

SPORTS

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SCL out of NBL's badminton shadow

Four decades since competitive high school badminton was launched locally, the Sonoma County League will have its own badminton pennant.

Starting this season, the five Division 1 schools with enrollment of 1,401 or more students — Santa Rosa, Montgomery, Windsor, Maria Carrillo and Casa Grande — will vie for the North Bay League title. The six smaller schools, Petaluma, Analy, Elsie Allen, Piner, Rose-



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land University Prep and, for the first time, Roseland Collegiate Prep, will compete for the brand new SCL badminton title.

The sigh of relief from the SCL side of the equation is nearly audible.

For years — for decades — Montgomery and Santa Rosa have been the giants of the sport, winning title after title. Montgomery has had the stranglehold the longest, but Santa Rosa won the title last year and has increasingly staked its claim as the

area's best.

That intense competition has left little oxygen left for any other school in the mix.

The NBL first launched competitive badminton in the early 1970s and since then, any school that started a team was pulled under the NBL umbrella.

It was a numbers game. For years, too few schools offered the sport to make full NBL/SCL leagues viable. But interest has slowly increased and this year reached the breaking point when Roseland Collegiate Prep asked to join the mix, a move that would have pushed the total

number of participating schools to 11.

School officials from both leagues debated the issue in the fall and principals voted to move to two leagues: the Div. 1 NBL and Div. 2 SCL.

"I was thrilled because I thought it gave us a chance. Division 2 schools never had a chance to win a pennant," said Donna McKenna, a badminton coach at Petaluma High.

"Badminton has been dominated by Montgomery and Santa Rosa for years," she said.

And the bigees welcomed the

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Sport draws nontraditional athletes

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change, too.

"I'm excited," Santa Rosa coach Brett Williams said. "I was all for it. My season is built around playing Montgomery. I went to Montgomery and played badminton there. I love the competition."

"The North Bay League schools were the stronger schools," said NBL commissioner Marie Sugiyama. "Sometimes they would overwhelm the other schools because the competition wasn't quite the same."

The change highlights the growing popularity of the sport described as different and quirky.

"If you ask any phys. ed teacher, it's one of the most popular sports; kids at any level can play it," Sugiyama said.

She ought to know.

Sugiyama coached Montgomery's dominating badminton program for years beginning in the early '70s.

"Badminton tends to have players that are not involved in any other sports," she said.

But that's not to say they aren't involved.

Badminton has the reputation as a draw for smart kids and kids who are active in other activities, many times to the detriment of sport.

"Badminton is a really different sport," Petaluma's McKenna said. "It's probably the only sport you will see that when kids aren't playing they are in the stands doing their homework."

Squads brag on team grade point averages as much as they do wins and losses.

"Most of my kids have never played a sport," Santa Rosa's Williams said. "They don't know how to compete. Literally."

So Williams has to not only teach student-athletes the athletic side of the game, but also the competitive nature of a game that is considered the world's fastest sport. Birdie speed has been recorded at more than 200 mph. The top recorded tennis serve? Just more than 160 mph.

"It's OK to beat the other person. It's a foreign concept to some of these kids," Williams said.

So, too, can be the idea of team sport trumping other obligations — rule No. 1 for so many athletes in more mainstream sports.

Badminton coaches say they compete for their kids' time with theater, homework, music lessons — just about everything comes before sport practice.

Can you imagine a football coach allowing that?

"Most badminton kids, it's not their first priority," Williams said. "I'm all about adapting. If you want to be successful in life, you have to adapt."

So Williams opens the gym for four hours for practice. Sure there is a set time for JV practice and a set time for varsity, but Williams will take the kids when he can get them.

McKenna said she battles the same thing — athletes who drift in and out of the sport or who struggle to commit.

As a draw, she sells the speed, the agility and athleticism displayed when it's played at the highest level.

"I think it answers a need for that kid who isn't fiercely competitive and doesn't like a contact sport," she said. "It's strategy and finesse ... that is what the sport is about."

And for a whole batch of newly independent Division 2 schools, it's now about winning league.

The first-ever SCL badminton banner is now up for grabs.

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