

Football schedule shaken up

By Jordan Hartshorn, The StarPhoenix August 31, 2011



Saskatoon high school football at Gordie Howe Bowl on Oct. 27, 2010, file photo
Photograph by: Greg Pender, The StarPhoenix

Saskatoon's high school football squads will be facing some unfamiliar opposition this year.

Since 2007, the Saskatoon Secondary School's Athletic Directorate (SSSAD) has divided football into 3A and 4A divisions, based on enrollment numbers at each school, with teams only playing outfits in their respective classification. This season, however, the SSSAD is implementing crossover contests to facilitate more competitive games and hopefully avoid lopsided outcomes.

"It's not traditionally how things have been, but the goal in mind is to give every kid a positive experience," said SSSAD athletics consultant Brad Smith. "There's been such a change in the number and size of schools over the past five years ... to get the best out of our divisions we thought we'd try something like this.

"I think it's the best thing for high school football right now."

Plans for scheduling changes came about in the spring, and were then put in place by outgoing athletics consultant Jeff Colquhoun and a committee of high school football coaches. Other options were explored, but the crossover method was deemed the most manageable and achievable.

Based on coaches' evaluations in the pre-season, weaker and stronger teams from

both divisions cross over and face similar-skilled opponents during the seven-game regular season. Also, teams like Bedford Road and Mount Royal, who combined for one win in the 3A league last season, face each other on multiple occasions in 2011.

In theory, more competitive games, regardless of skill level, will help keep kids interested in the sport.

"If we continued with the setup we had for the past few years, we were going to lose some teams," said Marion Graham Falcons head coach Bill Eng. "It's tough to go back and coach your kids when you're losing games by 40 or 50 points.

"It might sound hokey to some people ... but if we truly believe that athletics is for everybody and not just about winning and losing, then we have to have something like this."

As a result, the playoff format will be altered as well.

The regular-season standings, which used to operate as a strict measure for post-season qualification, will instead function as a guideline for a series of coaches' rankings. At season's end, coaches from both leagues will rank teams based on regular-season performances to decide playoff participation.

Eight of nine teams qualify in the 4A league, while all six teams make it in the 3A. The winner of each league's playoff will represent the city at 3A or 4A provincials.

The introduction of such a subjective measure could ruffle feathers, but Smith is optimistic the city's "tight knit" coaching community can remain as fair and objective as possible.

"What's beautiful about our coaching group is that we police ourselves," said Eng. "We want teams to have an equal chance at having success and that's why we're doing things this way."

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