

# High-school cross country: New rule stirs competition debate

Change to help one-coach teams draws critics

By **Steve Blackledge**

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In recent years, the Ohio High School Athletic Association has gone to great lengths to improve the competitive balance in its postseason tournaments, but a change to cross country has drawn the ire of some coaches who think the balance is being compromised.

The OHSAA instituted a rule change to help schools where boys and girls teams share a coach by making sure both teams are in the same division. This would eliminate conflicts for coaches and fans should the boys and girls teams be scheduled to compete at the same time in different locations.



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Creighton Barrett, left, and Kristin Faulkner, right, of DeSales will compete against runners from larger schools because of an OHSAA rules change.

The new formula takes the total enrollment for a school and divides it by two to determine the division in which a school will compete. Schools with 310 students or more will compete in Division I, 163 to 309 in Division II, and less than 162 in Division III.

Cross country will be the only OHSAA sport to determine divisions in this manner. In other sports, teams are slotted based on the total number of boys or girls at the school.

“We discussed this for the good part of two years and determined that it was in the best interest for all concerned to make a heavy push to accommodate these schools with only one coach, and to avoid double travel expenses by ensuring that their boys and girls compete in the same division at the same site,” said Dale Gabor, a retired athletic director at Cleveland St. Ignatius and the track and cross country liaison for the OHSAA.

Gabor estimated that roughly 500 of the 641 schools sponsoring cross country statewide have common coaches. About 60 had boys and girls teams in different divisions last year.

“Not only did the coach have to make an awkward decision which team to stay with and which team to send the assistant with, students from those schools were divided and parents sometimes had to choose between siblings on both teams,” OHSAA spokesman Tim Stried said. “A lot of states have used this procedure of determining divisions for years.”

However, the proposal was not endorsed by the Ohio Track and Cross Country Coaches Association. President Scott Dorne spoke on behalf of his constituents in a letter to the OHSAA board of directors.

“It is quite clear that our membership finds the idea of using a single-divisional assignment for a school not in the best interest of the student-athletes and their coaches in the sport of cross country,” wrote Dorne, the

athletic director at Thomas Worthington. "Moving programs out of their natural division creates competitive advantages and disadvantages and does not solve the problem."

Watterson coach Matt McGowan has been outspoken about the new alignment procedure. His boys, who won a Division II district championship last year, were elevated to Division I. But 61 percent of Watterson's students are female so, with 277 boys, the Eagles will run against schools with up to three times more boys in district competition.

"You're creating a coed division for cross country when they are none in any other sport," said McGowan, suggesting that Title IX laws might be violated unless schools designate faculty representatives for teams of both genders.

"They've created more problems than they're solving," he said. "To give a competitive advantage or disadvantage based on one gender having more students isn't equitable at all. Some kids and teams are going to be denied chances of moving on in the tournament because of the problems this has caused. I would be just as passionate about this if my team wasn't affected."

Only a handful teams from central Ohio will be affected by the change, many of them in the Central Catholic League. Recent trends have shown a decline statewide in male enrollment at coed parochial schools. Hartley's girls (334) caught a break because boys represent just 38.6 percent of its enrollment. The Hawks will be Division II.

But DeSales, with 292 boys, will move up to Division I because girls make up 55 percent of the student population. Coach Bob Lennon recalls several times when he traveled with his boys team to a Division II regional at Troy and missed the girls meet at Lancaster or Pickerington North. Combining divisions is not the answer, he said.

"I'm expected to compete with (Ohio Capital Conference)-sized schools in the regional and schools like Cleveland St. Ignatius with over 1,000 boys if we're lucky enough to get to the state," Lennon said. "I don't see how it's fair."

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