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HIGH SCHOOLS

It's an entirely new ballgame for the City Section's schools

Demographics have shifted dramatically in Los Angeles Unified School District schools over the last 20 years, and sports teams are proof of the changes.

Eric Sondheimer

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Change is coming to high school sports in the City Section, and it's reflected in the demographic transformation taking place in the Los Angeles Unified School District.

Thirty years ago, Canoga Park didn't have a soccer team and its student body was 65% Caucasian.

Last year, the soccer-playing sons of immigrants from El Salvador, Mexico, Guatemala and Colombia helped Canoga Park finish 24-0-1 and earn recognition as the nation's No. 1 boys' soccer team.

"They grow up with a ball at their feet," Coach Jake Gwin said of his Latino players, who are now part of a 79% majority at the school.

In 1975, when San Fernando won the City 4-A football championship, the Tigers featured the African American backfield of Kenney Moore, Charles White, Kevin Williams and Ray Williams. In the 2006-07 school year, the number of African American students had fallen to 28 in a student body of 3,756, with a 98% Latino representation.

These demographic changes are leading to a shift in sports preference and emphasis at many LAUSD schools.

LAUSD demographic statistics compiled in 1980, when there were only 49 comprehensive high schools, are dramatically different from those of 2006-07, when there were nearly twice as many schools.

Fremont's student population, which was 96% African American in 1980, is now 90% Latino. Jefferson, once 68% African American, is 91% Latino. Jordan, 94% African American in 1980, is down to 20% African American students but is 79% Latino.

Even high schools in the once predominantly white enclaves of the San Fernando Valley are changing. Chatsworth, with a 77% Caucasian population in 1980, is 47% Latino. Lake Balboa Birmingham, 73% Caucasian in 1980, is 69% Latino. Reseda Cleveland, once 64% Caucasian, is 58% Latino.

The lone school in LAUSD currently with a Caucasian population of more than 50% is Woodland Hills El Camino Real, which has still fallen from 74% Caucasian in 1980 to 53% and has seen its Asian population grow from 84 students in 1980 to 393, or 11% of its student body.

Latinos and Asians are expected to make up 80% of the population in Los Angeles County by 2050, according to state population projections issued in July, with Latinos growing to 8.4 million, or 65% of the total population. The African American population is expected to decline from 910,000, or 9% of the population, in 2000 to 583,000, or 4% of the population, in 2050.

One sport, above all, appears positioned to benefit most from these demographic trends -- soccer.

It's already the most popular sport, in terms of participation, among high school girls in California, with 40,895 players. Track and field is second among girls, with 38,817 participants. And boys' soccer has gained more than 5,000 players since 2005, a 13% increase -- the greatest among all sports in the state -- that has increased the number of players to 44,730.

Every weekend, whether at MacArthur Park near downtown Los Angeles or at Valley Plaza in North Hollywood, soccer is being played from dawn until dusk, with entire families involved in the sport.

In the City Section, the boys' soccer playoffs feature the only single-elimination 32-team bracket among the 12 team sports offered, and that's because of competitive equity -- no need to have a second-tier Invitational bracket. The toughest playoff game last season for top-seeded Canoga Park was a 1-0 victory over 32nd-seeded Hollywood.

At Canoga Park, where nearly 90 students tried out for the boys' soccer team, there are dozens who play the sport at lunchtime, and others who show up to school wearing jerseys of professional soccer players.

At Jefferson, more than 100 students tried out for boys' soccer, and football Coach Doi Johnson has begun to wonder whether soccer will continue to rise in popularity.

"I don't think it will ever overtake football, because it's America's game," Johnson said. "It might overtake basketball. If you said that in the '80s, that thought wouldn't be fathomable."

Among the 708,461 students enrolled in kindergarten through high school in the LAUSD last year, 73% were Latino, and it shouldn't come as a surprise to anyone that the sons and daughters of parents from Latin America are embracing soccer as their No. 1 sport.

"It's every child's dream to be a soccer player in Mexico," said Omar De La Piedra, a senior soccer player at Canoga Park who was born in the U.S. but has lived in Mexico.

"It's a family tradition," added senior Oscar De La Cruz, whose father played soccer in Guatemala.

Jeff Davis, Chatsworth's former principal, said, "When I was coaching up to 1993, everybody had soccer teams, but it wasn't any big deal. Now it's *huge*. All you have to do is go to a soccer match and see the emotion and passion not only in players but also in their parents. Every neighborhood I go to, I see people playing soccer."

Despite the soccer boom, no one is predicting the demise of high school football as the most

popular sport in terms of participation and fan interest. At least not yet. Football remains the No. 1 activity in uniting students from all ethnicities in a social setting on Friday nights.

"I think 'Friday Night Lights' is ingrained in the psyche of the American public," Canoga Park's Gwin said. "There could be a time, place and gradual interest to develop something like that for soccer."

Night soccer matches could take place in the future, competing with winter basketball games for crowds and exposure. But in California, soccer is a winter sport, unlike the rest of the country, where it's mostly a fall sport. And it can still get pretty cold outside on a winter night in the Southland.

