

## **THE HISTORY OF THE WEST SUBURBAN CONFERENCE**

To get a good feel for the high school landscape during the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, one must understand how conference realignment, a topic of discussion still today, affected the high school scene. After the Great Chicago Fire of 1871, the city rebuilt itself from the rubble. Within 15 years skyscrapers started to dot the skyline. The Home Insurance Building – albeit only ten stories originally – was considered the world’s first. The population of what would be later known as the City of Big Shoulders had doubled by 1890. Chicago would consider itself as an international destination, thanks in part to the 1893 World’s Columbian Exposition, which attracted over 27 million visitors during its six-month run.

As the century would change, so would the number of high schools that had started to play interscholastic athletics. The Cook County League doubled in size and was a conglomeration of public, private, and training schools from both the city proper and outlying communities. As the membership grew to 24 schools, the league became very difficult to manage. Eight private schools were the first to organize into their own league, the Chicago Catholic League, which was formed in 1912. The public schools inside the city of Chicago didn’t stand pat either, electing to break away and form their own conference, which would be known as the Chicago Public Athletic League, the precursor for the Chicago Public League, starting the following year. With only a handful of the Cook County League teams remaining, those suburban public schools, including future West Suburban Conference members Lyons Township, Morton, Oak Park-River Forest, and Proviso, formed the Suburban League in 1913, leaving the Cook County League to close its doors forever. DuPage County, which became a popular destination with many new schools being formed thanks to the influx of growing suburban communities, formed its own league, the DuPage County League, with Downers Grove, Elmhurst, Glen Ellyn, Hinsdale, Naperville, West Chicago, and Wheaton all being original members.

Many of the DuPage County schools had played one another in informal contests previously, so the league appeared to be a good fit. The league had its difficulty at times, as the Great Influenza Epidemic, more commonly referred to as the Spanish Flu Outbreak, of 1918 put all games to a halt. But stability finally looked to be on the horizon. Or was it?

In December of 1917 the combined high school and grammar school of Elmhurst School was destroyed by fire and York High School was established. A few years later, the Glen Ellyn and Lombard school districts unified and thus “Glen-bard” was officially born. But the biggest blow to the upstart DuPage County League came in 1921 when Wheaton and Naperville High Schools both bolted for the newly formed Little 7 Conference.

But one final change did lie ahead, as the West Suburban Pioneer League was formed in January of 1924 with the five remaining schools of the DuPage County League, and one lone entry from Cook County – Maine Township. The six original charter members included: Downers Grove, Glenbard, Hinsdale, Maine, West Chicago, and York. The Pioneer monicker was named for the area which was aligned between two of the first railroad lines in the state of Illinois. The Galena and Chicago-Northwestern railroads were pioneers in their industry with their Hiawatha and Zephyr streamliners. The word “pioneer” was also appropriate for the West Suburban Conference as it is defined as one who originates or prepares the way for others. Through the years many other conferences have learned much from watching the success and growth of the WSC, as it would win more team state championships than any of its competitors.

Since the new league was formed during mid-year, only two sports were offered for interscholastic competition – basketball and track and field. Hinsdale won both titles and laid claim to the West Suburban Pioneer League’s grand prize: The President’s Cup. The Cup was a trophy that was awarded to the conference school which placed the highest in a combination of all league sports. The following school year, football and cross country would make their debut in conference competition during the fall sports season. Maine Township proved that this new league was not only for the DuPage County schools by winning the league’s first football championship.

The year was 1924. People were keeping cool with Calvin Coolidge; the Washington Senators won their one and only World Series; the first Winter Olympics is held in Chamonix, France; the National Football League was only four years old; the Great Depression was still five years away; and the West Suburban Conference was born.

After a few seasons of regulated competition, the Suburban League went through yet another re-organization, which would benefit the landscape of the West Suburban Conference for years to come. In 1928 Riverside-Brookfield became the seventh member of the WSC. And after the fall season of the 1934-1935 school team, Lyons Township, who had free-lanced for six years as an independent after parting with the Suburban League, decided to settle down in the West Suburban as well. The total membership now reached eight schools, but that was only temporary since West Chicago elected to leave the conference at the end of the 1935 spring season. The Wildcats, who did not have a conference championship during their 11-year stay, opted to join a conference more suited to their geographical location.

During the next sixteen-year period, the league dropped its Pioneer name, but had no changes in its membership. There were rival competitions, and new sports and lower levels added. An outstanding performance record in state-sponsored activities took place, making the West Suburban Conference one of the most recognized, and respected, conferences in Illinois.

