

Around the League

by Steve Jezierski

High School athletics has its place in the school system. That is why the Fond Du Lac Ojibway school on the Fond du Lac Indian Reservation began its sports program four years ago. The school offers boys and girls basketball, football, and very soon volleyball and track will be added.

The school's principal and athletic director, Phil Minkkinen, began the push for athletics at the school which is now in its seventh year of existence. "Mostly, we're trying to encourage kids to stay in school and be a part of programs like that (athletics)," said Minkkinen. "We feel that it's important for the kids to learn to be a part of a group or a team."

With Minkkinen's pushing and the help of school superintendent, Donald Wiesen, who is a strong believer in athletics, the sports program had its beginning. The school began in the fall with football and added basketball in the winter.

Winning isn't the backbone by which the programs are run. Participation and having fun is. The ratio of students participating in athletics, as compared to those who are not, is incredible compared to other schools. Minkkinen said over 20 boys out of 50 in the school are on the basketball team, while about 20 of the 38 girls in the school are playing.

The school system built a new gymnasium that seats about 300 spectators, so facilities have not been a problem. "The biggest problem to begin with," said Minkkinen, "was being accepted by the public schools, that was a bit of a challenge."

The Fond du Lac Ojibway

2-19-87

Ogichida's applied for membership in the St. Louis County League, after receiving membership from the Minnesota State High School League, but they were turned down. That has forced the teams at Fond du Lac to play an independent schedule. However, Minkkinen said he couldn't fault the County League for not accepting them. "They couldn't be sure how sincere we were in our efforts to field athletic teams. I could understand that." Scheduling games is a problem of the past. The Ogichida's have proven they are serious about developing an athletic program. And the opposition is much less hesitant about playing a new school.

The success of the Ogichida teams is improving too. The football team had a 3-5 record this past fall. The girls basketball team has won only one game, but their skill level has continued to improve. The boy's team is enjoying an excellent year. They were 8-5 after last Friday night's play. Victories have come over such schools as Barnum, Floodwood, Toivola-Meadowlands and White Earth.

Until this season, the Ogichida's were coached by Minkkinen, and had not had a winning record. This season Joe Curran has led the team as head coach. "I've joked with the parents that it took me to get out of coaching before we could have a winning record," laughed Minkkinen. "Actually, we've got some good ball players whose skills have improved. Joe has done a good job."

Athletics have become an important part of the school year at Fond du Lac Ojibway. Minkkinen said the pride that is taken by the school's

athletes is obvious. "I think one big thing is, other than being an Indian and being in this school, there's maybe not an identity for these kids. The athletic program has really developed an identity for them. They wear these 'Ogichida shirts' around and they're proud of that. They feel good about being a part of athletics and going to these other schools and doing well. It really has helped develop a sense of identity in these kids in this school."
