

# All-sport leagues ill serve football

Watch District One football long enough and you get the impression that you are watching a dinosaur. If there is a more outmoded arrangement than what passes for football scheduling in District One, then it must be the steam engine or the sailing ship.

Simply put, the good teams around here don't play each other often enough to get really good. The current system, in which conferences are based on geography, short-changes the players, the coaches and the fans. The fact that there rarely are more than two good teams in a conference means that there generally will be a total of one interesting game per conference per year.

And administrators wonder why attendance is down and interest is dying. They might as well pack away the pads and let everyone play soccer. If you are going to have nothing but dull games, you might as well have them in a dull sport.

Let's get one thing straight up front: This is not a great high school football area. It's pretty good. There are some good individual teams. But there are not nearly enough of them to produce enough quality games.

Reorganization has gone on for nearly a decade in other areas of the state, so it isn't impossible. It hasn't happened here, though, and the area is missing the attendant benefits — more community interest and a greater willingness to fund the programs — because the leagues are set up for the benefit of the schools' overall athletic programs, and that works to the detriment of football.

It's time for administrators to realize that football is a different sport, that what is right for gymnastics or swimming isn't necessarily good for football. A league may be perfectly OK for baseball or tennis or field hockey or basketball and still be downright lousy for football.

Most principals and athletic directors like the idea of a league that includes all sports because that means that scheduling is easy. But the concept of an all-sports league doesn't properly serve football.

Which brings us to the point: If District One is serious about football, it badly needs an intelligent realignment. The current setup just won't do it.

What this area needs is a Southeastern Pennsylvania Football Association. Every District One school with a football team could remain in its current league for every other sport, but the scheduling and league

By DON MCKEE



On high schools

affiliations for football would be determined by the size of the schools.

There are 65 schools in District One that field varsity football teams. Two will disappear next fall, with Swarthmore and Nether Providence merging into Strath Haven while Langhorne and Maple Point recombine to become Neshaminy again.

The 63 football schools that will be left could be divided into four classes based on size, with 16 in each of three classes and 15 in the fourth. Each of the classes then could be divided into two leagues of seven or eight teams, and those leagues could be based at least partly on geography so as to keep travel costs to a minimum. In other words, each class would be divided into North and South or East and West or whatever made the most sense.

In the eight-team leagues, each team would play seven league games. In the seven-team leagues, each would play six. That would permit scheduling flexibility for schools with a geographical rival not of comparable size or not in District One (e.g., Ridley-Interboro, Norristown-Bishop Kenrick).

At season's end, if everyone agreed, the winners of the two leagues in each class could play off to provide a single champion for Class AAAA or Class AAA or whatever.

The strength of the feeling against any sort of football playoff in District One is such that a full-fledged playoff system will not become reality in the foreseeable future. But a one-game playoff in each class between the league champions should not offend too many principals by raising the specter of statewide play, and it might actually get some people involved in a school activity, too.

But best of all would be the sense of pride that would be developed among players whose teams climbed to a championship by playing the other good teams. Under those circumstances, coaches could actually mimic actor John Houseman by saying, "We got our record the old-fashioned way — we earned it."