

**Bring on Friday Night Lights,
Monday Night Hoops**



Can football and basketball co-exist?

Not in the — “we’ll hang out at the field house and you stick to the gym” — sort of way.

That’s the status quo.

We're talking about something a lot closer: Like shoulder-to-shoulder.

Outdoors, indoors. Cleats, high-tops. Jerseys, tank tops. Prolate spheroid, bouncy roundball.

This is beginning to sound like a George Carlin routine.



Even in athletic departments where football and basketball programs remain cordial and supportive of each other — there are demarcation lines.

When football teams make the playoffs in a normal year — basketball waits.

Go to a Thanksgiving week tournament and you can tell which teams are having a good football season. Which team’s players don't have their “basketball legs” under them? Who is starting freshmen and

sophomores because the varsity regulars are still in shoulder pads and helmets?

But can they exist simultaneously? Can they share players? Should they share players?

One wonders if here in Illinois we will soon find out.

Say the word "overlap" in the presence of an athletic director or coach of either sport and there's this expression of dread that comes over more than a few of them.

They do not like that word: overlap.

They are looking at the school calendar. Starting in February there are five months left in the academic year — if you are generous and count June, too.

If anything is to be preserved of both basketball and football, overlapping seasons might be the surest way of salvaging both.

Small schools, which rely on multisport athletes in team sports, are not keen on that prospect. The potential for injury is increased, for one thing, for athletes that try to do both. But simply having enough students for both team sports is another. Some schools have rules prohibiting athletes from being on more than one team at a time.

The Illinois High School Association is looking at that calendar, too. It is supposed to be coming up with a plan that its board of directors can vote on come Jan. 27.

In all likelihood, the IHSA has not given up hope on conducting some sort of playoff series, at least for basketball and for football. Volleyball

and wrestling, too, if they can swing it.

Illinois COVID-19 numbers are trending in the right direction and the arrival of a vaccine might mean the governor could still put the state in Phase 5 of its Restore Illinois plan.

Wishful thinking?

OK, a little. But the potential is there.

Why those sports?

Firstly, it's because they are the most popular in terms of student participation, fan support and general interest.

Secondly, because the organization is cash-strapped. The pandemic has put it in a bind. Its financial shape isn't as dire as that of the Illinois Elementary School Association, which is hoping to just survive the year. But losses this year for the IHSA were projected to be pretty steep.

Nor is anyone suggesting that the IHSA would put its financial stake above the welfare of athletes. Look at its cautious approach so far — cancelling last year's boys March Madness and its willingness to conduct regionals and sectionals for fall sports for no return at all. It's grumbled a few times, pushed back on restrictions at the start of the winter season, but it has followed Illinois Department of Public Health guidelines. Its priorities are in the right place.

Still, football and basketball postseasons could be the financial lift the organization needs.

In fiscal year 2019 — the last school year of "normal" — those were the biggest earning sports in terms of state tournament revenue. Boys

basketball brought in a net \$994,416. Football did \$618,576. Even in 2020, when COVID-19 truncated the boys basketball tournament, basketball earned \$522,334 for the state series and football was at \$865,208.

Girls volleyball and wrestling are earners, too. In 2019, volleyball did a net \$148,091 and wrestling \$70,449. In 2020, it was even better: volleyball was at \$213,686 and wrestling \$149,799.

But to generate even a portion of that sort of revenue, the IHSA needs a postseason — and a few fans, be it from limited gate or streaming subscriptions. But a postseason adds weeks to the schedule. Do that, and those sports won't be bumping up against each other like at Thanksgiving, there will be genuine overlap.

Well, if there must be overlap — that dreaded overlap — let it be a structured overlap.

Come February, there will be roughly 21 weeks left to the school year.

Allocate 12 to 14 weeks for football, maybe even move it back from its icy February start under the modified calendar. From start to finish, it's Friday Night Lights. There's a little more leeway for outdoor gatherings — so at least the parents will get to watch those games.

From the start of February until the end of May, it's Monday Night Basketball. Boys-girls doubleheaders. One game for each team per week. Schools can set up the TV cameras and broadcast the contests.

Monday nights are not ideal — ask anyone who plays girls basketball in Illinois. The weekend layoff before games is a coaching challenge, true, but manageable.

Scheduling practices for both will require some creativity, some understanding, some juggling by everyone involved.

But this will let football have a full season and playoffs and get basketball close to 15 games before holding some sort of postseason series.

And all those other team sports? Offhand, try to preserve Tuesdays, Thursdays and Saturdays for them. Maybe boys soccer can live on Friday nights along with football. Set aside Saturdays for track and wrestling. Midweek contests for volleyball, baseball and softball. Divvying up will be painful, but doable.

There are other ways to shoehorn the two seasons. Basketball jamborees, such as travel teams organize, is one option, but multiple-team events run headlong into COVID-19 restrictions. A district system for football might shorten the playoff calendar by folding a couple of rounds into the regular season.

But a "game of the week" strategy for both football and basketball preserves schedules, diminishes the impact of overlap and at least gives athletes who do both a shot at continuing to suit up.

ttaylor@starcourier.com