

The Morning Journal (<http://www.morningjournal.com>)

The view from press row: OHSAA's competitive balance is a step backward for high school athletic equality

By Jon Behm, *The Morning Journal*

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Editor's note: Welcome to the first edition of a weekly prep column written by staff members of The Morning Journal. In all other levels of sports — professional, semi-professional, college, etc. — writers offer opinions via column on a regular basis. This is not often the case with high school. However, there are plenty of issues and moments in the prep sports world that deserve commentary, hence the column that will be in your Morning Journal weekly. This column is not intended to cause controversy or call out students, coaches, administrations or anyone else. Rather, it is a forum that will allow The Morning Journal staff as writers who cover high school sports to shine an even greater light on what is going on in your own back yard. We hope you enjoy.

Finally, the state of Ohio knows exactly what I had a sneaking suspicion would be the case.

The Ohio High School Athletic Association's competitive balance initiative is ineffective.

However, I must admit I was caught off guard by one thing: It is more than ineffective.

It is in fact a step backward because what it appears to do is unfairly punish smaller private institutions.

For those of you who have not kept up, competitive balance is what the OHSAA has been working on since 2011 to try and bridge the gap between private and public schools when it comes to high school athletics.

In essence, a computer program is given enrollment data for each school and uses a formula to increase enrollment figures based on where athletes live and how long they've been part of a given school district.

If you're confused, you're not alone. Most are, and with good reason.

When the OHSAA [released divisional alignments that included the new cycle of enrollment data as well as the competitive balance formula on April 6](#), nothing had been done to bridge the gap.

In fact, as I've said, all it really appeared to have done was unjustly punish smaller private institutions.

Let's take a look at football (not to discredit the other fall sports that will be subject to competitive balance in 2017, but let's be honest. Football is the cash cow that drives virtually all of the decisions at the prep level and the success of the OHSAA initiative will be ultimately be determined by it, fair or not).

[According to the data on Division I schools](#), no teams from a lower division jumped up to D-I because of competitive balance adjustments. Six teams did advance from D-II, but that is due to increased base enrollment figures.

So, competitive balance did nothing to even the playing field in the division where the most complaints — and the largest talent gap — exist.

Unless you think Walnut Hills, Princeton, Groveport-Madison, Delaware Hayes, Massillon Perry or Miamisburg — the six teams that moved up to Division I — stand a chance at knocking off St. Xavier or St. Ignatius, the teams that met in the D-I state final last year and boast the largest post-competitive balance enrollment figures in the state at 1,532 and 1,427, respectively.

Compare that to Findlay, the smallest D-I school after competitive balance adjustments at 617, and it's clear to see that the top-dogs of high school football will not even bat an eye at how much harder competitive balance has made their lives.

To see the teams that are actually impacted by the implementation of competitive balance, you must drop down a few divisions.

There is something to be said for teams like [Akron Hoban and Benedictine being forced up to Division II from D-III](#) due to competitive balance or [Toledo Central Catholic joining D-III from D-IV](#), but those teams all have a proven track record of success and were teams that were already on the fringe of a division change due to base enrollment numbers.

Instead, I'm talking about teams such as Lutheran West, which was [moved up to D-IV](#) due to competitive balance. The Longhorns boast an enrollment figure of 163, one of six D-IV teams below 200 pre-competitive balance and by far the smallest.

By simply being a private school and thus drawing students from cities that are not Rocky River, Lutheran West is forced up a division even though the Longhorns have not made the playoffs since 2005 and can only boast three winning seasons since that playoff appearance.

Or, consider Lutheran West's sister school, Lutheran East.

[The Falcons have been promoted from D-VII to D-VI](#). Lutheran East had seen moderate success since dropping to D-VII in 2015, posting a 5-5 record that year and a 6-4 record last year. The 2016 mark for the Falcons was their first winning season since 2006.

The scary part is that Lutheran East, which had a pre-competitive balance enrollment figure of 99, was three students away from being in D-V.

The kicker is that Lutheran East and Lutheran West — along with the majority of smaller religion-affiliated schools — have the vast majority of their student bodies come from parochial grade schools, which is no different than a junior high student advancing to the high school of its school district.

But it is not simply the changing of divisions that proves competitive balance is unfair to small private schools.

Consider some of the public schools that dropped a division as private schools moved up:

- Coldwater — A team that has made the playoffs every year since 1995 and claimed six state titles and four runner-up finishes in that span. Now D-VI.
- Maria Stein Marion Local — A playoff qualifier every year but 2004 since 1999 that boasts eight state titles and two runner-up finishes in that time span. Now D-VI.

- Kirtland — Boasts three state titles and two runner-up finishes during a playoff streak that dates back to 2010. Remained D-VI even though base enrollment figures had it in D-V.

How is it fair — or competitively balanced — that those three teams are now all in D-VI?

The simple answer is that it is not.

That is because the “competitive” aspect of competitive balance is completely ignored.

Does the initiative attempt to balance enrollment numbers? Yes.

Does it even begin to factor in the competitiveness of a program? Not in the slightest.

Until the success of a program is factored into the equation so that teams making the playoffs and winning state titles are rising through the divisions while those posting losing records are dropping, there will never truly be competitive balance.

There will only be an ever widening gap where the teams that should be helped by the OHSAA initiative are hindered.

And that, quite frankly, is unacceptable.

Behm can be reached at JBehm@MorningJournal.com; @MJ_JBehm on Twitter

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