

TSSAA ends season for Elizabethton and Unicoi County HS baseball teams after fight on field

by: [John Jenco](#) Posted: May 8, 2023 / 01:29 PM EDT Updated: May 8, 2023 / 08:39 PM EDT

JOHNSON CITY, Tenn. (WJHL) – After a punch connected and [benches cleared during Saturday's Division 1-3A high school baseball playoffs](#), the season has ended for both teams involved.

Elizabethton and Unicoi County were locked in a tight game when a Unicoi County player and an Elizabethton player had an altercation at third base, leading to a punch being thrown.

Players from Unicoi County's bench ran onto the field toward the third base area, a violation of the TSSAA's unsportsmanlike conduct by-laws.

TSSAA said "a number" of Elizabethton players also left the dugout.

News Channel 11 obtained letters sent to both schools by the TSSAA outlining the penalties for each program.

Unicoi County Director of Schools John English also told News Channel 11 that TSSAA has ruled that both teams are finished for the postseason.

Despite the rule violation, English said the majority of players handled the situation appropriately. He said players ran onto the field to de-escalate the situation, not to cause more fights.

"I just think the whole thing was just really unfortunate for both teams," English said. "Anything I would say about our kids, I would say about the major majority of Elizabethton's players as well. I think a lot of kids reacted to a really bad situation in the right way."

The TSSAA fined Unicoi County \$1,250, and its baseball team was placed on restrictive probation for the remainder of the 2022-23 school year.

The Blue Devils baseball team is also on probation for the 2023-2024 school year.

The TSSAA fined Elizabethton a total of \$1,750 and also placed the baseball team on restrictive probation for the rest of this school year.

Elizabethton is under two years of probation until the 2024-2025 school year.

Elizabethton City Schools Director of Schools Richard VanHuss said it was unfortunate that Unicoi Co. and Elizabethton players that were not involved in the fight were punished.

"We're extremely apologetic from our side, as a community, that Unicoi's gotten wrapped up in this, as well as so many of our student-athletes who did the right thing and performed and reacted in the right way," VanHuss said. "But we understand what the rules are."

VanHuss said the school is still looking at discipline for the Cyclone player who threw the punch.

He said the incident does not reflect the way student-athletes are coached to act on the field.

"We don't have a history of those types of things," VanHuss said. "This was an isolated incident and we expect our student-athletes to perform and behave in a way that brings honor to our community. That's exactly what we'll continue to preach, and I have no doubt that our student-athletes will continue to do that."

Both VanHuss and English denied rumors on social media that the Unicoi County player prompted the fight by spitting on the Elizabethton player.

"There were words exchanged," English said. "They bumped there at third, and I think they both would say they exchanged words, and then the punch."

English said the Unicoi Co. player was "pretty busted up" and had a swollen face after taking multiple shots in the fight.

Under TSSAA rules, all players who left the dugout will face a two-game suspension for next season or during the next high school sport they play.

English said Unicoi County will appeal the ruling.

He said he believes Unicoi County has enough players that are not facing mandatory two-game suspensions for leaving the bench, and Junior Varsity deserves to continue play should the decision be reversed.

"I think the rule should be enforced," English said. "That's fine. Kids left the dugout, but the punitiveness of neither team being able to take other players that weren't suspended or ejected and finish and somebody move on is just kind of the tough piece that we struggle with

right now."

VanHuss said Elizabethton is still considering an appeal.

"You see our players, they were all trying to intervene in a positive way," VanHuss said. "We had several student-athletes that remained in the dugout area. We're considering an appeal on some of those issues there instead of just a blanket ejection for every player."

English said he hated the abrupt end to the season for players on both teams, but he understood why players ran out from the dugouts.

"They were torn up about like, 'Did we do something wrong?' English said. "I had to say no. I would've hated to think that they watch there and see a teammate and not run out. They didn't go out looking for blood, looking to fight other players. There needs to be some credit given to a whole lot of student-athletes on both sides for that."

TSSAA said any appeal could have an impact on who advances from the district tournament to regionals.

Any appeal must be heard soon, as regionals begin on Friday.