

MVC makes changes in girls basketball

Written by Jim Ecker

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Things will be a little different for girls basketball teams in the Mississippi Valley Conference next season.

For one thing, all the MVC teams will play a 13-game conference schedule next season instead of a 16-game schedule. And for another, some regular-season games between MVC teams will not count in the league standings.

The conference approved the changes at a league meeting in Dubuque on Wednesday.

There are 14 schools in the Mississippi Valley Conference and league officials were trying to find an equitable way to crown a champion. This past season, each girls basketball team played a single game against 10 opponents and had a home-and-away series against three opponents for a 16-game league campaign.

They will follow that same formula again next season, but only one game against each opponent will count in the standings - whether they meet each other once or twice during the season. Jefferson, Kennedy and Washington will continue their home-and-away battles against each other, but only one meeting will count in the standings.

The idea is to implement a fair schedule for all teams. In the past, one team may have had an advantage by playing a weaker team twice while another team had to play two games against a stronger opponent, with all the results counting in the standings.

Mississippi Valley Conference teams cannot play a double round-robin, because that would require 26 games and would exceed the state limit for games, and they don't want to play only 13 games against MVC teams and have to replace the other three games with non-conference opponents.

The MVC will keep two divisions in girls basketball - the Mississippi Division and the Valley Division, with seven teams in each division - and will still crown division champs. And even

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though everyone will count the same 13 games in the standings, they will not crown an overall champion.

"I think it's probably fine," said Washington Coach Frank Howell. "There's probably no perfect way to determine a conference champion. This is probably as good as any of them."

Washington will have two games against Kennedy during the 2012-13 campaign, two games against Jefferson and two games against Prairie. Only one of those games will count in the standings, but it could be their first meeting or it could be their second meeting.

Which game counts will depend on overall schedules as they try to give each team six or seven home games and six or seven away games that count in the standings. It might get a little confusing to keep track, but that's what the majority of coaches wanted.

The new formula will not apply to the MVC boys basketball teams. The boys will continue to play their lopsided 16-game conference schedule, with all 16 games counting in the standings.

"If it looks like it's a good thing, then maybe they'll want to do it," said Howell. "And if we do it and it doesn't work out so well, maybe they won't want to do it. So we're the trend-setters."

Howell said B.J. Mayer, the head coach of Class 4A state champion Iowa City West, was the main proponent for changing the formula for the girls basketball standings.

"For the size of the conference that we have, this is probably as good a solution as we could have come up with to try and determine a true conference champion," said Howell. "Any way you slice it, it's not going to be a perfect solution."

In any case, Howell said he's more concerned with preparing his team for the postseason tournament than about the formula for determining the league champion.

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"The conference race is always important to me, but the thing that has always been my main focus has been our postseason play," he said. "The conference championship is definitely something you shoot for, but the biggest focus in my mind is trying to find a way to peak when you're heading into districts and regionals and trying to get into the state tournament and make a run for everything at the end of the year."

Howell said he doesn't think he'll approach a game against a conference opponent any differently, even if the result does not count in the standings. "Whenever you're going to play a game, you're going to try to win it," he said.

The three Cedar Rapids Community District schools - Jefferson, Kennedy and Washington - will continue their traditional home-and-away series, only now with a twist.

"Regardless of whether or not you label that as a conference game or not, it's going to be a big rivalry," said Howell. "I think the competitive juices are going to be flowing quite a bit, whether you designate it as a conference game or not. Those are still going to be really big games for everybody."