

## Playoff schedule threatens player safety

Written by Mike Condon

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The atmosphere at Saints Field was electric on Friday night.

Xavier and West Delaware took the field before an overflow crowd on a crisp evening. The prize for the winner - a trip to the UNI-Dome for the Class 3A semifinals.

But a price was paid to go after that prize. Both teams came into the game with injury problems and by the end of the night, players from both teams were limping back to their huddles.

For years, the Iowa High School Athletic Association has gone with a Wednesday-Monday-Friday format for the first three rounds of the playoffs. If you count the regular-season finale, that requires teams to play four games in a 15-day time span.

The ISHAA has looked at changing the format to get games for the first three rounds all on a Friday. That would require either eliminating a regular-season game or beginning the season a week earlier.

Whatever it takes, 2014 has to be the last year under the current format.

Players continue to get bigger, faster and stronger. They need the regular recovery time during the playoffs. We are constantly being reminded, from the NFL down to youth football, about the importance of player safety and how it is paramount.

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Forcing high school players to play such a schedule puts them at risk. The postseason should be treated the same as the regular season. We all want to see great players at their best at this time of the season. What we are seeing are more and more great players either on the sidelines or playing at a reduced capacity.

The Saints were without two of their best players, Jay Kortemeyer and Nic Ekland, in Friday's 27-17 win over West Delaware. Both were injured in the Saints' second-round win over Waverly-Shell Rock.

Several other Saints were playing at less than 100 percent. West Delaware standout quarterback Brent Lammers re-injured his ankle twice during the game and gamely hobbled back onto the field twice to lead his team. They also lost reserve quarterback and top defensive player Max Ridenour to injury during the game.

Many could argue that these injuries would have taken place, no matter the time frame. That may be true, but the wear and tear on the players under the current schedule leaves them more vulnerable because they don't have the necessary recovery time.

Yet the feeling on the field was almost one of survival more than triumph for the Saints. Coach Duane Schulte spoke of how his team dug deep and came up with a way to win.

That they did, but again at what price?

Several Saints were sore, tired and excited all at the same time. As one person on the field put it after the win: "You worry about them not only as football players, but as kids. There are a lot of tired, beat-up bodies out there."

Hopefully, this is the last time any team in Iowa is forced to play three playoff games in 10 days. The playoffs should be a time to watch great football from properly rested teams, not wars of attrition from weary warriors.

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