

Port High, Saukville youth programs working together after tough talk last season

Members of the Port Washington High School athletic staff who nearly seven months ago expressed dissatisfaction with the Pirates' football feeder program — the Saukville Rebels — and warned that the high school coaches were prepared to field their own youth team said this week the two organizations are now working together to improve both programs.

“Our plan is that the Rebels will continue to be a feeder program,” Port High Athletic Director Thad Gabrielse said Monday. “There will always be things that we disagree about, but what we do agree on is that everything we’re doing is for the benefit of the kids who play football.

“I’d saying we’re taking a positive approach to making this work.”

News in September of the rift between the two football institutions shocked the Port-Saukville football faithful, who for decades have supported the Rebels as fervently as they have the Pirates.

At the time, Gabrielse said the Port High coaching staff was concerned that the Rebels were not doing enough to teach future Pirates the high school team’s offense and defense and that there wasn’t enough emphasis on football fundamentals.

Beyond the technical aspects of the game, Gabrielse said in September, the Port High administration was concerned with the Rebels’ philosophical approach to the game — how coaches deal with players and conduct themselves on the field and how playing time is divided among children.

That shocked Larry Donohue, president of the 54-year-old Rebels program, which fields teams for fifth through eighth-graders.

“I don’t even know where that’s coming from,” Donohue said at the time. “We’ve never cut a single player from our program, and we’ve never turned a kid away because his family couldn’t afford the registration fee. I always found a way to make sure those kids could play.”

Lending urgency to the concerns for Port High officials is declining participation in football. A total of about 80 boys played last season on the high school’s freshman, junior varsity and varsity teams, significantly fewer than in the program’s heyday.

Now, however, many of those concerns are being addressed by both organizations, thanks, Gabrielse said, to Pirates’ head football coach John Bunyan and his Rebels’ counterpart, Al Lopez, who have been meeting regularly.

“In the February meeting, the question of how to help increase the numbers (of players) at the freshman level was addressed,” Gabrielse said. “We’re focusing on how we keep kids

Pirates, Rebels mend rift that divided local football teams

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interested and involved in football.

“It’s not that the Rebels were doing anything wrong, but our coaches have some insights based on what they see and hear.

“And playing time is being addressed.”

Bunyan said the meetings between the coaches of the programs have focused on maintaining the identities of the two long-standing programs while bringing them together in terms of football mechanics and philosophy.

“We’ve had a lot of talks, and they have been very productive in keeping the structure of the two organizations status quo but getting both programs on the same page in terms of offensive and defensive systems, positive coaching and keeping kids interested in football,” Bunyan said.

“Coaching football is a lot of work for youth coaches and my staff, but the good news is we’re working with people who have their hearts in the right spot.”

Bunyan said Pirates’ coaches and players will be more visible at Rebels’ practices and games. He envisions high school players attending Rebels practices occasionally and holding additional clinics and events that bring players of all ages and coaches together on the field.

“I want to build a community of kids excited about football,” Bunyan said. “I want kids to have fun and stay interested in football.”

Donohue is pleased the two programs are working more closely but said he is still perplexed by the sudden breakdown in relations between the organizations last season.

“To tell you the truth, I still don’t know what happened last season,” he said last week. “They (high school athletic staff members) apparently thought we weren’t doing enough to match what the high school team was doing or we weren’t doing it fast enough.

“We really haven’t changed a thing. Working with the high school has been an ongoing process for us. Our intention has always been to do what the high school does, which only makes sense since that’s where our kids will play eventually.

“Either way, everything seems fine now.”