

New Haven Register

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A decade in the planning, SCC makes debut today

The headline reads: " `Mega conference' stirs interest." The accompanying picture shows Bob Laemel, New Haven's supervisor of athletics, in a shirt and tie. The quote from Laemel proclaims the response to be "very, very positive."

The date: Jan. 29, 1984.

The long and winding road at long last has reached its destination. Ten years of optimism, stoicism, skepticism, determination, exasperation, confrontation (almost to the point of litigation), patience, diligence and perseverance come to fruition today. The Southern Connecticut Conference - for years referred to as the New Haven Area Superconference - will open its cover, crack its bindings and begin writing its chapter in the history of Connecticut high school athletics.

Twenty schools from Madison to Middletown to Fairfield will compete in 18 sports in the SCC. More important, those schools are set to begin a new social, academic and cultural relationship.

"Personally, this is one of the most satisfying feelings I've ever had in my work in athletic administration," said Laemel, who once was basketball coach and athletic director at now-defunct Lee High. "No matter what pitfalls we've had to (endure to) get there, the bottom line is, we're there.

The Southern Connecticut Conference is a reality." But such a massive change could not occur without stirring some trepidation - and confusion. Athletic directors are swamped, coaches are scrambling and students don't know what to expect. Here, then, are answers to some of the most-asked questions about the new league.

Why a superconference? To save the District League. At one time, the District was arguably the most powerful conference in the state. (In the 1940s and into the 1950s, Hillhouse and West Haven used to play a Thanksgiving Day football game in the Yale Bowl, drawing crowds of 20,000 or more.) But with Notre Dame of West Haven leaving in the 1970s and Lee closing in 1985, the District was left with four teams: Hillhouse, Cross, Hamden and West Haven.

That made scheduling impossible. Laemel literally had to travel the state pleading for opponents to bail his schools out. "We started applying to the Housy and the Shoreline (Conferences) and the FCIAC and made all these inquiries and petitioned the CIAC and called the superintendents together," Laemel said. "We were on our hands and knees saying, `Hey, we're out there; there are four schools that need your help.' "

Why not a superconference? Not everyone with the opportunity to join this league did so. The Cross County Interscholastic Athletic Conference, which includes seven schools from Milford, Stratford, Fairfield and Bridgeport, balked at the idea and will merge with the Western Connecticut Conference next year. The reason: the WCC is more accessible to the CCIAC schools than some schools in the SCC. Also, the size of the WCC schools is more in line with those in the CCIAC. Also, Seymour joins the Naugatuck Valley League this year, making it the only Housatonic League school not to move to the SCC. Geography was a major factor in that decision. Of course, the fact a school has joined the SCC doesn't mean all its coaches are happy about it. Many of the malcontents are in the former Housatonic League, long one of the pre-eminent leagues in Connecticut.

"This (SCC) is a superintendent's league," North Haven football and baseball coach Bob DeMayo said. "I have the longest tenure of any coach in the Housatonic League, and I hate to see the league trashed after 75 years. It was the most competitive league around."

If they made a movie about this conference, what would it be called? How about "A River Runs Through It"? Originally, the SCC's three divisions were going to be called Housatonic, District and Shoreline, in deference to the leagues from which most of the SCC schools came.

But that raised the possibility of confusion between the SCC's Shoreline Division and the still-existing Shoreline Conference. Thus, the District and Shoreline Divisions will now be called Quinnipiac and Hammonasset, respectively. All three divisions are now named after Connecticut rivers.

Will the SCC have division champions or conference champions? There is some division on this question. Football, boys soccer, softball, boys tennis and hockey will crown division champions but no conference champion. Cross country, track, gymnastics and golf will have championship matches or meets. Girls soccer, field hockey, swimming, wrestling, girls tennis and lacrosse will crown conference champions on the basis of regular-season records. Volleyball, basketball and baseball will have conference championship tournaments.

Incidentally, the number of divisions will vary with the sport. Three divisions will be used in sports where each division has at least four teams. In hockey, there will be two divisions. Otherwise, there will be one division. These divisions sure do know how to multiply.

Why are athletic directors so much more comfortable with the new setup than coaches? Because the AD's are the ones who set up the new setup. With so many decisions to be made on so many questions, only so many voices can be heard. Thus, during the preliminary stages, athletic directors provided the direction.

"What the football coach says is going to be different from what the soccer coach says or what the field hockey coach says. We (athletic directors) wanted some threads of consistency," Guilford AD Chip Dorwin said. "The coaches haven't had an opportunity to see the entire picture, and what might be good for one sport might really cause problems with the bigger picture."

Were coaches pleased about being shut out of that dialogue? Is Tom pleased with Roseanne? "Scheduling is very important to your team. I don't like to have it forced down my throat," Cheshire swimming coach Ed Aston said. "Looking at our girls' schedule right now, traditionally Amity, Cheshire and Branford have been the three best teams (in the Housatonic League) and we've always swum each other toward the end of the season. "Now my opening meet is against Amity and my next meet's against Branford. I don't think that's necessarily good for the league."

Is the Shoreline Conference better off without Hand and Guilford? It depends on whom you ask. Certainly the departure of those schools will give other schools a chance to win league titles. In each of the last two years, Guilford alone won 10 of a possible 18 Shoreline championships. Hand won a total of 11 titles in those two years.

But the Shoreline, which added Wheeler of North Stonington and Hale-Ray, in the Moodus section of East Haddam, clearly has lost stature. "I'm sick with this (Shoreline) conference as we have it right now," Valley Regional of Deep River girls cross country coach Lou Luciani said. "The only way you get better is to compete against people who are better than you. If you compete against weak people, it doesn't help you at all."

What rivalries are helped most by the new league? In the past, two of Notre Dame of West Haven's biggest rivalries - with Hamden (which the Green Knights play in the annual Thanksgiving Day football game) and West Haven - have only been for bragging rights. Now, with all three teams in the same division, those games have true import.

What rivalries are hurt the most? No question the Hillhouse-Cross rivalry won't be the same. The New Haven schools have provided this city with some great matchups through the years, but now that they're in separate divisions, those games will lose some luster. One reason the schools were split is size. In 1993-94, Cross had 257 more students than its crosstown

counterpart, so Cross is in the Quinnipiac Division with large schools such as Hamden and West Haven. Still, all parties will make sure Cross and Hillhouse go on competing. "You can never take away from the importance of the games," Cross AD Pete Barbarito said. "It's a rivalry and it will always exist as long as the two schools are there."

Unfortunately, the same can't be said for the Ansonia-Shelton football game (played 65 times through the years) or the Notre Dame-St. Joseph of Trumbull basketball game. Ansonia remained in the Naugatuck Valley League; St. Joseph is about to join the FCIAC. But that is just part of the price for change.

And despite the nagging questions and lingering gripes, the SCC is widely perceived as a change for the better. "I would say this is probably one of the most diverse conferences in the state," Branford Principal Ed Higgins, the SCC's president, said. "Once the idea was here and the people had signed on, it was just total cooperation. Everybody was willing to give a little bit to make sure this thing got off the ground."

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