

Liberty Christian Academy to join VHSL as league opens up to private schools

Ben Cates | Posted: Wednesday, May 20, 2015 11:29 am

CHARLOTTESVILLE — For a century, the Virginia High School League has served only public schools throughout Virginia. That all changed here Wednesday, when VHSL members voted to allow Liberty Christian Academy into the league's ranks.

The decision came after the VHSL and LCA settled a lawsuit, avoiding a trial set for early 2016. LCA sued the league in June 2014, demanding the right to compete and seeking compensation for the years it was not allowed to join.

LCA becomes the first private school ever allowed membership into the 101-year-old league.

"I think there were a lot of factors involved," VHSL Executive Director Ken Tilley said when asked why the VHSL was willing to reach a settlement. "If you can reach an agreement that you can accept, why go through a lot of effort and expense?"

VHSL officials declined to comment Wednesday on the terms of settlement. LCA will be eligible to compete in August 2015, but likely won't compete against area football teams until 2016, since football schedules already have been set for 2015.

The Lynchburg-based school becomes the eighth member of the Seminole District, will join the newly-aligned Conference 23 and compete in Region 4A West, along with local schools Amherst, E.C. Glass and Jefferson Forest.

LCA can draw students from the Lynchburg City attendance zones only, which include Glass and its rival, Heritage High.

"We have great respect for these schools and we just think it's going to be a special rivalry, just like the way Brookville and JF is when they have their competitions," LCA superintendent John Patterson said. "We're just glad to be a part of the rivalry with the Seminole."



LCA VHSL

LCA's Brian Ogle runs the ball following a reception during the first half of a benefit game against Amherst High School last August at a preseason game at Williams Stadium. The VHSL announced that the private school will now be eligible to compete against public schools. The Bulldogs will be competing in the Seminole District against teams from E.C. Glass, Heritage, Brookville and Amherst County, among others.

LCA is home to 812 students in 9th through 12th grades. In order to compete at the 4A level, it chose a multiplier to make up for the deficit of facing schools with larger populations. Each student will count as one-and-a-half to make up for that deficit.

The decision opens the door for all non-boarding schools in Virginia to apply for VHSL membership, but each must meet VHSL requirements. For instance, LCA students could reclassify during high school, a move commonplace among private schools. That isn't an option in the VHSL.

The VHSL allows openly gay, lesbian and transgender students to compete in athletics. Transgender athletes must have undergone a sex reassignment. There was no indication Wednesday, though, if LCA would be forced to comply.

"LCA will continue with the values and the mission it has," Patterson said. "We're not going to change because we're now a member of the VHSL. The VHSL is just the league we compete in. ... It's not an athletics issue. It's an enrollment issue."

The school also will be allowed to remain a pipeline to Liberty University, with students earning a 10-percent-per-year scholarship to LU for each academic year they are enrolled at LCA.

It's been widely speculated for years that LCA recruits athletes from area schools, a claim LCA officials have categorically denied. Patterson reiterated that point Wednesday.

"If I knew about that, I would confront it and stop it, because that's being a bad neighbor," Patterson said. "LCA wants to be a good neighbor here and we have great relationships with local schools. ... We only hope it gets better."

Each school in the Seminole District will be required to place LCA on its schedule, exempting those which already have been finalized and approved for this fall.

Amherst athletics director Robert Curd said he looks forward to playing the Bulldogs. Amherst has played LCA in benefit football games and the two baseball squads have hooked up, too.

"I think our contention all along was that we wanted a level playing field, for everybody to play by the same rules," Curd said.

LCA cited in its original lawsuit that as a member of the Virginia Independent Schools Athletic Association, it routinely was forced to travel long distances to find quality opponents. Its VHSL membership alleviates that concern. Curd said Amherst, which also has been forced to travel long distances the last two years because of VHSL realignment, would benefit as well.

"We were playing non-traditional teams and suffered financially for that," Curd said, adding he hopes to see increased gates by having LCA as a member and as part of Conference 23.

LCA's requests for membership were denied on several occasions dating back to 2006. After the school filed its 2014 suit, indications were that even if LCA was allowed to compete, it may not

become a VHSL member for years. But Wednesday's announcement did away with those notions.

Why was LCA allowed to join, effective immediately? Patterson thought for a moment. "The graciousness of the VHSL," he said.