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After going 10-2 in 2016 and 9-2 in 2017, Sprague designated themselves as average-plus at the scheduling meeting in 2018. McNary did the same after going 7-4 in 2017 and earning a playoff win over Grants Pass.

However, both programs didn't account for how other coaches would identify their own teams.

According to Gragg, who is the chairman for MVC football, only three teams in the state identified themselves as tough, which made it extremely difficult for scheduling — especially for athletic directors in the valley, who were already dealing with the fact that they had to schedule five non-league games in each of the next two years instead of just one per season, like they were accustomed to from 2014-17.

"The state has six teams

that are in the top 10 every single year, and so for those teams not to identify as tough, it makes scheduling more challenging," Gragg said. "It should be balanced, but if nobody's identifying as tough, there will be some mismatches."

McNary and Sprague experienced some of those mismatches firsthand.

Sprague has lost all 10 of their non-conference matchups over the last two seasons and experienced some particularly lopsided losses against 6A powers Tigard and Central Catholic in 2019.

McNary has also lost 10 of their non-league contests since the MVC was formed — with an average margin of defeat of more than 30 points per game.

However, what was really telling from McNary's perspective is that after starting each of the last two seasons 0-5, the Celtics rallied to win all four of their conference games in 2018 and 2019 and were back-to-back league

champions.

"When a team like McNary goes 0-5 in non-league, 4-0 in league play and then is finished after the first week of the playoffs, clearly there's something that needs to be adjusted. When you see it happen the first time, it might be an outlier, but after the second year of that happening, something has to change," Gragg said.

Some of the other concerns athletic directors had was that playing a four-game league schedule took away some natural rivalries and made it harder for coaches to vote on all-league players.

Since all the athletic directors in the conference were on the same page, it made it easy for Gragg to advocate for a six-game league schedule to the chairman of 6A football, Alan Boschma, the athletic director at Tigard.

"Everyone wants to be competitive at the state level, and one of the components of being successful at the state level is making sure you're

vibrant and making sure you are building a program that's competitive in your conference and I think this schedule allows us to do that," Gragg said. "I'm happy with this process. When you only have to find three games for our league, that also means that other leagues will only have to find three games, so it will make it easier for everyone."

Under the new format, each Salem-Keizer team will take a trip over the mountain three times in the next two years. McNary will visit Mountain View this season and then travel to Bend and Summit next year.

"If you're going to be a playoff team, you have to be able to go on the road. I don't know why people complain about going over to Bend. I think it will be good for us," McNary head coach Jeff Auvinen said.

Although the four-game league schedule seemed to benefit McNary during league competition, Auvinen is more than happy to be

returning to a typical conference schedule.


"This is the way it should be. It makes our out-of-conference schedule a lot more manageable, plus it will give our teams the chance to rebuild natural rivalries. It's the

right way to go," Auvinen said.

Gragg added: "I'm very appreciative of Jeff and his staff that made the best of a difficult and challenging non-league schedule. It was a challenging couple of years, but we learned a lot."



McNary's Ethan Martin was a first-team all-league kick returner last season.





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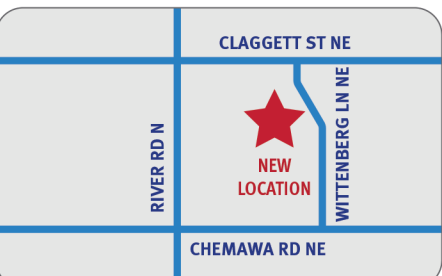
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