

[High school basketball: Turners Falls girls, Mohawk Trail boys won't have varsity teams this winter](#)

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As the high school hardwood season prepares for opening night on Thursday, a pair of Franklin County schools will not be sponsoring varsity programs this winter.

Turners Falls High School will not compete as a girls varsity program this winter, same for the Mohawk Trail Regional boys basketball program. Both programs will instead play JV schedules, in hopes of returning to varsity status in the future.

Turners Falls' numbers were low last season, though the Thunder still qualified for the MIAA Division 5 state tournament and posted an 11-9 overall record.

"We only had a couple of high school players returning, a couple of middle school players who were on the JV team last year," explained Turners Falls athletic director Adam Graves. "They just weren't ready for varsity competition. We had heard some rumblings about kids not playing earlier in the school year and then just talking to everyone involved, we came to the conclusion that it wasn't feasible."

Graves said the decision to play a JV schedule was cemented well before opening day of winter season — which began this past Monday.

"We wanted to give other schools time to replace those games on their schedules," Graves said.

Graves said the JV team, which will be coached by Jason Salls, is still looking for games to fill a schedule for the winter.

"The hope is that we're back with a varsity program in two years," said Graves, who noted that there were 12 players on the middle school team and 10 on the JV club.

Enrollment at Turners Falls High School is about 225 currently, up from a few years ago when that number was below 200. Graves said the winter sports catalog has strong numbers overall, including 30-plus in the boys basketball program. Swimming and diving is also over 30 participants, and the cheer program has 19.

While the schedule will change, Turners' JV girls basketball team is tentatively set to open the season Dec. 18 against Athol.

"We'll try and make it a fun experience for the kids," Graves said. "They're gonna wear the varsity uniforms. When they have home games, we'll try and treat it like we did for varsity home games."

Over in Buckland, Mohawk Trail AD Greg Lilly said that the district will field a JV boys basketball team this winter in lieu of varsity. The Warriors tried to play a varsity schedule last winter with just six players, but after losing their first four games by an average margin of 39.3 points, and with just four healthy bodies after suffering some injuries, the school canceled the remainder of their season and forfeited the remaining 13 games on the schedule.

“We made it clear after last year that we weren’t going to have a varsity team again this year,” Lilly said. “We couldn’t put other schools in that position when they’re committing to schedules. We were at the point here where we were putting a subpar program on the floor at the varsity level and we weren’t winning. That wears on kids. We also want to make sure these kids don’t get comfortable with losing. If they get comfortable with losing, you can’t grow a program.”

Former varsity coach Darren Schmidt has returned to the fold and will coach Mohawk Trail’s JV team this winter. Lilly said that while middle school numbers remain solid, with over 20 players competing, it’s going to take a healthy dose of those middle school students matriculating to the high school in order for the varsity team to return. Lilly said the district has lost too many student-athletes to other schools over the past few years.

“As far as the future of program, we have to have one of these eighth grade classes stay [into high school],” he explained. “We have great middle school numbers, which we always do, but we can’t afford to lose the majority of these kids to other schools once they reach ninth grade.”

The JV team has eight players signed up, according to Lilly, with four others in eighth grade ready to play at that level. Like Turners Falls, Mohawk Trail will be adding games to its JV schedule in the coming weeks with hopes of growing its 2023-24 slate.

“The good thing now is all the schools in the area are working together,” offered Lilly. “We understand that if programs keep dropping, it’s not good for anybody.”

Mohawk Trail has a new girls varsity coach in Steve Bzomowski, and while high school numbers are low, Lilly said it’s the first year in some time where the Warriors will field varsity, JV and middle school programs.

Boys soccer reinstation a success

While Turners Falls is dropping varsity participation for girls basketball this winter, the school’s boys soccer team made a successful return to the pitch after nearly a full decade without a varsity club. The Thunder qualified for the state tournament in their first season back at the varsity level.

“I consider soccer a success this year,” Graves said. “We had 18 kids in the program, they just missed the Western Mass. tournament but made states. We lose two seniors so we’re returning 16 players, and we’ve got kids coming from the middle school as well. It’s totally positive there.”

Source: <https://www.recorder.com/High-school-basketball-Turners-Falls-girls-won-t-field-a-varsity-team-this-winter-Mohawk-Trail-boys-also-won-t-return-53228169>