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'High school basketball in Indiana is at a tipping point.' How one coach won't lie down.

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Published 7:46 a.m. ET Jan. 8, 2022 | Updated 8:12 a.m. ET Jan. 8, 2022

WEST LAFAYETTE – It was a great high school basketball game. Tense? Yes. There was even a little trash talk between the coaches in the fourth quarter that went something like this: “Shut up!” And then: “No, you shut up!”

About 20 minutes after visiting Tech held off Harrison for a 64-62 on Friday night for a North Central Conference victory on Friday night, Harrison coach Mark Rinehart sat alone in an office down the hall from the gym, where a few fans and parents still lingered.

Rinehart, in his 11th season at Harrison, wanted to make it clear his comments that followed did not hinge on whether the last-second 3-point shot by Jonah Lucas went in (it did not).

Basketball referees are human: I spent a day with an Indiana high school crew to prove it.

“I don’t have a single bad thing to say about those kids at Tech,” Rinehart said. “It was a good high school basketball game. And that’s why I feel like I need to speak out. Because I think if this continues, I don’t think those games are going to occur 10 years from now. I think by the time the kids my fifth-grade son’s age are playing, it could be the West Lafayette State Farm Raiders playing the Team Teague Titans sponsored by Nike. We’re halfway there.”

Sitting here, in this quiet office, is not a man speaking off the top of his head after a tough loss. Rinehart sent a letter, signed by the 52 coaches and administrators, to the Indiana High School Athletic Association on Nov. 1 outlining his issue with what he sees as “high school basketball programs in our state operating like prep schools and bringing in players from all over the state, country, and in some cases internationally for the purpose of playing high school basketball.”

Rinehart points to Tech as an example, though not the only team on Harrison’s conference schedule to benefit from transfers. But the Titans are a prime example.

The starting lineup includes players who previously played elsewhere in the North Central Conference: Reggie Bass (Muncie Central), RaSheed Jones (Marion), Dayveon Turner (Anderson) and Tylan Harris (Richmond) all played elsewhere in the NCC prior to Tech. Turner is the son of coach Damon Turner, who is in his second season with the Titans and coached his son, Bass and Jones in the Team Teague AAU program, though Bass and Jones both went to prep schools prior to coming to Tech. Another starter, senior Antonio Lisenbee, attended Avon before going to a prep school in Florida last season.

Damon Turner was aware of the letter sent by Rinehart to the IHSAA, which had already ruled the transferring players were eligible.

“He can feel how he wants to feel,” Turner said of Rinehart after the game. “I’m here to coach Arsenal Tech and we’re here to do a job and hopefully win City and go from there. We’re here to play basketball, like I told him. Obviously we’re beatable. We’ve been beaten twice and we were almost beat (Friday night). I think it’s wide-open this year for anyone to win. There are 50-plus good teams.”

The 15-degree temperature on Friday night outside the gym seemed to travel inside. The postgame coaches’ meeting was icy and the Harrison student section started with the taunts (“You don’t even go to Arsenal Tech” and “How much did they pay you?”) even before the opening tip. But Turner said all of that was part of a fun Friday night.

“I told the boys before the game that this is probably the toughest place to play in the conference and get a win because they are all engaged,” Turner said. “The band is awesome, the student section is wonderful. It’s one of the toughest places to play in the conference, so we knew coming in what it was going to be like. We were lucky to survive. He’s a great coach and he does a great job with that group.”

Insider: There might not be a hotter ticket in town this season than Tech basketball.

Rinehart said his purpose in speaking out is not to lay the responsibility at the IHSAA’s feet or to call out specific players or teams. He said he is tired of the response from colleagues and others that amounts to, “Well, what are you going to do?”

“It’s not under the table,” Rinehart said. “I get frustrated because everybody says, ‘Well, this has been going on forever.’ And I understand we are not like everybody else. I don’t live in dream world. I know in Marion County there are going to be transfers and that has been that way — that’s true. But when this stuff becomes above the board, people are going to compete to catch

up with what's being done out in the open and there's not going to be any coming back from it. It's the wild west. We have a boarding school in our conference at a public high school, an AAU program at a public school and a school that is bringing in kids from out of state at a public high school. I think it is on coaches like myself and the people who govern the IHSAA — the principals and superintendents. For too long, they have let it go on willingly or have said, 'Oh, what are you going to do?' I'm not willing to do that. If we don't have principals and superintendents stand up for what this is supposed to be, then it's over."

Rinehart said he has engaged in some conversation with the IHSAA after he sent the letter. The IHSAA's transfer rule does include a "past link rule" that guards against players following an AAU coach to a program, but that is only for a 12-month period prior to the student's enrollment. Bass and Jones both came from non-IHSAA schools before arriving at Tech.

