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The PIAA transfer problem is trickier than it seems (column)



MIKE GROSS | Sports Writer | Mar 30, 2018



Without Diamond Johnson, Neumann-Goretti's girls' basketball team probably would have won a state championship.

The Saints, from Philadelphia, have won four in a row. In their 63-46 win over Bishop Canevin Monday for the PIAA Class 3A title, Johnson didn't even start.

But when Johnson transferred to N-G from Phoebus High School in Virginia in February, she walked into the eye of a storm.

There is an increasingly loud and angry cohort, among people who follow high school sports in Pennsylvania, who feel that the game is rigged.

For those people, Johnson is the latest Exhibit A:

A mid-season transfer. From a school four states and nearly 300 miles away, to what amounts to an elite magnet school for basketball. By a kid averaging 33 points a game at her old school.

District 12, which represents the School District of Philadelphia, handled Johnson's transfer. She actually enrolled at N-G in February, but wasn't allowed to play until after the District 12 committee approved the transfer March 5.

"I have to give District 12 credit for that," PIAA Executive Director Robert Lombardi said Tuesday.

"They did everything properly and people might not like the decision, but they treated the student fairly."

Not everyone is giving District 12 credit.

"It seems every year now, the state tournament comes and the eastern part of the state dominates," Bishop Canevin coach Scott Dibble told the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette last week. "The reason they do is because kids go to school wherever they want.

"I should've gone down to Florida two weeks ago and brought two players up here to play and said they're here for academics and family reasons. But (District Seven, or the Western Pa. Interscholastic Athletic Association) would never let that happen because they have ethics and stick by them."

We should point out here an interesting truth: Philadelphia has, arguably, 4-5 elite magnet schools for boys' basketball and another 2-3 for girls basketball. Pittsburgh, arguably, doesn't have any.

Western Pa. certainly has one in Kennedy Catholic, in the Northwest corner of the state (District 10, not the WPIAL). And the Pittsburgh area certainly does have such powerhouses in other sports, like football.

Another truth: Contrary to popular belief, the folks who run the PIAA look at the entire morass of competitive equity issues - transfers, recruiting, the public/private divide - with as much dismay as anyone else.

They hate it, too. They just don't publicly say so. They realize the complexity involved and the hurdles to reform.

But they keep trying.

On Monday, the PIAA Board of Directors passed an amendment to the transfer rule. It makes students ineligible to play a sport if they transfer from a school at which they've already played half a season in that sport.

And if they haven't played half a season, in-season transfers must wait 21 days to play.

Further, the Competition Committee last week recommended a first reading of an even stronger limitation: Making senior-year transfers ineligible for the postseason.

That is, if you play basketball at School A as a junior, and transfer to School B during or before your senior year, you can't play postseason basketball for your new school.

That change gets a first-reading look in May. It can't actually happen until three readings and then a vote are complete.

Still, Lombardi said, "That's pretty strong. There was a feeling that a lot of late-career transfers are a hidden attempt at competitive advantage."

Under the amendment approved Monday, Diamond Johnson would not have been able to play hoops at N-G this season.

Except that the rule can be waived by district committees for exceptional or unusual circumstances. District 12 officials cited a "private family situation," as the reason for Johnson's transfer.

Would they have regarded the private family situation as an exceptional or unusual circumstance?

The Competition Committee, formed a little over a year ago, keeps whittling away.

"A lot of things have been percolating," said Lombardi. "You have a lot of good research and good ideas, and people who aren't afraid to speak their minds."

There are hurdles, and at least one brick wall.

When private schools joined PIAA in 1972, they did so via state law, an addition to the state's public-school code:

"Private schools shall be permitted, if otherwise qualified, to be members of the Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic Association."

"Members," cannot be treated differently, in any way, than other members. Thus no separate public/private championships. No factoring public/private into classifications by enrollment multipliers, etc., etc.

The PIAA can't mess with that, or there will be litigation. They can't change it. Only the state legislature can.

"We're not going to break the law," Lombardi said. "That isn't going anywhere."

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