

IHSAA rejects changes to football playoffs

Written by Bill Seals

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BOONE - During its monthly board meeting Wednesday morning, the Iowa High School Athletic Association struck down two measures that would have brought widespread changes to the prep football playoffs.

Much of the original playoff structure will remain intact, as far as the number of qualifying teams and the traditional Wednesday-Monday-Friday structure for the first three rounds. Teams across the state will continue to play a nine-game regular season schedule.

"The (Iowa Football Coaches Association) brought this to us in December," said Tom Keating, Chairman of the IHSAA Board of Control and Cedar Rapids Xavier principal. "We considered it very seriously because they're right in the middle of it. We didn't feel in December we had enough information to make a decision and that's why we went out and sought input from people in our areas.

"The input helped us in making this decision. It appears that this is something we're not ready to accept at this time," he said. "We need some more study, and can perhaps do that in this two-year cycle with district football."

While the board opted against widespread changes, it did approve other postseason-related measures regarding elimination of sister districts and pre-set playoff pairings.

Sister districts have been discontinued for classes 8-player through 3A and will not be implemented in 4A. Additionally, a 125-mile travel limitation will be instituted for first-round playoff games and the IHSAA will no longer pre-set brackets. Pairings will be determined after each round.

The board also approved a non-playoff recommendation that adds more discretion to the forfeiture policy. Instead of seeing its respective season end following a forfeit, a school will have a chance to appeal its case to the board prior to any ruling.

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"Currently, once a team starts a season, if they have a forfeiture their season is over," IHSAA Executive Director Rick Wulkow said during a December board meeting. "There are times that I don't think that's a good policy. If you have a flu epidemic, 20 kids are out for football, eight of them are sick and two of them are injured, then you have 10 able bodies.

"The school's administration would present their issue. If it's 'We don't want to play Xavier and Kennedy because they're going to beat the crap out of us,' then I'm sorry. You either play them or your season is over."

But the biggest news from Wednesday morning's meeting were the two proposals the IHSAA board declined to vote on. Board members cited input from their constituents across the state as a major reason for not making a motion for approval.

"My communication was with principals of the biggest 64 schools, because that's who I represent," Keating said. "While it certainly wasn't unanimous, it was pretty clear that those principals had visited with their ADs and coaches who didn't want to lose that ninth game. A lot of it was revenue - to lose that possibility every other year of that home game. Booster clubs depend on that and obviously the gate receipts are an important part."

Perhaps the biggest push from the IFCA was the desire to get away from teams playing four games in 14 days (last game of the regular season plus the first three rounds of the playoffs), as the current system dictates. But the prospect of losing a home game every two years outweighed the good in overhauling playoff scheduling.

"While those folks are cognizant of the challenges of the Friday-Wednesday-Monday-Friday scenario, I think they felt at this time that if it came down to eight games versus nine games and that was the only decision, they'd prefer the nine games," Keating said.

"Maybe a study in the next couple years will show we can do a nine-game and still get away from the Friday-Wednesday-Monday-Friday deal. If that happens, great, but it's going to take a lot of study and a lot of work to make that happen."

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High school coaches have learned how to deal with a compressed playoff schedule in past years and will continue to be tasked with it for at least the next two years. The IHSAA board won't revisit the issue of playoff changes for at least the next two years during the duration of the current district setup across all classes.

"It is a challenge, but coaches have learned how to manage it," Keating said. "They don't wear the kids out between those games. By the time they get to that part of the season, what's ingrained is ingrained. They have a pretty good idea of what they need to be doing."

Keating said he thought the biggest push for change came from schools with smaller rosters, which have been hurt by the short turnaround between playoff games.

"The schools that don't have great numbers in football are the schools that are affected the most dramatically," Keating said. "Maybe it was just time to stop talking about the challenge and do something about it. Folks have brought up the challenge of those quick turnarounds for years."