

Class 4A football districts are bad idea

Written by Jim Ecker

Saturday, 26 October 2013 18:23 -

It's been a terrific season for high school football in the Mississippi Valley Conference again this year, filled with high drama and pennant races and great games.

There was a lot riding on all the games, week after week, as teams jockeyed for playoff spots and league titles.

That could all end if a renewed effort to install artificial districts for Class 4A football in Eastern Iowa is not stopped in a hurry.

If Class 4A districts are approved for the 2014 season, it would mean the end of the venerable Mississippi Valley Conference as a football league.

This brouhaha erupted two years ago, spurred by the Class 4A schools in the Western part of Iowa who belong to the Central Iowa Metropolitan League (CIML) and the Missouri River Athletic Conference. Those schools, faced with travel and scheduling problems, successfully petitioned the Iowa High School Athletic Association and adopted a district format that went into effect last season.

Thankfully, the 24 schools in the Mississippi Valley Conference and the Mississippi Athletic Conference rejected the motion and retained their league identities.

There's a split right now. The 24 Class 4A schools in the West play in football districts (they call them divisions), and the 24 Class 4A schools in the East have continued to play in the MVC and MAC conferences.

Both sides of the state send 16 teams to the playoffs, but the formulas are different. In the West, the top four teams from each six-team division make the playoffs. In the East, the IHSAA uses a mathematical formula to select the clubs.

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How's it working? It depends on your point of view.

Last year, Mason City made the playoffs from the West with a woeful 1-and-8 record. This year, Mason City and Sioux City West both made the playoffs with dismal 2-and-7 marks.

This year in the East, by contrast, all of the playoff teams had to win at least four games to make the postseason tournament. And not all of the 4-and-5 teams made it. Dubuque Senior finished 4-5, but finished out of the money.

The Class 4A schools in the West apparently solved some of their travel and scheduling problems with the district format, but do you really want a team with a 1-and-8 or 2-and-7 record in the playoffs?

Don't think it couldn't happen around here, since only games against district opponents count for playoff purposes. If there are six teams in your district, the five games against district opponents count for the playoffs and the other four games do not.

You can finish with a 2-and-3 record and place fourth in your district, lose all four of your non-district games and prance into the playoffs with an unsightly 2-and-7 mark.

The Class 4A playoffs have been watered down already, with 32 of 48 teams advancing, but that's making it way too easy.

The 10 schools in the Mississippi Athletic Conference apparently are behind the push for Class 4A districts, according to an article Saturday in The Gazette, but there's apparently sentiment in favor from MVC schools as well.

This time, a formula for Class 4A district football could be adopted as quickly as this December. And then what?

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Xavier, Dubuque Wahlert and Davenport Assumption could elect to drop from Class 4A to Class 3A for football, based on their enrollments. It would be up to them, but don't be surprised if that's how it turns out.

The IHSAA apparently would not force any of the biggest Class 3A schools into the Class 4A bracket, so that could leave only 21 schools with Class 4A football in the East. Think about that: Sixteen of those 21 schools would make the playoffs, making it even easier.

And how do you think the other Class 3A schools in the neighborhood would feel about having to compete with the Xavier Saints, who have one of the most successful Class 4A football programs in the state despite ranking only 52nd in student population?

As the Metro Sports Report learned two years ago, some Class 3A schools would not be too thrilled with competing against Xavier, which has no geographic boundaries for student enrollment.

In addition, a few administrators at local Class 4A schools have hinted they might shun a potential game against the Saints if they leave for Class 3A. If that happens, Xavier might have trouble filling its non-district schedule with attractive contests against traditional opponents.

Apparently some schools in the Mississippi Athletic Conference are looking for tougher competition, rather than playing the same nine MAC opponents year after year. But there's no guarantee that would happen, either.

The Metro Sports Report engaged in some "advocacy" journalism when this issue popped up two years ago with our "Save The Valley" campaign, which was intended to raise public awareness about the issue. We have not changed our minds in the two years that have passed.

Please, let's save the Mississippi Valley Conference as a football league. It's not broken, and there's no good reason to throw it away.

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