

# General Assembly completes dismantling of High School Athletics Association

BY EARL VAUGHAN JR. | CityView sports columnist

The North Carolina General Assembly has penned a 21st-century version of the Hans Christian Andersen classic "The Emperor's New Clothes."

If you've forgotten your reading, the story tells of a couple of phony tailors who convinced an emperor they were weaving new clothes for him, clothes that only the stupid and ignorant could not see.

Refusing to admit he could not see the new threads that the guys didn't really make for him, the emperor went out in public in his nonexistent finery until a child blurted out that he was actually naked.

State Senate Bill 452 has completed the stripping of power from the N.C. High School Athletic Association that began four years ago as a personal crusade by Sen. Tom McInnis, a Republican who represents Cumberland and Moore counties, and his two top helpers, Sens. Todd Johnson, R-Union, and Vickie Sawyer, R-Mecklenberg, as well as the rest of the Republican majority in the state House and Senate.

They have been repeatedly trying to sell the new-clothes story, telling North Carolinians that the new athletic association is more transparent and better able to serve its membership.

This same mantra comes from a Republican Party that was recently

called out by a politically diverse group including The Carolina Journal, the N.C. Press Association and the John Locke Foundation for leading the General Assembly's passage of legislation making it legal for the body to determine what is and is not public record and destroy documents as it chooses.

That's this General Assembly's kind of transparency — fake and embarrassing.

But that's just part of the nonexistent clothing the General Assembly has been weaving and passing off as high fashion.

Que Tucker, the commissioner of the athletic association, held a news conference via Zoom this week after even Democratic North Carolina Gov. Roy Cooper caved to the Republicans and declined to veto Senate Bill 452, which leaves the association almost naked to act in the future.

The problem is that the rest of North Carolina keeps hearing the new-clothes story from the Republicans who conveniently leave out details, such as the fact that the bill was literally introduced in the middle of the night without advance notice to the NCHSAA and was passed by the House after midnight with some Democratic representatives voting no.

The handwriting was practically on stone tablets by the time it got to the Senate the following morning and was passed unanimously since it was skillfully weaved into the middle of an important insurance bill that had nothing to do with high school sports.

In her latest news conference, Tucker suggested North Carolina won't see that high school sports has no clothes for one or two years, and when it does, high school athletics will be grabbing for a bathrobe it doesn't have anymore.

Even Cooper, though declining to sign the bill, said it was a solution in search of a problem as far as the athletic association is concerned.

“This legislation handcuffs the NCHSAA,” Tucker said, adding it limits the way the association can raise money.

The bill also prevents the association from giving grants and scholarships, unless the latter are donor-directed.

Brandon Moree, communications director for the athletic association, said the bill also will restrict corporate sponsorships, which currently account for more than a third of the organization’s annual income.

Sen. Todd Johnson doesn’t think that’s a problem. In an interview with High School OT, he suggested that major venues like Kenan Stadium, Carter-Finley Stadium, the Dean Smith Center, etc., would gladly welcome high school state championships with open arms at no charge.

Maybe Johnson and friends will pass another bill to force the university system to provide their stadiums free of charge to the athletic association, which they understandably haven’t been doing since the state championships were first held there some years ago.

I’m more inclined to believe Tucker, who predicted it’s likely in the years ahead that the NCHSAA will have to return to the days when state championships in sports like football and basketball were played at high school fields and gyms, often subject to seating limitations that didn’t allow everyone to get in.

Or worse, too many people crammed into an unfit stadium like in 1981 for the Terry Sanford-South Mecklenburg 4-A football championship. I

was there and remember fans standing three deep in the team boxes on the sidelines because there wasn't enough bleacher space, creating a safety hazard for players, coaches and fans.

"It will force us to have to look to our membership to host some of these events," Tucker said.

What Tucker fears most is what she described as a "wild, wild West" mentality taking over high school athletics. Now that power to oversee athletics has been shifted to the office of the Superintendent of Public Instruction, Tucker fears politics and not years of understanding how rules are needed and work will be replaced by political favors.

