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A-HED

Prep Schools Getting Slam Dunked Want Easier League of Their Own

By DAVID ARMSTRONG Staff Reporter of The Wall Street Journal

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WINCHENDON, Mass. -- When Phillips Exeter Academy faces the top basketball teams in the New England Prep School Athletic Conference, coach Malcolm Wesselink jokes that his biggest problem is getting his players not to ask star opponents for autographs.

Hoop stars among the preppies? Don't snicker. The NEPSAC league includes the likes of Martin Iti, a 6-foot-10 junior at the Winchendon School here who has already been scouted by the New York Knicks and San Antonio Spurs. Giedrius Rinkevicius, a 7-foot-2 center, came to Maine to attend Bridgton Academy from basketball-mad Lithuania -- and next year will have a basketball scholarship at the University of Missouri, one of the best college teams in the country.

Then there's Rashad McCants, a slam-dunking guard who made six out of six three-point shots and scored 25 points altogether in New Hampton School's 91-65 drubbing of Exeter in an intra-New Hampshire battle this past season. Mr. McCants, who made at least two high-school All-American teams and is headed to the University of North Carolina, might have scored 50 if a merciful New Hampton coach hadn't pulled him for more than half the game.

"You don't want to go into a game trying not to win," Mr. Wesselink says of his team's contests against league powers like New Hampton. "On the other hand, you know what your chances are."

Concerned about the league's talent disparities -- and worried that athletic recruiting is compromising educational standards at some league schools -- several of the academic heavyweights want Bridgton, Winchendon, New Hampton and a couple of other basketball powers out of the league's top-tier "Class A" division, which has 12 schools.

The league's ascent has come as a host of relatively small, unknown preps bet on basketball as way to generate publicity and attract more students. These schools recruit players from across the country and the world, offering them financial aid that covers most or all of their tuition.

Because the academic heavies don't want to drop down to the less-prestigious "B" class -- or have too many students to even be considered for the lower division -- they suggest placing the top basketball schools in a new "Super" or "AA" class division. There is even some talk of the best academic schools breaking away and creating a new league.

"No one wants to go out there and get beat by 50 points," says Leon Modeste, coach of Phillips Academy in Andover, Mass. The school, alma mater to both presidents Bush, no longer plays Bridgton after a shellacking last season, and hasn't played some of the others since they entered the A division in the 1990s. They "are in a different world that has little to do with NEPSAC-traditional anything," Mr. Modeste argues.

"We are dropping the renegade programs," says Chuck Timlin, coach at Choate Rosemary Hall, a Wallingford, Conn., institution that has groomed many of its graduates -- including President Kennedy -- for the Ivy League for 112 years. "They all like to play the Choates, Exeters and Andovers of the world because it gives them cachet. But it's an unlevel playing field." Choate's basketball team also refuses to schedule some of the league's basketball powers, and finished last in the league this year.

Some of the league's basketball strongholds -- which are generally smaller, more blue-collar and less wealthy -- are crying foul. They say the dispute has nothing to do with academic standards and everything to do with sour grapes. If the other schools can't compete and don't want to play them, they say it's the refuseniks that should leave Class A.

"They can't steal the league," says Bridgton coach Whit Lesure. "It will happen over my dead body."

League president David First said he will push the prep association to consider reconfiguring the league during meetings this spring. "I'd like to put something together that would make everyone happy," he says.

College recruiters say prep schools became more popular with top basketball prospects after the National Collegiate Athletic Association toughened academic requirements for incoming freshmen athletes in 1996. Academic course requirements were boosted to 13 core courses from 11, and a student with a C grade average was required to score 1010 on the 1600-point SAT admissions test, up from 820.

The new requirements prompted many U.S. high-school hoopsters to look for schools that could help them bring their academic credentials up to snuff. Foreign prospects looked to the preps for similar reasons -- including the need to bone up on English to get into big-time basketball colleges in the U.S. At the same time, hard-pressed preps like Winchendon were working to make their basketball program a draw, and were willing to dole out generous financial aid to make that happen.

Demario Eddins received C's and D's at the public school he attended in Chicago. He came to Winchendon two years ago after learning about the school from his public-school coach. Since arriving, he has improved his grades and his SAT score to the point where he is ranked sixth out of 80 in his class. Mr. Eddins, a standout 6-foot-6 forward on the Winchendon squad, is being recruited by several top college programs.

"School in Chicago was just basketball," he said. "Here you have two study halls every day. It is lights out at 10. You have to make your bed. It's hard."

Mr. Eddins said the prep league is a culture shock for city kids. He was unprepared for life at a school where the highlight of off-campus living is often a trip to the nearby McDonald's. "I never visited, and everyone is telling me it's cool and everything, but when I got here, it was a rude awakening," he said. "It's OK for people who are used to it, but not city kids."

Exeter, founded in 1781, has a \$521 million endowment, more than most colleges. Andover's endowment is \$495 million. Winchendon has no endowment. When headmaster William LaBelle decided to start a top-notch basketball program in 1993, he says, his school didn't have any famous graduates, was struggling

financially and desperate to boost its 100-student enrollment.

"We didn't have a lot of boastables," Mr. LaBelle says. "This gives our kids something to be proud of out here." Since basketball became big, Winchendon has doubled its enrollment to 200 and is \$13 million in the black. In addition to basketball, Mr. Labelle also credits the recruitment of nonathletes from Asia for the improvement. Three of the school's graduates have made the National Basketball Association, out of about a dozen placed in the pros by NEPSAC schools.

Officials at some of the schools say privately that rape charges against three former Winchendon players have also helped fuel the move for a league split-up. The students were charged with raping two intoxicated 14-year-old girls in 1999 while attending the school, in a case that drew lots of local media attention.

Last month, one of the players pleaded guilty to four counts of child rape. A second player was found not guilty of the charges, and a third awaits trial. Winchendon wouldn't comment on the specifics of the case because one player is still awaiting trial.

Still, Clark Francis, head of Hoop Scoop Online recruiting service for colleges, says NEPSAC is the best high-school league in the country. It also has more top college basketball prospects than anywhere else, says University of Louisville recruiter Mick Cronin.

His boss, Louisville coach Rick Pitino, has been to New England to scout the field, as has the legendary Bobby Knight, now coaching at Texas Tech.

But the elite academic schools say the same win-at-any-cost ethic plaguing the college game has begun to infect NEPSAC. Winchendon's team is sponsored by Adidas AG, which provided free sneakers and other goodies for the players.

Coach Michael Byrnes says he has tremendous leeway to run his program, including the ability to admit any player he wants -- something that is anathema to other prep schools, who try to maintain selective academic standards.

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