

Oh, to be king of the IHSAA for a day

By Ryan O'Leary - 8/14/20 11:31 PM



If two MIC teams deserve to meet in the state finals, the IHSAA should let it happen instead of gerrymandering the tournament to appease the have-nots. Chris Williams | Daily Journal

As I told newly minted IHSAA commissioner Paul Neidig just a couple of weeks ago, I certainly don't envy the position he's being thrust into as he takes over. The ongoing (and, in Indiana, still growing) COVID-19 pandemic has made life more difficult for the majority of us, but Neidig is truly in a tough spot.

Deciding how to proceed with the coronavirus still in full bloom isn't easy. Many states across the country have either pushed their fall sports to the spring or cancelled them altogether, and in a world where money was not at all a factor, it might be easier for Neidig and others to make a similar choice.

But for better or worse, money is *always* a factor in the United States — and Neidig has made no secret of the fact that if the IHSAA's revenue stream (translation: the state football tournament) were to dry up this fall, the survival of the organization could be threatened. And it's clear that survival instincts have been at least playing some role in the decision-making process, or lack thereof, during the run-up to the fall season.

Look, I can't fault Neidig for taking self-preservation into account; I write about sports for a living, so it's not like I'd have the safest job in the world if it all shut down again. We all want to remain relevant, so I get it.

(Speaking of, all of the chirping about how "the media wants the season to be cancelled" is so incredibly stupid. Do *you* sit around rooting for your own professional extinction? Didn't think so. Me either. I would want sports to happen even if my livelihood didn't depend on them. But that doesn't mean I can just pretend that what's happening isn't happening. Reality is what it is.)

Neidig has many challenges staring him in the face as he gets started, and the virus-related ones are obviously the top priority. But even if COVID-19 vanished tomorrow, the IHSAA would still be in need of some fixes.

Luckily, I'm here to help. Here's a short list of some of the items I'd tackle first if I were king of the IHSAA for just one day:

Was blind, but now I seed

This one we've covered before, but it bears repeating: Why are we not seeding the state tournaments? Indiana has so many tools at its disposal when it comes to ranking teams effectively, especially in football and basketball, that continuing with a blind draw is borderline criminal. What on earth is the appeal of the top two teams in the state potentially meeting in a sectional semifinal?

Divide and conquer

Speaking of which, why would you put two top teams in the same sectional anyway?

There's no need to group teams into pods two years in advance when you're not doing the draw until late in the regular season anyway — let it play out a bit and then spread the best teams out across different sectionals.

And do it in a way that makes sense, please. Having all eight MIC teams funnel into the bottom half of the state football bracket (Carmel was just moved south this fall) is completely indefensible. You could make a strong case that the eight or 10 best teams in Indiana are all on one half of the draw now.

If the schools from Fort Wayne, South Bend and northwest Indiana want to complain about imbalance and the fact that we almost always wind up with a MIC-on-MIC state final, maybe they should remedy the situation by fielding better teams.

Don't punish one league for being dominant. And don't punish football fans by making them shell out money to see a 63-0 bloodletting in the state finals. Get two teams there that belong instead of gerrymandering the tournament to appease the have-nots.

Use the tools you have

There was quite an uproar during the boys state swim meet this past winter when the 200-yard medley relay saw one team (Franklin) disqualified for debatably leaving the starting block early while another (Chesterton) clearly left nearly half a second early and got away with it.

How could such a controversy have been avoided, you ask? The IU Natatorium, which hosts the state meet each year, already has the technology to monitor relay exchanges and false starts — the IHSAA just doesn't use it. Why not?

And finally...

Forget about the money

Indiana is a sports-crazed state. We host Final Fours here regularly. There was a Super Bowl here. Basketball is the unofficial state religion. We might be better equipped to host an Olympic Games than any American city, Los Angeles aside. Do you really think that any self-respecting official would allow the state's governing body for high school sports to collapse?

Losing a football season this fall would undoubtedly hurt the IHSAA financially. But thousands upon thousands of other entities nationwide have been threatened by the ongoing pandemic, and life jackets have been thrown to many of them. Somebody in the government — state or federal — could be convinced to come to the rescue if Indiana high school sports were truly in jeopardy. (I mean, really. If we have the money to save cruise lines, we should be able to afford to save literally everyone else.)

So don't make decisions as if cash rules everything around you. Do what's right for the kids. That's who the IHSAA is supposed to be here for, right?

I'm not saying one way or another whether that means we should go forward with the season; I'm not a medical expert and won't ever pretend to be. But listening to those who are experts makes more sense than blindly plowing ahead out of self-preservation and the fear of being the wet blanket. If it's not safe to proceed, then don't.

Cancelling the season, or even postponing it, would certainly not help one's popularity (especially in an election year). But sometimes leaders have to make hard decisions.

I'm glad I'm not in Neidig's seat for that one.

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