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NJSIAA wants all high school athletic transfers to sit 30 days

MICHAEL McGARRY Staff Writer Jan 6, 2017



Edward Lea / staff photographer

Members of the Holy Spirit football team enter the field for their Thanksgiving game against Atlantic City. Spartans coach A.J. Russo says that after losing the 2015 season finale to the Vikings, his players went right back to work in the weight room. 'It's all because of the kids,' Russo says of this year's 9-2 record off seasons of 5-7 in 2015 and 4-6 in 2014.

The New Jersey State Interscholastic Athletic Association wants to simplify and toughen the state transfer rule for high school athletes.

But will the proposal cast too wide a dragnet?

The NJSIAA, which governs most New Jersey high school sports, this week unveiled a proposal that would require all athletes who transfer to a new school to sit the first 30 days of the season regardless of whether they move or not.



Athletes playing multiple sports would have to sit for the first 30 days of each season.

The proposal also calls for the following:

If an athlete transfers after the start of a season, the player would have to sit 30 days and miss the state tournament.

All athletes — even those who only play on freshmen or junior varsity teams — would be subject to the new rule.

Athletes who transfer to a third school would have to sit 30 days and miss the state tournament.

There would be no appeals.

“What we’re trying to do is address a number of concerns,” NJSIAA project manager Michael Zopicchi said in a conference call with reporters this week. “One is kids going back and forth between schools. The second is multiple transfers. The third is kids and their parents shopping programs to figure out which is the best for them athletically.”

The transfer of high-profile athletes is one of the biggest problems facing New Jersey high school sports.

The movement of athletes, especially from public to nonpublic schools, creates a tremendous amount of acrimony between schools.

“It affects athletes academically,” Zopicchi said. “Everytime someone switches from one school to another, they lose three months on their reading and math scores.

“It’s also affecting the integrity of the game.”

The NJSIAA has tried to deal with the matter in a variety of ways. The current rule requires only athletes who transfer without a bonafide change of residence to sit for 30 days. The NJSIAA defines a bonafide change of residence as a move from one public school district another. The rule says athletes cannot transfer for “athletic advantage,” but athletes do that all the time as “athletic advantage” is difficult to prove.

“It’s pretty clear the way rule is currently constituted,” Zopicchi said, “we can’t consistently and effectively administer it.”

Earlier attempts

The NJSIAA in the mid-2000s passed a rule that required transfers to sit for an entire school year but reversed that proposal because it was too harsh.

The state high schools in December 2014 voted against a proposal that would have required transfers to sit the first 45 days of the season and miss the state tournament.

“Everytime the state comes up with something, I feel like Charlie Brown about to kick a football,” Absegami athletic director and Cape-Atlantic League president Steve Fortis said. “It’s going to get convoluted.”



The NJSIAA executive committee will review the proposal at its Wednesday meeting. The committee must pass the proposal on first reading at that meeting and on second reading in February for it to go into effect for July 1, 2017.

If the executive committee votes against it, New Jersey high schools could approve the measure at its December 2017 general membership meeting. It would not take effect until 2018 if that happens.

NJSIAA officials said they felt strongly that the proposal should include all athletes, not just the ones on varsity teams.

“You have situations where students look at the depth chart and realize they’re not going to play and then go to a school where they’re going to play,” Zopicchi said.

The fallout

The problem with any transfer rule is that for every high-profile athlete who switches schools multiple times there is an average cross country runner or baseball player who will be penalized just because his or her family moved.

"There's going to be that kid who moves because their dad gets a new job," Fortis said. "Nobody likes punishing a kid for that reason. The (NJSIAA) has never figured out a way to address that. This blanket policy simplifies and makes it easy to understand, but you're going to end up catching kids who did nothing wrong at the same time you're catching kids who tried to take advantage of the situation."

But NJSIAA officials say the proposal would affect a limited number of student athletes. There are more than 250,000 high school athletes in New Jersey and only about 1,500 transfers in a school year, according to the NJSIAA.

NJSIAA officials also noted that even if the proposal passes, the transfer rule would still be among the most lenient in the country. Zopicchi noted that 24 states require transfers to sit out for a year.

"The 30-day sit is the shortest sit in the country," he said. "During the 30-day sit, they can still practice and participate in all team activities. They get the bulk of the positives that being on a team provides, but they can't compete. That (requiring everyone to sit 30 days) is the negative, but we feel the tradeoff is worth it."

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I've covered high school sports and variety of other events and teams - including the ShopRite LPGA Classic and the Phillies - since 1993.