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Reductions, Defections Spelling End of Central Vermont League

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School consolidation and shrinking enrollments in the Green Mountain State's high schools seem to have claimed another victim, this time marking the end of the Central Vermont League.

Sharon Academy athletic director Blake Fabrikant, Rivendell Academy athletic director Ross Convertino and White River Valley Union athletic director Sean Murphy all confirmed recently that their athletic departments will be switching affiliations to the Marble Valley League starting next fall, a move that effectively ends a conference that was decimated in the last two years by school consolidation via Act 46. Only Blue Mountain Union, Craftsbury Academy and Twinfield Union remain in the CVL, a conference that had as many as nine schools two years ago.

Fabrikant, who also has served as the CVL's vice president for the last six years, said the decision to switch was a difficult one considering Sharon's long-standing relationship with both the league and its commissioner, Blue Mountain athletic director Todd Powers. But it also was a necessary move, he said, with school closures and consolidations effectively giving his athletic department no other choice.

"I grew up in Thetford, which was originally in the CVL. TSA has been in the CVL since 2003, in its infancy," Fabrikant said on Tuesday. "It's a league that's sentimental. It was a great little league, the fact that we were all so close in proximity, all competitive with one another.

"There was just no one left to play. ... It was out of necessity."

For years, most of Vermont's athletic departments belonged to one of three conferences: the Northern Vermont Athletic Conference, which represents many of the state's northern schools like Champlain Valley, Enosburg Falls and Colchester; the MVL, which represents many of the state's large and small southern schools like Springfield, Woodstock and Hartford; and the CVL, which was made of several smaller schools near the New Hampshire border.

A conference's primary role is to act as a built-in scheduling mechanism, allowing schools of similar sizes to play a consistent regular-season conference schedule for specific sports: field hockey, boys and girls soccer, boys and girls basketball, baseball and softball. Football, hockey and track and field are exceptions in Vermont; the Vermont Interscholastic Football League, for example, sets football schedules for the state's 32 football-playing schools.

New Hampshire schools, as a comparison, create their divisional schedules within the New Hampshire Interscholastic Athletic Association and do not have a conference affiliation. Vermont teams are awarded conference titles and receive all-conference recognition after the season but ultimately compete for state titles based on divisional alignment within the Vermont Principals Association.

But the world has drastically changed for the CVL. It had nine members two years ago, including Whitcomb Rochester, Chelsea and South Royalton. Three of those schools — Whitcomb, Rochester and Chelsea — have since shut their doors due to Act 46; South Royalton and Whitcomb united to form White River Valley. The league currently only has six schools with a full complement of athletic offerings. Cabot has since shut down its athletic programs, and Craftsbury has struggled to find athletic participation over the last few years.

The result, Fabrikant said, was an unreasonably difficult scheduling process. Each conference allows for athletic directors to organize both conference and non-conference games in putting together schedules.

"I had an unbelievably hard time filling out our girls soccer schedule this year," Fabrikant said. "We had to play Poultney, had to play Winooski at Winooski. It was piecemeal. ... I kept asking around. I didn't know where I could get more games."

Sharon's girls soccer team, which competes in VPA Division IV, played 14 games this fall, seven of which were against CVL opponents: two games vs. Twinfield, Blue Mountain and Rivendell and one with White River Valley. The Phoenix also played two games against D-II's Stratton Mountain School, losing both games by lopsided scores.

"The main purpose of a league is having a bulk of your schedule guaranteed," said Jeff Moreno, athletic director at Hartford High, an MVL school. "You can't be scrambling to fill schedules. And when schools are dropping out of the league, or schools are not having

teams, it can get really tricky.”

The CVL, with its limited number of teams, made filling out a full schedule difficult on its athletic directors. It also shrunk the number of opponents a CVL team could play in a single season, which put competitive CVL teams at a disadvantage come playoff time.

“In the CVL, half of our schools are Division III, half are D-IV,” Rivendell AD Convertino said. “We were D-III in basketball last year, playing D-IV schools. All of a sudden, you get to the playoffs and you’re playing much tougher teams at the top of D-III. It just doesn’t prepare you for the playoffs when you’re not playing at the right level all season long.

