If no one else opted to play in the AAAA league in 2010, this would result in an AAA league made up of Churchill, Simcoe, Grimsby, Myer, Stamford and Westlane. The latter would likely opt to play in the AAA loop, despite being eligible for AA play to maintain its Niagara Falls rivalries.

Both leagues could play a five-game regular season and have the two top teams advance directly to the semifinals while the bottom four teams meet in the quarterfinals. If there was a desire for teams to play more games, there could be interlocking games between the leagues that didn't count in the lower league's standings.

Regardless of how the powers that be feel about my suggestions, work needs to begin now to fix a badly-broken system in time for the 2011 season. The fate of football at several high schools is already in jeopardy.

If seeing kids not playing football at as many high schools in Niagara as possible isn't the goal, then by all means carry on with the status quo.