

Too many teams, too many blowouts

Written by Mark Dukes

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The numbers were eye-popping, the results almost laughable. The first round of Iowa's high school football playoffs last week produced some of the most lopsided scores imaginable.

Should anyone be surprised? Of course not. Expansion of the playoffs in 2008 has made them terribly diluted, at best.

Of the 96 first-round games contested, nearly one-third (30) were decided by 40 points or more. Close games? Try 14 percent of them decided by 7 points or fewer. In large part, it is because 15 percent of the 192 teams had .500 or losing records.

Here are the average margins of victory in the first round by class:

Class 4A – 31.8

Class 3A – 16.7

Class 2A – 26.5

Class 1A – 32.4

Class A – 28.0

8-man – 35.7

It is no secret expansion to 32 playoff teams in each of six classes was made to line the coffers of the Iowa High School Athletic Association with more gate receipts. It's a charade if anyone tells you the move was made to give more kids opportunities to play in the postseason.

Corning made the 8-man playoffs with a 2-7 record and what it got in return was a 62-12 shellacking by Madrid. You think they'll be reminiscing at the 10-year Corning class reunion about how the football team made the playoffs back in 2011?

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Some coaches have embraced, or at least accepted, the proliferation of playoff teams.

Bob Forsyth, coach of top-ranked Linn-Mar, was discussing the playoffs on Scott Unash's "Coaches Corner" radio show over the weekend. Forsyth said it could benefit some teams that get off to a slow start, and that could serve as motivation to finish the season strong and make the postseason. But he also admitted to seeing some of the lopsided scores and wondering how that served anyone well.

Tim Lewis of Kennedy benefitted last year when his squad was missing some star players early in the year, but got them back, qualified for the playoffs and made a strong, deep run in the 4A tournament.

Sioux City East, 4-5 in the regular season, knocked off Waukee (6-3) in the first round of 4A. Spencer (4-6) eliminated Creston (8-1) in a 3A opener.

But those results are not the norm. They are the few exceptions.

The structure of the 4A playoffs, perhaps to be changed to a district setup soon by the IHSA, is grossly unfair as it stands now. The state is essentially split in half, with 16 teams making the playoffs in the west, 16 in the east. In the west, seven of the 16 entered the first round this year with a losing record. In the east, there were two.

Three of the state's top-ranked 4A teams – Linn-Mar, Iowa City High and Cedar Falls – were lumped in one bracket. If you set things up geographically, those types of inequities are going to happen.

Oh, and district football in 4A? Will that be any better? The concept being floated is to have eight districts with either five or six teams in each. To me, that would not eliminate the possibility of losing teams making the playoffs. In fact, it could enhance the chances.

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Bottom line is that the IHSAA should have stopped in 1986 when it expanded the playoffs to 16 teams in each class. Back then, it actually meant something to make the football postseason.

(Mark Dukes is former sports editor of the Cedar Rapid Gazette. He is co-host of The Gym Class radio show weekdays from 3-4 p.m. on KGYM-AM 1600.)