

# Numbers alone can't level playing field

By BERND FRANKE

Niagara high schools are discovering not everything automatically becomes equal once the playing field is levelled in football.

While a change to three from four downs on a region-wide basis affects all schools that are not used to moving the chains under Canadian rules which emphasize passing, realignment based entirely on student population is only hurting those programs in the top division that have never benefitted from having a junior team.

On Thursday, A.N. Myer, Stamford and Westlane entered Week 5 action a combined 1-11 competing against the likes of Lakeshore Catholic, Notre Dame and Saint Paul in the Triple A league for schools with 900 or more students.

The only win scored by these three newcomers occurred two weeks into the eight-game schedule when Stamford defeated Myer 15-6.

In their three games against schools that have benefitted from built-in farm systems -- i.e. junior teams - the Marauders have been outscored 161-0 on their way to falling to 0-4 in their inaugural year competing in Niagara's premier division.

Included in those lopsided losses Myer has suffered was a 65-0 setback last Saturday to Lakeshore, thankfully on the road.

The Stamford Hornets have also felt the sting of playing against the top teams in Niagara, all while getting used to a three-down game plan that has effectively reduced the margin of error in the offensive huddle by 25% this year.

With a student population of 650 and eligible to play in the 501-to-899-student Double A division, the misery 0-4 Westlane is suffering in Triple A is self-inflicted. Rather than be the lone Niagara Falls entry in the lower division, the Spartans opted to play up to maintain crosstown rivalries with Myer, St. Michael, Saint Paul and Stamford.

For Westlane, the first half of the Triple A season has been a painful reminder that you should always be careful what you wish for.

In comparison, the disparity in competition levels in the Single A and Double A have not been as pronounced. Some teams are much stronger than others, of course, but that can be explained by the cyclical nature of high school sports, an arena in which the window of opportunity can close in as few as two years.

Realignment based entirely on school size may yet turn out to be the fairest formula for high school football in Niagara. Overcoming these growing pains while programs progress along the learning curve will take time, perhaps years.

In the interim, the losses will keep piling up, threatening with each demoralizing debacle to trample on the very seeds that need to be nurtured.

Rome wasn't built in a day, nor were the championship-calibre senior high school football programs at Lakeshore, Notre Dame and Saint Paul. They were only able to begin sustaining a level of success season after season after they invested several years of commitment in building a junior team as the base for a strong varsity program.

When the pigskin powers that are sit down after the season to rehash what occurred on the gridiron during Year 1 of realignment and three-down football, they need to remember that Triple A programs, like players, need time to develop. Schools that never had strong junior programs can't be expected to be on a level playing field with Lakeshore, Notre Dame and Saint Paul just because they have a predetermined number of students.

High school football isn't just the mathematics of a realignment formula, it's history as well.