

Power shifting away from SOL National

FOLSOM — It hadn't happened in a generation of players. So when Neshaminy coach Mark Schmidt was reminded that his club's semifinal exit marked the end of the 11-year run of the Suburban One League as District One champions, he seemed a bit stunned for a second.

"Kind of a bummer, huh?" Schmidt said.

When you have been a part of the most dominating league in Pennsylvania football over the course of the past decade, you understand the bar has been set pretty high.

This time, it was a little too much for the SOL National Conference to handle. And Ridley's 27-7 victory over the Redskins on Friday night could be a signal that the pendulum that had been headed north for so long could finally be ready to swing back toward the southern part of District One.

The conference that has produced five state championships and two other state finalists over the past 11 years will finally be able to enjoy a basketball season in its totality when the district title game takes place Friday night between the Green Raiders and West Chester Henderson.

However, this isn't an overnight occurrence that is taking place here. When you're the hunted for so long, the hunters eventually get to you. But the National Conference didn't need camouflage all those years. The teams could just hide behind a tree and nobody could ever find them.

Consider that from 1999 to 2004, the National Conference's record in district playoff games against non-Suburban One League opponents was 12-1. (Ridley's 2002 win over Neshaminy was the one flaw in that equation.)

If you add in the Eastern final games for the right to play for a state title, that record improves to 17-2. (Austin Scott's Parkland squad beat North Penn at Heartbreak Ridge in the '02 East finale.)

During that time frame, CB West and Neshaminy went to two state title games and North Penn went to one. All three schools earned the title belts in Hershey once.

But now, it's like they are running through the gaming reserve in big orange vests with antlers and bull's-eyes on the back.

Since 2005, the National Conference's record against

Local view

By Kevin Cooney



non-SOL opponents in districts is 8-5. If you want to extend this out further and include Bethlehem Liberty's wins in the Eastern finals in 2005 and 2006, the record is 8-7. There have been no state championship game appearances out of the National since Neshaminy was whipped by Pittsburgh Central Catholic in 2004.

One's an accident ... two's a trend ... three is an issue.

So what gives? Perhaps it's just a natural order of change: Football has always been a cyclical thing that relies on incoming classes with natural height, weight and ability. Perhaps the Ridleys of the world have just found a right mix that's worked for them over the past few years.

But there's also a bit of a slide in the level of talent within its own conference as well. There was one super player to draw Division I interest in the National Conference this year in Eric Reynolds at Central Bucks South. Oh, there are good ones (Justin Kinney, Jason Ulmer) and very good ones (Kevin Morton). But there isn't a steady stream of BCS schools flocking to Montgomery and Bucks counties these days.

In 2007, Neshaminy was a good football team — not a great one. Ditto with CB South and North Penn.

Plus, teams like Ridley, Henderson and both Downingtowns right now seem to have the edge in team speed and offensive attack capability. Watching the Green Raiders on Friday night was like watching a really good college offense. They used the speed and precision on the outside to help set up their running and passing games.

You would almost wonder if the way the National plays — the bruising, pound-the-ball-down-your-throat style — isn't in need of a freshening up. It's great when a team can run the ball down people's throats effectively like Pennsbury did last year. But in the end, perhaps that style has taken the energy out of teams when they get deep into November.

Kevin Cooney is a staff writer for The Intelligencer. He can be reached at kcooney@phillyBurbs.com.