

# Four-down football now a thing of the past

## HIGH SCHOOL: NRHSAA also realigns leagues

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The era of four-down high school football in Niagara is officially over.

At a meeting of the Niagara Region High School Athletic Association early last week, the recommendation of the Niagara Regional High School Athletic Association's football sports advisory committee to go to three-down football was approved by an overwhelming majority.

Thirty schools voted in favour of the motion, two voted against and two schools abstained from voting, said Rina Rode, coordinator of secondary school athletics.

Niagara's former Premier League has played three-down football for several years while the Varsity 1 and 2 loops had opted for the four-down variety.

Other committee recommendations ratified by the NRHSAA were having an athletic therapist or first-response first aid person at every game and the creation of a junior development league for a few years until the participating schools are ready to join the existing junior league.

Last November, the NRHSAA voted in favour of two football leagues, A/AA and AAA/AAAA, based on population. Schools with populations exceeding 900 will play in the higher league and schools under the 900 threshold will compete in the lower league.

This fall's leagues will be based on school populations as of Oct. 31, 2009, and the higher league will include existing Premier teams Denis Morris, Blessed Trinity, Lakeshore Catholic, Notre Dame, St. Mike's and St. Paul along with former Varsity 1 squads Sir Winston Churchill, A.N. Myer, Stamford and Grimsby.

One or two of the lower-population schools may opt to play up in the higher league, but that won't be known until the football coaches meet in June, Rode said.

Defending Varsity 1 champion Churchill can't wait for the season to begin.

"There is probably no perfect scenario in aligning the 26 high school football programs in Niagara, but population size seems to make sense," coach Peter Partridge said. "This new league is definitely in the best interest of our kids at Sir Winston."

Particularly intriguing to Partridge is rebuilding a rivalry with Denis Morris.

"It's a complete shame that we haven't played Denis Morris since 1989 as they are our natural rivals down the street. Many generations have missed out on this once-great rivalry. Our players and our alumni can't wait to renew the battle."

As for three-down football, Partridge says adjustments will have to be made on offence and defence, and the passing game and special teams play will increase in importance.

"However, the fundamentals of football don't change as we still need to out-hit, out-block, out-shed, and out-tackle our opposition," he said.

One big concern with regards to football leagues by populations are the obvious mismatches it creates. In the lower league, it will be difficult for a school like Eastdale to compete with bigger schools like Holy Cross, Westlane, Myer and Simcoe. And in the higher league, local football fans are already cringing at the thought of a game between Lakeshore Catholic and Grimsby.

"Everyone agreed they are going to try and help Grimsby out as much as possible," Rode said. "They're not going to use their starters, they're not going to run up the score and there was even some people who phoned Grimsby and told them that.

"And we're going to make that known at the coaches meeting: 'Let's not try to kill their program but help them through it.' "

#### TRANSFER RULES CHANGES

Also discussed were changes to the transfer rules that were recently adopted by the Ontario Federation of School Athletic Associations and will be implemented by the local association. Eliminated from the transfer categories are being able to transfer to another school because a certain course wasn't offered at the athlete's former school and a transfer because of failed intervention strategies. An example of the latter would be a student transferring because of bullying.

The failed intervention transfer request was rare because of the documentation required, but the NRHSAA's transfer committee dealt with many requests to transfer to take a course at another school.

"There would be several per transfer meeting, but we turned them down because you can't transfer for just one course. It has to be a series or courses, but a lot of kids were trying," Rode said.

Unsuccessful transfer candidates were advised they were allowed to play any sport they wanted at their new school, provided they hadn't played it the previous season at their old school.

OFSAA decided to change the course portion of the transfer policy because there were many inconsistencies across the province and the provincial association was facing increased costs because of court challenges, Rode said.