

## MVC girls basketball ripe for confusion

Written by Jim Ecker

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The Mississippi Valley Conference girls basketball campaign begins this week. Or does it?

You better check with your favorite school to find out for sure.

There's no doubt MVC girls basketball teams will begin facing each other this week, but will the games count in the league standings?

Usually, but not always.

The conference changed the rules in girls basketball this year. Each team will play a total of 16 games against MVC opponents during the regular season, but only 13 of those games will actually count in the standings.

Last year, all 16 games counted in the standings.

There are 14 schools in the conference and they decided to play a single round-robin in terms of crowning a true champion. And since each school has 13 opponents, they decided that only one result per opponent would count in the standings.

It sounds simple, but it's not.

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Each girls basketball team has single games this season with 10 MVC opponents, and each team has a home-and-away series with three MVC opponents. That's 16 games.

In the cases of the home-and-away meetings this season, they agreed that the second meeting would count in the standings and the first game would not. But not always.

Let's say that Team A has a home-and-away series with Team B, Team C and Team D. And let's also say that all of those games for Team A occur in that order, with the first meeting at home and the second meeting on the road.

In that case, Team A might end up playing eight or nine road games that count in the league standings and only four or five home games that count in the standings. Realizing that, the league decided to do something about it.

If there's a scheduling imbalance like that, the Mississippi Valley Conference will count the first meeting of a home-and-away series between two schools as the result that counts in the league standings.

It won't happen often, but it will happen.

"In a few cases," said Scott Kibby, the Iowa City West athletic director who handles scheduling for the league. "In a majority of them, it's the second game that counts."

That's the part that's rife for confusion. There's a master schedule for these things, but the tricky part will be constant vigilance.

Arranging schedules is a tricky business, because it's partially dependent on when gyms are available. It's not as easy as you might think to make it fair for everyone.

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And what if two schools are supposed to use their second meeting for the league standings, but it gets snowed out in February and there's no time for a makeup date before the playoffs begin? Will they revert to the first outcome or just skip it? It might depend on whether the result would have a bearing on the race and naming a champion.

The league wants all teams to have six or seven home games in Year 1 of the new plan and six or seven road games, to be balanced out from year to year.

Some coaches campaigned in favor of the balanced 13-game schedule because they felt the imbalanced 16-game schedule was occasionally unfair and gave some teams a competitive advantage or disadvantage.

Xavier girls basketball coach Tom Lilly remembers a year when the Saints played a home-and-away series against strong teams from Linn-Mar, Iowa City High and Washington while Dubuque Wahlert played home-and-away series against three lesser opponents. All 16 games counted in the standings and Wahlert beat Xavier by one game for the title.

Situations like that led to the new rule.

"The coaches liked the true champion idea. That was probably the No. 1 thing," said Randy Krejci, the MVC commissioner.

The new rule applies only to girls basketball this season. It apparently was not a major issue among the boys basketball coaches, so the boys basketball teams will continue to count all 16 of their MVC games in the standings.

The girls will play 16 games against MVC teams and count only 13 games in the standings, while the boys will play a 16-game conference schedule and count them all.

Kibby acknowledged there is a certain amount of "angst" in the league about the different

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formats, but they've decided to give it a try.

There are other options for devising an equitable league schedule, of course, but neither option has majority support.

One option would be playing 13 games against league opponents and eliminating the home-and-away series, but that's not going to happen. That would leave all of the schools scrambling to find eight non-conference games to fill the rest of their 21-game schedules, and most schools say it's hard enough to find five games against non-conference opponents.

If they eliminated the home-and-away series, it would end the annual two-game series among Jefferson, Kennedy and Washington.

"That's never going to fly," Kibby said. "Gate revenue, rivalry, transportation ... every reason under the sun.

"Those schools are going to play each other home-and-away every year."

The Mississippi Valley Conference already has two seven-team divisions, so another option would be playing a 19-game season. Each school could play two games against a division member for 12 division games, and each school could play a single game against a non-division member for another seven games to reach 19.

Some schools like that idea, because it's equitable and means you have to find only two more games to finish the 21-game schedule. But some schools don't like it, because it leads to arguments about which teams should be in which division. They also don't like it because it leaves them with little flexibility with their non-conference games.

Some say the tricky part with the 19-game proposal is the division format. It's easy to form a Northern Division with Cedar Falls, Waterloo West, Waterloo East, Dubuque Wahlert, Dubuque

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Hempstead and Dubuque Senior, but who would be the seventh member in that division?

Linn-Mar is the next northern-most school in the Valley, but it wouldn't be fair for the Lions to make all those extra trips up north.

They could rotate teams from division to division, which they already do in the MVC on a two-year basis, but so far it hasn't gained traction in terms of a 19-game basketball season.

In any case, the girls basketball games between Mississippi Valley Conference opponents will begin this week. Media outlets will try to keep the public informed, but there's lots of room for confusion.

Vigilance is required.