"We have 31 kids in our program," he said. "And we've got 29 of those kids who played in our youth program from second to eighth grade. We're never going to be same as everybody else. But I know our kids deserve the respect of knowing there are standards to something — and they are gone. When we know kids are following AAU coaches, I don't think it's even up to the IHSAA. I think it's up to principals and superintendents to say, 'That's not how we're going to do this.'"

What does Rinehart propose happens? He said the conference should consider not playing certain schools.

"That should be one of the things on the table," he said. "There has to be some pressure or it's all going to go away and we're all going to be coaching AAU. I think that's the truth."

Here is the full letter Rinehart sent to the IHSAA on Nov. 1 and shared with IndyStar on Friday that was signed by 52 coaches and administrators:

"IHSAA Executive Staff and Board of Directors,

High School Basketball in the State of Indiana is different. As Coaches, Athletic Directors, and Principals, we recognize the role that high school basketball plays in our schools and the impact that it can have on creating positive school environments and experiences for players, cheerleaders, band members, and general students as fans at games. We all have a responsibility to protect the integrity of the game at the high school level. As high school coaches specifically, we are given the opportunity to use this game to impact young people in ways that will have a positive impact on them over the course of their lives. Through the

game, we teach and have the responsibility to build our kids and arm them with traits like character, responsibility, a willingness to give of themselves for something bigger. As Coaches, we believe in these values and we believe that young people in our state are better equipped to become successful and productive citizens through their participation in high school athletics. The game here is special, and it is special because generations of players, coaches, and school and state administrators have been willing to adhere to high standards.

It is with those thoughts in mind that we are reaching out to our governing body to ask for your help in partnering with us to clean up our game and protect its future. Our game is being tarnished by coaches who are not being held to any kind of standard when it comes to IHSAA rules pertaining to recruiting and by school administrators who are allowing this to happen. Unfortunately, we have high school basketball programs in our state who are operating like prep schools and bringing players from all over the state, country, and in some cases internationally for the purpose of playing "high school" basketball. The article published in the Indianapolis Star last month by Kyle Neddenriep is just one of many examples. Kids are following AAU coaches who have been hired at high schools because they are obviously promising to bring players with them and as a result we have high school players who are attending 3 and 4 schools during their careers. Other schools in our association are actively bringing kids in from out of state and out of the country, finding and or providing housing for them and creating completely different rosters out of nowhere. The consequences of allowing this type of recruiting to occur are great and they are being felt by the kids currently playing the game. Kids in these programs and the kids who compete against them are learning all the wrong things. They are taking these values with them when they leave high school. Even worse, generations of future players won't have the opportunity to experience a meaningful high school basketball experience.

As coaches and administrators we all take pride in the success stories that come from the investment that we make in kids, however we are now going to have to collectively acknowledge that we are setting kids up to fail. Instead of putting their head down and going to work when things get hard, our players are learning to quit and try to find a new and easy short cut to success. If this trend continues and it is growing at an alarming pace, the school and community connection to it's high school basketball teams will be lost. The role of the coach in a school and community will be changed and instead of the coach establishing meaningful relationships with young people through youth and middle school programs the coach becomes the recruiter for the annual varsity team. As opposed to the basketball program being a source of pride in the community, teams are becoming just a group of kids

brought together to play a season and the JV, Freshman, middle school, and youth levels will cease to be a priority or even exist. This isn't a prediction, it is already a reality in many schools. In the end, what is happening is the opposite of education based athletics and we have to stop it.

The vast majority of our colleagues in this state do things the right way. They start youth programs to build fundamental skills and teach the foundations of their system and they are held accountable by school administrations who are invested in more than short term varsity victories. Basketball programs give kids the opportunity to grow in the game in elementary and middle school so that far more kids get to experience the joy of being on a basketball team. They work at Freshman and JV levels to develop consistency within their programs and develop a depth of talent that can be relied on year after year. Our coaches work tirelessly to teach young people in our programs that opportunity for success will come over time if they buy into the concepts of consistent, dedicated, and disciplined hard work. They build programs where young men and women are willing to invest and trust in each other to work toward common goals, and they create teams at all grade levels who are representatives of their athletic departments, schools and communities. In return, they deserve the opportunity to allow their teams to compete on a level playing field.

High school basketball in Indiana is at a tipping point. We recognize the need to partner with the IHSAA to attack this serious issue on multiple fronts. The strategy of dealing with improper transfers by simply ruling the student ineligible is complicated by the appeals process and our current situation is letting us all know that it is not working. Our coaches in this state want to be held to high standards and to uphold the rich tradition of Indiana High School basketball. If our colleagues won't meet that standard and individual schools promote recruiting athletes to transfer to their school for athletic reasons, we need pressure applied to hold individual schools and coaches accountable. By eliminating IHSAA tournament eligibility, having schools dropped from schedules, and coaches knowing they will face actual consequences we can get on top of the issue and create change. The signees below are asking for all stakeholders in our game (Coaches, Athletic Directors, Principals, IHSAA, and Coaches Associations) to come together and take action to protect high school basketball. Our game depends on it.

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