

FOOTBALL/SOCCER

A monster of a football league is born

On a serene spring afternoon last week, during a 2½-hour meeting at a Horsham restaurant, the Philadelphia area's fiercest, fastest and finest scholastic football league became even more of a football force.

Suburban One League principals Tuesday approved a plan that would realign its football divisions effective with the 1991 season. The league will be divided into three enrollment-based divisions — 10 in the division with the largest schools, seven in the division with medium-size schools and six in the division with the smallest schools.

The big-school division is to be composed of the 12 members of the existing Patriot and Colonial Divisions of the National Conference minus Harry S Truman and Pennridge, which will drop into the middle division. Recently, Truman and Penridge have become enmeshed in the division basement: In the last three seasons, these two schools combined have won 4 of 48 league games.

And thus was created what could be called the Crunch Conference: Abington, Bensalem, Central Bucks East, Central Bucks West, Council Rock, Neshaminy, Norristown, North Penn, Pennsbury and William Tennent. Not a terrible team in the bunch.

"Now there's no breather," said Ray Coleman, the league's executive secretary. "Unless a team is down one year, everybody's playing a toughie every week."

By DAVE CALDWELL



Even before the realignment, the Suburban One National had been considered the area's premier football conference. No contest. Sorry, Catholic League fans.

"You really can't appreciate it [the Suburban One League] until you're in it," said William Tennent coach Bill Saybolt, who was the head coach at North Catholic for seven years before he moved to Tennent last year.

"We hit the first week of camp — that's all we can afford," said Abington coach Doug Moister, whose team finished 10-1 last year. "The level of play is just so intense that we can't risk losing kids during the week. Only by Thursday is everybody back to 90 percent. The first day back [after a game], we have a lot of sore kids."

Moister should expect to have even more sore kids in 1991. Suburban One National teams now play eight league games — five against the teams in their division and three "crossover" games against teams in the other division within the conference. In the fall of '91, each team in the Crunch Confer-

ence will play the other nine teams one time in its league schedule. Ugh.

Last year, seven of the 10 Crunch Conference teams appeared in The Inquirer Southeastern Pennsylvania Top 10 at least once: Abington, C.B. East, C.B. West, Council Rock, Neshaminy, Norristown and Pennsbury. Outside the conference last year, the 10 teams — eight of which had winning records — won 18 of 26 games.

"With this new league, when you go from the top to the bottom and look at the 10 teams, there can't be a football league that compares," said Bill Travers, who came to North Penn from Bishop Egan six years ago.

Moister was much more succinct. "Facing that kind of schedule is brutal," he said.

Creating the Crunch Conference was not the league's first priority when a 13-member realignment committee originally met in January. According to Coleman, the league wanted to create a more competitive atmosphere for Pennridge and Truman, plus the league's smallest schools — Upper Moreland, Lower Moreland and Springfield.

"The whole basis for everything," Coleman said, "was to make it possible for everyone to compete. ... Truman was moved down because they just couldn't cut it right now. Same with Pennridge."

So Pennridge and Truman

dropped into what is now being called Division B. They will join Cheltenham, Souderton, Quakertown, Plymouth-Whitemarsh and either Upper Dublin or Methacton (whichever has the larger enrollment as of Sept. 30.)

Following Lower Moreland's announcement Tuesday that it plans to defect to the Bicentennial League, the six smallest schools remaining in the Suburban One League were grouped in Division C. Included in that division are Springfield, Upper Moreland, Upper Merion, Hatboro-Horsham, Wissahickon and either Upper Dublin or Methacton.

Now, everyone is satisfied — even the coaches in the Crunch Conference whose teams have not done particularly well recently. "Hey, if they're going to give me a schedule, I'll play it," said Saybolt, whose Tennent team was 3-8 last year and won only 4 of 22 games the two years before he arrived.

Said Travers, whose team finished 2-9 last year: "Now, everybody's going to play everybody, so you're going to have a real champ. None of these crossovers. With playing only three teams from the other division now, people say, 'Well, you played three easier teams from the other division.'"

"And the thing that happens now is that everybody likes to have a couple of easy teams on the schedule. Crush people, play everybody and be happy. But if you want to be competitive, you have

to play the best."

And playing the best every weekend may make players for even the worst teams in the Crunch Conference more appealing to college scouts, who already have made Suburban One League game films a must-see.

"From my point of view," said Travers, "it's going to be a challenge coaching, but I think from the players' point of view, it's going to be a challenge, too. There are going to be people on the collegiate level — and I don't care if it's Division I, II or III — who will be saying, 'This guy's got to be a pretty good player to be outstanding in this league.' And I think as a football player, you like to get excited about the game you play next. I just think there are going to be great football games."

Which will make qualifying for the state football playoffs so much more difficult for the teams in the Crunch Conference.

"There's a lot of talent in this league. It's scary," Moister said. "You could go into the season with a very talented team, and come out with a 6-5 record."

But if the Suburban One League can realign quickly, could the establishment of a District 1 playoff really be all that far behind?

"I think the coaches are in favor of it," Travers said. "We can sit down and come up with an amicable way to do it."