“I would spend six to eight months trying to create a schedule for one team with games in the conference,” he added. “It’s challenging to fill a full 14-game soccer schedule or a 20-game basketball schedule.”

Rivendell’s girls soccer team, which competes in VPA Division III in the state tournament, has gone 25-6-1 over its last two seasons, winning back-to-back CVL titles in that span. But eighth-year Raptors head coach Tim Goodwin said he’s noticed a tougher road to the D-III final in the last few seasons, partly due to his team’s regular season schedule against mostly D-IV foes. It does little to prepare his athletes for the speed and physicality of some of D-III’s more competitive teams.

“It’s hard just for Rivendell on its own; we’re one of the smallest schools in D-III,” Goodwin said on Thursday. “I feel like we make it to the quarters and it just gets harder and harder every year. Being in the CVL, currently with all D-IV schools, we went undefeated the last two years, which I think is still a great accomplishment. But playing and practicing for those CVL teams, and then practicing for teams like Peoples or Stowe, it’s different. Moving the MVL, I’m hoping that the quality of competition will be much stronger.”

Goodwin’s Raptors will play all D-III opponents in the MVL next fall including Otter Valley, Green Mountain, Leland & Gray, Bellows Falls and Windsor.

“I think there definitely is going to be a transition,” Goodwin said. “I imagine the teams will be more physical than they have in the past — I mean in a good way, a good soccer way. ... It’ll be fun to be challenged in a different way.”

White River AD Murphy, who started at the newly formed school this summer, said switching leagues gave the athletic department one less thing to worry about.

“The wheels were already in motion for a progression to be made,” Murphy said on Tuesday, adding that he looked at both the MVL and the NVAC before settling on the former. “Other schools in the conference were looking at other options even before my arrival here. Once we had a sense of what was involved, we had a lot of questions about that conference and what the implications would be.

"It's a weird year (for us), by most measurements," he added. "There are a lot of gaps to be filled. Having a solid schedule a year out, 10 months out, was very appealing."

Murphy, Convertino and Fabrikant hope the move will still keep some of rivalries intact.

Tim Brown, the former athletic director at Mount Anthony who now serves as the executive direction and commissioner for the MVL, said the addition of CVL schools has been in the works since last fall. The MVL will have 22 schools with the addition of Rivendell, Sharon and White River Valley for the 2019-20 school year.

The move also insulates the MVL from any future school consolidation. Ludlow's Black River, one of the MVL's smallest schools, is scheduled to close by 2020.

"Personally, it's a win-win," Brown said on Thursday. "The Marble Valley League has a real shortage of Division A (larger schools) and Division D (smaller schools). We've had to rely on a lot of crossover of divisions in scheduling to fill out those schedules. I think the bigger our league is, the more flexibility we have to move teams around."

The remaining CVL schools — Craftsbury, Twinfield and Blue Mountain — will be left stranded without conference affiliation if nothing changes by next fall. The NVAC is not accepting new schools until the 2020-21 season, according to Fabrikant; their isolated locations far from many of the MVL's southern schools take a full CVL-MVL merger off the table.

The loss of the CVL, Fabrikant said, is the end of an era.

"It was just such a great little league," he said. "There was a localness that we appreciated. The proximity of all the schools bred familiarity over the years. You don't get that anymore in athletics, where the kids all know each other. I really looked forward to our league meetings. I don't think many ADs can say that."

Moreno, the Hartford AD who previously worked as the athletic director at South Royalton, said the CVL's uniqueness came from its rivalries. He grew up in Hartford and played sports in another CVL — the Connecticut Valley League, an all-Upper Valley league made up of both New Hampshire and Vermont teams like Lebanon, Hanover, Windsor and Woodstock.

Those local ties have since been lost. Vermont schools can now add the CVL to the list.

"(The Central Vermont League) was all local, close rivalries — SoRo, Whitcomb, Chelsea, Rochester, all right on top of each other," Moreno said. "You just got great atmospheres for those games. A lot of cousins playing cousins, a lot of history. And after the game, kids generally would go and hang out with each other."

"From a historic standpoint, it's just another domino to fall from Act 46. It's sad to see them tip over. You don't see Chelsea Red Devil uniforms, no Rochester Rocket uniforms. The CVL, that was a fun league."

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