

Time has arrived for the Public League

By KEVIN COONEY

phillyBurbs.com

PHILADELPHIA - Where there normally is the hammering of blocking sleds, there is a steady drilling from jackhammers.

Areas where players plowed through the line now have front-end loaders on them, moving dirt and shifting the ground.

It is so bizarre to stand at the top of Northeast High's Charles Martin Memorial Stadium - a place that was never beautiful but has always been so familiar over the years - and see the green grass being replaced by compressed brown soil and drainage pipes being installed for an artificial turf replacement of the real thing.

Time waits for no man, no stadium and no league.

And this is a different time for the Philadelphia Public League and the PIAA.

•

The excitement in Robert Coleman's voice is bubbling over the phone. This product of Germantown High School always wondered when the day would occur when his beloved league would join the rest of those in the state and compete for a championship.

"We were always happy to keep playing, but we wanted to see if we could do more," said Coleman. "Now, these kids get that chance to do more, and it's a great thing."

The chance arrives this year, when the 105-year old Public League officially changes its name to District XII and starts competing for PIAA championships for the first time ever.

Forty-eight schools, including 10 charter academies under control of the School District, will participate fully. Last year, District XII started competing under PIAA rules but not for state championships.

"We're all set and ready to go," said Coleman, the chairman of District XII. "We're ready to have that championship season."

From the PIAA's perspective, having the Philadelphia quadrant in place finally fills out the state championship puzzle. Only the Philadelphia Catholic and Inter-Academic Leagues remain out of the mix.

"We've had a number of dialogues over the years looking to bring the Philadelphia area in," said Mark Byers, one of the PIAA's assistant executive directors. "It's great to have them fully on board."

It hasn't been without controversy or growing pains. Some teachers within the district felt that things were being rushed and programs were not in place. Others worried that ancient, decaying facilities would fall into disrepair. There is still the problem of hiring coaches to fill out staffs and setting up sports that have not normally been a part of the sports program at a lot of school.

But through the work of Coleman and district president Paul Vallas, among others, things have started to take shape. The improvements at Northeast are part of a \$23 million renovation of gyms and facilities, including the creation of "super-sites" across the city that will handle PIAA championships.

Also to help meet PIAA requirements, District XII set up exams with different hospitals to provide free physicals to all athletes at the start of every season. Also, grades are checked to meet PIAA requirements.

"We're going to be state-of-the-art," said Vincent Thompson, the spokesman for the School District of Philadelphia. "We have made sure that we're giving every one of our kids an opportunity, and that's what it's all about."

"We have become fully compliant with what was expected of us," Coleman said. "We have realigned our entire infrastructure to get into the PIAA, and they've told us that they're happy."

•

They may be happy, but how competitive are they going to be?

In most sports, the Public League will struggle to keep up with their suburban neighbors for the early going. Basketball, track and field and football are where the ground appears to be the most level. But even that could be tough to judge until teams actually step on a field.

"I don't think there's a district out there that's good in just about every sport," Thompson said. "We'll have to see."

The coaching situation is a serious one. At Overbrook High, the staff consisted of just head coach Ken Sturm until Coleman found assistants for him this week. The ultimate goal, according to Coleman, is to have coaching academies set up to train new coaches from the outside and get them into the system.

"We don't have kids who are willing to spend the \$300 to join a Bally's or a YMCA," Coleman said. "But what we're hoping to do is give them a chance, and the best coaching we can possibly give them to make them better."

Where the District XII honchos expect the biggest surge is in the classroom. They see a move into the PIAA as another incentive to keep kids in class.

"Our kids want to accept the academic challenges that being a member of the PIAA presents to them," Coleman said. "We believe truancies will drop because of this. Because when you provide extended challenges, you give kids a great opportunity. This isn't about winning and losing - this is about getting our kids to learn lessons that will help them in life."

Kevin Cooney can be reached at 215-949-4209 or kcooney@phillyBurbs.com.

August 27, 2004 7:38 AM