"In 20 or 30 years, hopefully what we'll see is greater technical ability of the younger [soccer] athletes as some of them grow up and become coaches themselves and reach the urban community," Gwin said. "You're going to see growth not just from Hispanics but growth in the Anglo community. When we can keep kids involved in soccer from 13 on instead of going to football, I think you'll see a multicultural face of soccer."

There are other changes in the works. The number of high schools participating in sports in the City Section has grown to 94, including charter and magnet schools, and that figure could double over the next 25 years, according to Barbara Fiege, City Section commissioner. It has led to the creation of a City small-schools playoff division.

Schools once strong in specific sports are having to regroup and come up with new ideas to stay competitive. At Fremont, a one-time football powerhouse, Coach John Washington has begun playing schools in East Los Angeles, such as Garfield, in the hope of encouraging more of the Panthers' large Latino student body to come out for football.

Charter schools, established to improve academic performance through smaller class sizes, are taking aim at luring away athletes from traditional schools by offering a balance between academic and athletic opportunities.

One of the early success stories is View Park Prep, a charter school in South Los Angeles with a 97% African American population that made it to the state Division V championship game in boys' basketball last season in its second year as a varsity program.

Private and Catholic schools, aided by wealthy donors, dedicated alumni and strong parental participation, continue to make inroads in attracting many students, mostly Caucasian, away from neighborhood public schools.

Among the 1,600 students in grades 7-12 who attend North Hollywood Harvard-Westlake, 64% are Caucasian. Encino Crespi, an all-boys school of 600, has a student body that is 65% Caucasian. At Sherman Oaks Notre Dame, which has a student body that is 56% Caucasian, there were 800 applications for 350 openings this year.

Fueling demographic change is a migration of families coming to and leaving Southern California because of job opportunities and housing costs, according to Eugene Turner, a geography professor at Cal State Northridge who has been charting local population trends since 1980.

Turner believes the dispersal of African American families from such areas as South Los Angeles, Pacoima and Monrovia will continue, with Palmdale, Moreno Valley and San Bernardino gaining

as destination points.

Fundraising, already a mandatory requirement for sports teams, will surely widen the gap between the haves and have-nots in regard to state-of-the-art amenities.

At Newhall Hart, a Southern Section school, the football program has a budget of more than \$100,000, with a majority coming from its booster club, while at Sun Valley Poly, the football budget this year is \$17,000, of which \$5,000 was raised by a booster club. At Brea Olinda, the boys' basketball budget is more than \$50,000, while at Hollywood, it's \$3,000.

"Fundraising here is like pulling teeth," Hollywood Coach Craig Laurent said. "The kids can't see the benefits that their parents will be paying less."

Notre Dame recently installed a synthetic football field, all-weather track, aluminum bleachers and a new weight room. Five of the seven private schools that compete against the Knights in the Mission League have synthetic turf fields that cost close to \$1 million each, and the two schools that don't, Crespi and Mission Hills Alemany, have plans to add them within two years.

Additional money allows a team to take advantage of the continuing technological breakthroughs that can improve athletic performance and provide greater exposure to its student-athletes.

Digital cameras linked to school Internet sites are enabling teams to broadcast games live via webcasts. Software used by college and professional teams to edit and break down video is being used by high school coaches who can produce DVDs with highlights of games for players, fans and college recruiters.

Schools that were once football powers are having to decide whether that's where they should continue to put their resources.

Tom Hernandez was an All-City offensive lineman for San Fernando in 1974, when the Tigers won the first of consecutive City titles. There were more than 500 African Americans attending the school then. More than 30 years later, that number has dropped to fewer than 30, and Hernandez, now the school's football coach, has been working hard to reverse that trend.

"What we had to stop was the perception that this wasn't a safe school for African Americans," he said. "The perception now in the community is, it's a good place, it's safe, it's academically sound and you can do what you want athletically."

Rashaad Reynolds, a three-sport standout, is doing his part to help his school regain its luster in the African American community. He plays football as the Tigers' quarterback, plays basketball and is a two-time City wrestling champion.

He gave serious consideration to choosing another high school before enrolling at San Fernando.

"I felt real uncomfortable at first," he said. "You could tell every black in school. We ate and hung around each other."

But Reynolds, a junior, said he has come to feel comfortable at his school, which is nearly 100% Latino, and is motivated trying to lift its sports programs back to prominence.

He led the Tigers to the Valley Mission League football championship this season and is a

reminder of a different era when San Fernando relied on such multiple-sport African American athletes as Anthony Davis and Heisman Trophy winner Charles White to pump up its athletic program.

In this changing environment, members of high school sports teams can serve as campus unifiers in the face of racial tension within the student body.

When there was a dispute between African American and Latino students at Jefferson in 2004, it was members of the football team who helped calm fears.

"That's why teams on every campus can be an example of unity," Jefferson's Johnson said. "We made sure we wore our jerseys. We ate lunch together. We talked how we could promote unity. By being visible and through word of mouth, we helped defuse the tension."

eric.sondheimer@latimes.com