1935 saw the start of the Old Oaken Bucket rivalry between Downers Grove and Hinsdale. The bucket was made by the manual training class at Hinsdale High School and has been annually awarded to the winner of the Trojans-Red Devils football game. This became one of the oldest and most highly contested rivalries in high school sports in the Land of Lincoln.

Lyons Township became a strong football power, winning eight conference titles between 1941 and 1950. The Lions did not lose a game WSC game between 1941-1944 and allowed only six touchdowns during those four years. During the 1942 season, Lyons Township outscored their opponents by an eye-popping 139-0 margin.

Golf was added to conference competition in 1937, as was tennis in 1941. Baseball became the third major team sport, with WSC play first taking place in 1949. During the 1947-1948 school year, the conference disbanded the use of the heavyweight-lightweight format and added the freshman-sophomore levels. Frosh-soph titles were then contested in the sports of football, basketball, and outdoor track.

Meanwhile, the league had experienced significant success in state tournament competition. A total of forty individuals from the WSC were crowned state champions: 27 alone in track, as well as the first IHSA individual champion in cross country. In addition to their individual plaudits, the league won ten team state titles between 1935 and 1951.

In the fall of 1951, Arlington High School increased the conference membership to eight teams. The West Suburban now had a wide range of competition in all sports, and some of the league's greatest dynasties would soon follow.

Tracksters saw Lyons Township win five state titles over seven years and capture eight consecutive West Suburban Conference track championships. Hinsdale would win ten West Suburban Conference football titles from 1951 through 1967 – never finishing lower than third place over that eighteen-year stretch.

During the 1956-1957 school year, the WSC added wrestling to its athletic schedule, giving the conference eight sports. By the following year, lower-level competitions were being played in every sport. The West Suburban Conference now only trailed the Suburban League in state titles won.

Maine Township won back-to-back state titles in baseball in 1958 and 1959, and York made it three-in-a-row for the WSC, by capturing the 1960 IHSA championship on the diamond. Hinsdale Central would begin to rewrite history by capturing four straight tennis teams state titles from 1956 through 1959.

The 1960's saw the beginning of three new sports and two membership changes in the West Suburban Conference. Three indoor sports made their first appearance in league competitions, as gymnastics started in the spring of 1965, and both swimming and indoor track were added for the 1965-1966 school year.

Although there was no state tournament format for football, powerhouse teams excelled on the gridiron. Hinsdale Central claimed "State Rated" mythical state championships in 1960, 1961, 1962 and 1967. The Red Devils were undefeated in those four seasons and outscored their opponents 834-114 in conference play. Not to be outdone, Downers Grove North claimed a mythical football championship of its own in 1969.

At the conclusion of the 1965-66 school year, Arlington became the second member to leave the conference. Realignment was prevalent with many new high schools being built to accommodate the baby boom. As teams were moving everywhere, the West Suburban Conference had minimal change, adding Proviso West to replace the Cardinals. The Panthers became the tenth school since the conference's inception and maintained the membership at eight schools.

The seventies saw the conference double in size – not in membership, but by the addition of interscholastic girls athletics. The organized movement for girls athletics sports with the IHSA having a state series for tennis and track during the 1972-1973 school year. The West Suburban Conference followed suit with competition in six sports: volleyball, basketball, badminton, softball, track and field and archery. The following year four more sports: gymnastics, tennis, swimming, and bowling gave the girls a program of ten events.

There were changes in the membership during the first half of this decade, as Maine East, a charter member of the West Suburban Conference, joined the Mid-Suburban League at the end of the 1971-1972 school year. The Suburban League went through one last change, which was once again felt by the WSC. At the end of the 1974-1975 school year, the Suburban League dissolved – what was one of the state’s most prestigious conferences ceased to exist. Two schools, Oak Park-River Forest and Proviso East joined the West Suburban Conference at the start of the next sport season, giving the conference nine member schools throughout the remainder of the seventies.

The two newest teams would make an impact in contributing to the West Suburban Conference’s leadership in state titles won, as OPRF captured the league’s first state championship in girls athletics, with the Huskies triumphing at the 1975 IHSA tennis tournament.

More changes and additional championships continued over the next several years, as boys soccer was added in the fall of 1975; along with girls cross country, which debuted in 1978. Due to the concern for safety and a lack of interest in the sport, archery was dropped by the Girls Sports Coordinators in 1976. Hinsdale Central expanded the WSC state title tally by winning twelve straight boys swimming titles, six boys gymnastics championships over a seven-year period, and eight boys tennis first place finishes in the decade. Altogether during the 1970’s, the Red Devils won 59 West Suburban Conference titles, a National Swim Title (1970) and a National Gymnastics championship (1971).

