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TOPICAL

TODD AARON GOLDEN: It's long past time to ban the semistate

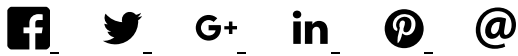
By Todd Aaron Golden Tribune-Star 10 hrs ago



Tribune-Star/Joseph C. Garza

No Miner was finer: Members of the Linton community applaud and take photos as the Miners' Evan Slover walks off the stage after he was named the winner of the Arthur L. Trester Mental Attitude Award for Class 2A boys basketball Saturday at the state finals in Indianapolis.

JCG



Last Saturday, I was supposed to cover Linton's IHSAA Class 2A boys basketball state championship game against Andrean at Bankers Life Fieldhouse. At the last minute, I had to cancel that plan as a flu bug that ultimately kicked my rear end for five days straight reared its ugly head.

So I wasn't there to witness the game last Saturday. And it appears, flu or no flu, many of you made no personal connection to the state finals either — those of you reading this in Linton excepted of course.

Attendance for the IHSAA state finals for the two sessions was 22,476. Turnout was 9,568 for the Class A and 2A session and 12,908 for 3A and 4A.

It's the worst turnout for the state finals since the class era began in 1997-98. You can bet that it was likely not lower in the pre-class era either.

So what gives? Many had ideas. Too many things going on, too many modern distractions. Spring break for many schools. Small town community spirit and identifiable pride in high school sports vs. suburban apathy and no identifiable connection with high school sports. The popularly demonized PRIVATE SCHOOLS!

There's an element of truth in all of the above. Linton certainly brought their share of fans — high school sports provide the identity for the community. It's no different than when the Indianapolis Colts represent the state on a national level. It's about pride.

That pride doesn't exist in the same proportion in every community and demographic. Many wonder why Indy suburban schools — Carmel and Ben Davis did not bring large contingents to the 4A title game, certainly not reflecting their massive enrollment — rarely show up in numbers.

I can speak to this as an Indy suburban school grad. Suburbs, almost by definition, are places to live, not places to settle down in and identify yourself as being a part of. A suburban school is really not much different than the office buildings and factories that draw people to suburbs in the first place. They're functional, not a point of pride like small-town schools are.

Private schools? Most aren't big enough to have a huge fan base. Those that are larger have their hard core of support ... and are often despised by their neighbors.

These are dynamics that are going to exist no matter what the state tournament format is. So how does the IHSAA try to conquer it?

My idea? Ban the semistate. Be gone with it. Send it packing.

I advocated for the death of the semistate two years ago when I wrote a series on Improving Hoosier Hysteria and last Saturday's attendance did nothing to shake me from that opinion. Banning the semistate makes more sense than ever.

The biggest problem with the state finals is that much of the state doesn't feel engaged. Theoretically, every state championship game should be a North vs. South battle, but it's not as if fans in Fort Wayne care about the Region schools, or, Terre Haute people care about the Louisville area schools. And, of course, the rest of the state really doesn't care when it's two Indy suburban schools, as the 4A game was.

A way to solve this is to send the regional champions to Indy instead, so four teams make it in each class to the big event. Make the regional what the semistate used to be in the pre-class days. Spread the wealth and the geographic profile of the schools.

If that had been done this year? Mishawaka Penn, Lafayette Central Catholic, Marion, Shenandoah (southeast of Anderson), Crispus Attucks, Bloomfield and Center Grove would have been added to list of state tournament participants. Not every corner of the

state is represented, but it's a much broader brush.

Not only that, but then the IHSAA state finals becomes a multi-day tournament that feels more like an event again. A Sweet 16, even if four state title winners emerge from among the 16. Media coverage would likely be better. If media outlets in every corner of the state knew they would likely have a representative in Indy? They're far more likely to invest in coverage of the event beyond just their local participants, like it used to be in the pre-class days.

Another reason to ban the semistate? The tournament is too long. It takes four weekends to complete the IHSAA basketball postseason for both genders. When one of those weeks only serves to knock the total of schools from 16 to eight? There's fat that can be cut. Three weekends is plenty of time to complete a postseason tournament and to prevent erosion of interest.

Would banning the semistate be some miracle cure-all? Of course not. Are there logistical issues to conquer, such as working around arena availability? Of course.

However, people all across the state need to feel like they have some skin in the state tournament game. Until it does? The IHSAA will continue to see attendance erode.

So ban the semistate. Take 16 teams to the state finals. Make Hoosier Hysteria a big event again.

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Todd Aaron Golden has been Sports Editor and Indiana State beat writer since September 2004. Born in Milwaukee but an Indiana resident most of his adult life, he previously worked in Jeffersonville, Columbus and Eau Claire, Wis.