The athletic association has been fully endorsed by such organizations as the N.C. Coaches Association, N.C. Athletic Directors Association and National Federation of State High School Associations.

Now it has been replaced by legislation launched by a trio of senators with a personal agenda trying to disguise it as a push for transparency.

"We need to make sure we talk about consistency, a level playing field, fair play," Tucker said. "That's one of the things we've prided ourselves on, even if people don't like rules and regulations."

Not liking rules and regulations is what got us here, when four years ago Sen. Tom McInnis was angered when one of his schools broke an established and needed rule about too many ejections. He felt his school, Anson County, was being picked on, even though the Anson head football coach admitted his team was guilty in an interview on WSOC-TV.

Ever since then, it's been McInnis' goal to shred the NCHSAA from a

neatly tailored suit into a pile of dust rags. With the passage of Senate Bill 452, it's nearly mission accomplished.

Sadly, this battle is over. Now it's time for everyone to support the sentiments of this comment that appeared on social media Wednesday from the N.C. Athletic Directors Association.

"SB 452 is law," it said. "The focus now shifts to doing all we can (as athletic directors tend to do) to ensure that our student-athletes have the experience they need and deserve."

### **Earl's Pearls**

- **Former Clemson University** and Douglas Byrd football star Donnell Woolford has been recognized for his outstanding career with the Tigers.

A publication called "Yardbarker" named Woolford as the 10<sup>th</sup>-best football player in Clemson history.

Woolford played for the Tigers from 1985 to 1988. He was consensus All-American and a finalist for the Jim Thorpe Award, given to the top defensive back in college football. His 10 career interceptions are among the most in school history. He was also a top punt returner, running back two for touchdowns in 1987.

- **This was a special week for me**, not just because of my birthday, but because of a major anniversary.

On a stormy night on Oct. 5, 1973, a nervous teenager stepped into the old press box at E.E. Smith High School to cover his first high school football game.

I had kept football statistics as a student at West Rowan, under the tutelage of classmate Bob Rathbun, now the play-by-play announcer for the Atlanta Hawks.

But on this night, I would be keeping stats and writing a story for other people to read.

The Golden Bulls beat Richmond Senior 21-0. I interviewed Smith's legendary coach D.T. Carter after the game, who was gracious to the new kid as he lit up one of his traditional White Owl cigars to celebrate.

But Carter also taught me and his players a valuable lesson about defeat. He reminded me it's just a game we play, not life or death, and his motto, win or lose, was always, "The sun is gonna come up tomorrow."

It's been coming up for me ever since that night, and 50 years later I'm glad to still be writing about high school sports.

### **This week's picks**

Speaking of the sun coming up, it keeps getting brighter as my picking continues to improve. Last week's record was 6-1. I came within seconds of 7-0 until Pine Forest rallied in the closing seconds to beat Terry Sanford 41-38.

The season total is 73.9%.

Here's this week's forecast:

**Pine Forest at E.E. Smith:** The visiting Trojans go for their third straight win ... *Pine Forest 30, E.E. Smith 6.*

**Harnett Central at Terry Sanford:** The Bulldogs face a critical conference matchup after the tough loss to Pine Forest last week ... *Terry Sanford 28, Harnett Central 14.*

**Douglas Byrd at Cape Fear:** The Colts seek to bounce back after a close loss to unbeaten Seventy-First ... *Cape Fear 32, Douglas Byrd 7.*

**South View at Purnell Swett:** The Tigers go for their third straight win ... *South View 39, Purnell Swett 7.*

**Overhills at Westover:** The Wolverines look to snap a three-game losing streak ... *Westover 22, Overhills 6.*

**Jack Britt at Seventy-First:** Big Red rolls to victory No. 7 ... *Seventy-First 31, Jack Britt 8.*

**Lumberton at Gray's Creek:** The host Bears get their second straight win ... *Gray's Creek 37, Lumberton 8.*

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