

# OBSERVER-DISPATCH

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## Oriskany switches to 8-man football

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ORISKANY — One of the area's smallest high schools still playing football will be playing 8-man football this season.

That wasn't the plan at Oriskany, but when only 18 players showed up - six of them in street clothes - for Monday's first day of preseason practice, head coach Jerry Tine said the district decided to join Section III's new 8-man league.

"We were hopeful we could do it. ... We thought we could at least be competitive," Oriskany head coach Jerry Tine said. "But obviously, that didn't work out. A couple of families moved, a couple of kids decided not to come out, and the last couple of years our modified numbers had been dropping, too.

"Instead of trying to start the season with 18 kids and hope nobody gets hurt or misses a practice or two, we just thought this would be in our best interest. So this is where we're at."

Tine said there was some talk of some players from Oriskany possibly playing with longtime Cider Street rival Westmoreland - the schools already have joined forces in boys varsity soccer and modified football.

"But the kids said, 'We want to play football and we want to play together,'" Tine said.

Oriskany played in the National Football Foundation (NFF) - a Section III league formed with hopes of breathing new life into struggling small-school programs - last season and finished 7-2 overall, including a loss in the NFF semifinals. There were six seniors, including school record-setting quarterback Ryan Enos, and a total of 27 players on the 2016 roster.

The state's game-day minimum is 16 players for 11-man football and 14 players for 8-man football, but Tine said that 8-man number might be lowered to 12.

"We thought we were going to have 22, maybe 24 kids this year," said Tine, who believes several other Section III schools have started the preseason with few than 25 players on this year's roster.

Tine said one of those, Class C Pulaski, also has decided to play 8-man football because of low numbers.

“We’re not the only ones in that boat,” Tine said. “Nobody wants to see anybody lose football. ... This is still football and the kids who are here are excited about it.”

According to Tine, Section III will draw up a new schedule for an 8-man football league that now includes Oriskany, Pulaski, New York Mills, Cooperstown, South Lewis and Bishop Grimes. Practice begins Aug. 28 and the season opener is Sept. 23.

Oriskany was scheduled to play in the Class D Central with Beaver River, Morrisville-Eaton, Waterville, Sauquoit Valley and Westmoreland, but now those five teams each have an open date that they will try to fill. Oriskany’s season opener was originally scheduled for Friday, Sept. 1, at Waterville, and the Cider Street Trophy game - at home against Westmoreland - was supposed to be played Saturday, Sept. 9, at Bernie Block Field.

Longtime Westmoreland coach Tim Gates, whose Bulldogs lost that Cider Street Trophy game last year for the first time since 1994, is confident his team’s open date will be filled. “But losing that local rivalry, a game that’s just down the road, that’s what hurts the most,” Gates said. “It’s just unfortunate.”

Hamilton’s football program merged with Morrisville-Eaton a few years ago; now Hamilton players are playing with Waterville.

With low numbers at the modified level as well, Tine isn’t sure what Oriskany’s high school football future holds.

Most likely, “we’ll either be 8-man or have to merge,” he said.

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