

# The Palm Beach Post

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## FOOTBALL

### Why the FHSAA's Metro/Suburban split is working despite familiar faces in state finals



**Jon Santucci**

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Did the Metro/Suburban class split work in football or was it much ado about nothing?

The nine state championship football matches are set. We've had four weekends of postseason football in the rearview mirror and two more ahead of us, so it's a good a time as any to revisit the controversial decision.

And, to me at least, the answer to both of those questions is pretty clear.

Yes.

It's understandable if that's confusing. How could two seemingly opposite takes on a situation both be correct? But let's look at some of the questions in the debate and see how the answer is "Yes" to both.

**More Semifinals:** Mainland rallies past Dunbar, punches ticket to Class 3S football title game

**Recent:** Blake Boda, Cocoa deny Bradford in Class 2S football semifinal

**Florida high school football:** American Heritage denies Bolles rally in semifinal

#### **Aren't a lot of the same teams in the state championships?**

Absolutely. Nationally-ranked Chaminade-Madonna (Class 1M), Miami Central (2M) and St. Thomas Aquinas (3M) are all looking to repeat as state champions. The same goes for Venice (Class 4S). Apopka (Class 4M), Cocoa (Class 2S) and Hawthorne (Class 1S), who are looking to rebound from last year's state championship losses.

Perennial powers such as Plantation-American Heritage (2M), Columbus (4M), Lakeland (4S), Mainland (3S), Florida High (2S) and Trinity Catholic (1S) all will play for state championships.

## **So, doesn't that prove it didn't work?**

That depends on what you were looking for.

Let me ask a couple questions: Did you really expect a Metro/Suburban shift to suddenly mean that elite programs would fall off? Did you really envision a scenario where Chaminade, Central and Aquinas would stop being Chaminade, Central and Aquinas?

The only way the elite teams won't be in the championship picture year after year is to put all the top teams in their own classification (think UEFA Champions League in professional soccer) and see who survives. Great programs winning are not a reflection that it didn't work. It's a reflection of those being great programs.

It also needs to be pointed out that the ease of students transferring schools, one of the biggest factors keeping top teams at the top, isn't an FHSAA issue but a state legislature issue and that ship has already sailed. This is where we are. But as long as teams can just keep filling holes through ~~high school free agency~~ transfer students each year, don't expect it to change.

The argument can be made that private schools and public schools should be in different classes. It has merit. But the other side of that coin will show that with the exception of Classes 1M and 1S — classes made almost entirely of private schools — only three of the other 14 state championship finalists are private schools. Hardly sounds like an epidemic.

### **What was the point of the Metro/Suburban split then?**

Two of the primary goals of the football advisory committee were to create a more balanced playing field and help grow the sport.

### **Is the playing field more balanced?**

Are we seeing better games this postseason? Yes.

The FHSAA also helped address this issue with the way it seeds teams during the regional playoffs. What it did in many cases is ensure that the top overall team, which usually is a district champion, and the top at-large team didn't meet in the second round as it had in previous years. That's how we got district rematches like Jones-Edgewater and Cardinal Gibbons-American Heritage in the regional championship and not the regional semifinal. Pushing back top matchups was definitely a plus.

Also, the state semifinal games were very exciting this past weekend. Eight of the 18 games were decided by a single score and three other games had a 10-point margin of victory. One of the games not on the list — Trinity Catholic's 22-10 win over John Carroll Catholic — was a three-point game with less than three minutes remaining. These are the kind of games fans want to see.

For more proof that this season was a step in the right direction, last year's 16 state semifinals featured a total of two games decided by 10 points or less. The average margin of victory in the state semifinals in 2021 was 21.6. This year, that number was 15.8 — a number that is overinflated by Chaminade's 56-0 win over True North Classical Academy and Aquinas' 42-point win over Jesuit. Take those two out of the equation and the number drops to 11.6 in 16 games. Regardless, there's a huge difference between the feel of a 21-point lead and a two-touchdown lead in the fourth quarter.

Let's throw in one more factor that some people don't want to admit. It's crazy to expect smaller counties to go toe-to-toe with major metro areas — especially in the age of transfers. If 10 top players in Miami decide they all want to go the same school, that school immediately becomes a state champion contender. But if you take an all-star team from some smaller counties or areas, they still have zero chance to beat top programs like Chaminade or Miami Central.

It's just a reality, and the argument that teams in one area need to have a generational squad to compete for a state title while others assume the trophy is an annual birthright because they constantly have talent flooding through the doors doesn't really make a lot of sense when you're talking about a level playing field.

### **Is it helping grow the sport?**

Well, this certainly is a longer-term question. But good competition creates excitement and hope, which certainly should help grow the sport in suburban areas.

Programs in Southwest Florida, Gainesville and Lakeland areas saw the immediate benefits of the Metro/Suburban split this year. Even programs that didn't advance to the state championship should feel a lot better than they did at this time a year ago.

Let's use Buchholz and Dunbar as examples. Both lost in thrilling, one-score games on Friday. A year ago, Buchholz lost to Aquinas by 38 points in the state semifinal. And had the previous classes stayed as they were, it would be hard for Bobcats fans to truly envision breaking through. Now? There's a path and a feeling they are competitive at the highest level. Last season, Dunbar was the No. 1 seed in its region and lost to Plantation by 24 points in the first round. Think Tigers

fans feel better today about the program's chances to win a state title than they did a year ago?  
Absolutely.

Hope and excitement are certainly better factors for growth than stagnation and the feeling of inevitable doom when playing teams in metro areas.

Do we still have familiar faces in the state championship games? Yes.

Do we have a more balanced playing field? Yes.

So, is the Metro/Suburban split working or is it much ado about nothing?

Yes.











