

Next salvo in war on private schools is fast approaching

Montgomery Academy Hall of Fame coach David Bethea is likely to serve out the remainder of his coaching career with a Class 7A program elevated four classifications because of his success.

By Tim Gayle

The next salvo in the war on private schools is rapidly approaching.

On one side of Competitive Balance Factor, that fine piece of legislation adopted by the Alabama High School Athletic Association in 2018 that penalizes successful private schools by moving them up in classification. On a collision course with Competitive Balance are several Alabama Independent School Association programs that plan to finalize a move to the AHSAA in the next month.

Why would you want to move to an association that repeatedly tells you by its actions that they don't want you?

Competitive Balance Factor, adopted by the Alabama High School Athletic Association prior to 2018, can't be found anywhere in the association's bylaws. It was special legislation adopted from policies employed by other state associations as a method of adjusting those private schools -- and only private schools -- that enjoy postseason success. Public schools, their frustration growing over the uselessness of the private school multiplier installed in 1999 (another piece of special legislation by the AHSAA that counts every private school student as 1.35 people) wanted more penalties placed on private schools.

AHSAA officials considered raising the multiplier that every other state has long since abolished but remains in place in Alabama. Instead, they enacted Competitive Balance Factor (while also keeping the outdated multiplier). The original legislation, adopted in 2018, charted private schools over the previous three years, assigning points for deep playoff runs and utilizing a point system to elevate a private school to a higher classification in specific sports.

The formula was adjusted in 2020 to only use the previous two years (otherwise, schools could be penalized twice if their postseason success was used over multiple classification periods). But the adjustment also added a half-point for any team making the second round (previously the point system started in the quarterfinals), thus making it easier to bump a private school up in classification.

The rule would only apply to schools who earned points, but in 2022 the Central Board extended the rule to include ANY private school

since Competitive Balance was initiated in 2018, refusing to let Alabama Christian Academy drop from 4A to 3A based on its enrollment.

Alabama Christian took the matter before the Legislative Council and back to the Central Board for a correction, but the inaction of AHSAA officials to take any stance on the policy against the Central Board that employs them is a grim reminder to anyone jumping into the private vs. public fray that this is a volatile issue that is neither influenced by money or reasoning.

It is, in fact, an emotional fight that will certainly get worse for private schools before it gets better. And with several AISA schools moving to the AHSAA (two in 2022 and likely at least three in 2024), the future of the Alabama Independent School Association from an athletic standpoint is on shaky ground, which isn't healthy for private schools. They need the AISA as an alternative because AHSAA officials, certainly those on the Central Board, can inflict any punishment they want on a private school if there is no alternative.

Just recently, AHSAA had several proposals as well as some surveys (proposals generated by the AHSAA to gauge interest) that focused on putting the private schools in a separate division for postseason play. The private schools could play public schools during the season but would be placed in two private-only classifications for postseason play. This would be the next logical step after the six-year failed experiment with Competitive Balance, yet apparently none of the AISA schools discussing their future inclusion into the AHSAA were told a separate private school division is under serious consideration.

How do you trust the motives of people who seem to operate on a

need-to-know basis?

At last month's AHSAA Media Day, when AHSAA officials were asked about the future of private schools within the association, a separate private-only division wasn't discussed as a serious alternative to the current mess.

In fact, AHSAA officials continue to avoid all talk concerning the future of legislation or new rules targeting private schools within the organization. Apparently, transparency isn't a strong suit. In fact, there's less coming out of the AHSAA than ever before, reflecting a group that possibly feels it doesn't answer to anyone.

How rampant is Competitive Balance? Among the 30 largest private schools (out of 53) competing in the AHSAA, all but six have at least one sport elevated to a higher classification by Competitive Balance. Montgomery Academy, a 2A school based on enrollment that is boosted to 3A by the 1.35 multiplier, competes in 4A in football, in 5A in volleyball, in 6A in soccer and in 7A in tennis.

Listen up, prospective private school members, because this is your future organization at work. Montgomery Academy tennis competed with Auburn in both the section and state tournaments (the top two teams from each section advance) after defeating its other six section opponents by a combined 49-0 score. Once the Eagles advanced to the state tournament in boys and girls tennis, they automatically reached the Competitive Balance point threshold to remain in the same classification.

In other words, until Competitive Balance is abolished or modified (or if one of those six section opponents that failed to win a match one day

figures out how to beat Montgomery Academy), the Eagles forever will be a 7A tennis team.

"There's only eight teams in 7A at the state tournament," said Montgomery Academy's Hall of Fame coach David Bethea. "We're never going anywhere. And all the guys who got us there are now in college. One of us (boys or girls) is always going to make it. But the depth gets us. These schools have 2,000 students. They just have that depth."

AHSAA officials probably will praise Bethea's career when he retires in a few years. What they won't do is discuss how they robbed him of a chance to win more state championships with this ridiculous legislation or how they probably hastened his retirement by putting him in a no-win situation.

Seventeen of the largest 25 private schools are virtually assured of moving up in classification in at least one sport in 2024 because of Competitive Balance, including Catholic (volleyball), St. James (football and tennis), Trinity (volleyball, boys' golf and girls' golf), Montgomery Academy (soccer) and Prattville Christian (volleyball), along with the AHSAA's newest member, Tuscaloosa Academy (girls' golf).

And we've still got another school year for the private schools to earn more points. By the end of the 2023-24 school year, it may be 25 out of 25 private schools.

There is no end in sight to this madness.

And yet, several more private school sheep are lining up to join this organization later this year. What type of speech will their head of school, or their board of directors, make to the students who will be

penalized for their success? What lessons will those future leaders take from participating as a student-athlete in the AHSAA?

In the latest round of proposals made by member schools and surveys introduced by AHSAA officials, there was an effort to apply Competitive Balance to open enrollment schools (those who accept students who pay tuition from outside of their school zone), an effort to separate boys' and girls' sports from counting together in Competitive Balance, an attempt to eliminate Competitive Balance (nice try, Faith Academy), an effort to apply Competitive Balance across the board to every school, an attempt to raise the multiplier to 3.0 and three proposals to separate the private schools into their own division.

Sooner, rather than later, the AHSAA will enact special legislation to separate the public schools from the private schools in postseason competition. As the new AISA-turned-AHSAA members are about to find out, the private schools have no friends among the AHSAA public schools or the officials governing the association. What will the private schools do?