

Commentary: New WIAA rule proposal deals with transfers and influence of club sports

Tim Martinez: High School Sports



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Among the list of new rule proposals for the WIAA includes one pertaining to transfers and the influence of club sports

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A lot of people look at the Washington Interscholastic Activities Association as this all-powerful body that rules over the state's high school athletic teams with an iron fist led by a dictator.



But the reality is that the WIAA is a representative body, and it is that body that establishes the rules.

The process of changing rules begins each year with the submission of amendment proposals. This year's initial list of amendments was sent out last week.

It's always interesting to see what ideas are being presented. More often than not, proposals are administrative in nature — i.e. practice limitations, the kind of training coaches received — or are specific to one sport, like the pitch-count limitation in baseball.

Heck, one proposal last year had to do with the kind of uniform wrestlers are permitted to wear in competition. Hardly, earth-shattering stuff.

But there is one proposal this year that is sure to create opinions and stir emotions. It pertains to transfers and the influence of club sports on high school athletics.

According to the proposal, students who transfer schools in the middle of their high school career would be ineligible to compete at their new school for one year if a teammate on the student's non-school sports team plays on the team at the new school. The same would apply if the student received instruction outside of school from a coach who serves on the coaching staff at the new school.

Most proposals are submitted by a group of schools, usually from the same league. This proposal however was submitted by the Executive Board of the WIAA.

"The Executive Board has been looking at the impact club sports have been having on high school sports in the state," WIAA Executive Director Mike Colbrese said. "In some cases, clubs have been directing families to have kids transfer. The Executive Board feels this is not good for high school sports in our state, and this proposal is one way we could address it."

Colbrese said the proposal was based on a similar rules passed recently in Oregon, California and Michigan.

"The Executive Board reached out to the association in Oregon, as well as California and Michigan, and asked what impact the rule has had in their state," Colbrese said. "The feedback we received was positive. The Board submitted this proposal as a way to test the waters and see if it's something our member schools would be interested in and support."

Member schools have about month to review all proposed amendments prior to the WIAA's Winter Coalition on March 19 at the WIAA offices in Renton.

At the Winter Coalition, each proposal is presented and explained to member schools, who are then given the opportunity to provide feedback. This year, Colbrese said the general public will be given the opportunity to provide input on proposals.

After the review process, proposals could be amended, if the submitting body sees fit, before they are sent before the Representative Assembly for vote in late April.

For high schools in the WIAA, the Representative Assembly is comprised of 35 delegates from the nine WIAA districts. Each district receives a number of delegates proportional to the number of schools in the district.

For a proposed amendment to pass, it requires 60 percent positive vote, or 21 of 35 delegates.

History has shown that in this process, the more dramatic a change proposed, the harder it is to get a 60 percent approval, at least on the first attempt.

A couple of years ago, a proposal was made that would make an athlete who changes schools within a 50-mile radius ineligible for a portion of their first season at the new school.

That proposal was defeated.

Opponents may have found that proposal too broad. This one has a much narrower focus. But it's still unclear if that will help it garner enough support.

Colbrese said that any ruling of ineligibility is subject to a waiver process in which families can petition the eligibility committee in each district to show that a hardship exists. Eligibility may then be restored even if a transfer comes in violation of a rule.

And if the district's eligibility committee does not approve the hardship, that decision could be appealed to Colbrese.

But again, it's difficult to tell if that will be enough to assuage any concerns people might have about this proposal.

It's an interesting proposal, one that will be sure to ignite some dialogue about competitive balance and fair play in high school sports.

We'll see where that discussion leads in the weeks ahead.

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