York High School also added to national recognition for the conference with its first of twelve straight National Cross Country titles. The Dukes would eventually win 28 IHSA state cross country titles.

Glenbard West and York both made more headlines for the conference, winning a pair of state championships during the 1983-1984 school term. The Hilltoppers became the first WSC school to be crowned state champions in football, with their Class 5A title game victory. In the state championship girls basketball final, York upended Peoria Richwoods, who had a 63-game winning streak and was ranked number-one in the nation.

As the eighties approached, more transition was on the horizon. One change in the league's structure took place in 1982, with Riverside-Brookfield departing from the West Suburban Conference after a fifty-five-year relationship with the WSC. The school's low enrollment numbers, which were always the smallest among the conference schools, prompted the Bulldogs move to the nearby Dees Plains Valley League.

Girls soccer made its conference debut in the spring of 1985, but the biggest change in conference history loomed in the offing.

At the close of the 1985-1986 school year, the merger of the Des Plaines Valley League and the West Suburban Conference took place. This action, prompted by the superintendents, combined the two leagues into one umbrella conference, with each division having seven teams. Throughout the previous year, the Principals and Athletic Directors established by-laws, guidelines, and a constitution for various sports for the new-look conference.

After much debate, the two divisions would be known as the Gold and Silver Divisions. According to legend, the division names were chosen in part, because the locks of hair from the Athletic Director in the Silver Division were from primarily gray-haired professionals, thus securing the appropriate handle.

Members of the Gold Division were represented by Addison-Trail, Downers Grove South, Hinsdale Central, Leyden, Morton, Proviso East, and Willowbrook. The Silver Division included Downers Grove North, Glenbard West, Hinsdale Central, Lyons Township, Oak Park-River Forest, Proviso West, and York.

Although no team changes to its membership would take place for the next 37 years, the West Suburban Conference continued to add sports, as Girls Bowling returned to the West Suburban Conference in 1986, after pausing league competition for six years. Boys Volleyball was added in 1992. And both Girls Wrestling, and Cheer and Competitive Dance were later added, to give the West Suburban Conference full participation in 27 different sports.

On the playing field, the teams of the West Suburban Conference continued to rack up title after title. On the same day in February of 1991, two teams became the first Gold Division squads to win a team state championship, as the Addison-Trail Girls Gymnastics team and the Proviso East wrestling team won IHSA titles. The Pirates would also capture back-to-back state titles in boys basketball, their first roundball championships, since they entered the league.

Since the merger, Downers Grove North won multiple state titles in girls badminton and girls cross country. Glenbard West won two more football state championships and added four state titles in boys volleyball. Hinsdale South captured three badminton team state championships. Lyons Township took home three straight girls tennis state titles. Morton won a state title in boys soccer. Oak Park-River Forest won four wrestling state championships. Willowbrook finished first in back-to-back state badminton championships. And York won team state championships in seven different sports.



During the 2014-2015 school term, Hinsdale Central established a state record by winning eight different IHSA state championships in a single year. The Red Devils finished first in the state in girls tennis, girls golf, wrestling, boys cross country, boys soccer, boys golf, boys swimming and boys tennis. By the close of the 2022-2023 school year, the Red Devils have won 108 team state titles since entering the West Suburban Conference in 1924.

And Downers Grove South not only secured three girls volleyball state titles but won an unprecedented 19 team state championships in Speech Individual Events.

Over its first century of athletic competition, the West Suburban Conference has won more IHSA state championships than any other conference in Illinois. The WSC ranks as the sixth-oldest conference in Illinois that is still participating without interruption, behind the Chicago Catholic League (1912-1913); Chicago Public League (1913-1914); the Northern Illinois Conference (1916-1917); the Little 10 Conference (1919-1920); and the Southwest Conference (fall of 1923-1924).

During the 2023-2024 school year, the West Suburban Conference will recognize its Centennial Celebration, concentrating on the individuals, teams, and moments of its first 100 years. An all-time honor roll, that recognizes over 100 student-athletes and more than 100 coaches and contributors that represents individuals from every era, school, and sport, was selected to acknowledge the conference's rich history.

The West Suburban Conference has provided wholesome athletic competition for 100 years. Its teams have captured 259 IHSA state championships in athletics, provided many memorable moments throughout the seasons, and has set the bar high for all the other conferences in the state to model after.