

They voted against GHSA private school playoff restructure. Now, they face the flaws

ATHENS – Athens Academy football will take the field for the first time in 28 days this Friday when it hosts Aquinas in its first playoff game.

“It’s definitely not ideal,” Athens Academy head coach Josh Alexander said. “We haven’t played a game in a month, and our opponent has played four games since we’ve played a game. There are some disadvantages to that.”

Just down the road, Prince Avenue Christian has had to wait 21 days between games. The Wolverines, who like the Spartans had a first-round bye, host Providence Christian on Friday.

Head coach Greg Vandagriff used the idle hours for team bonding.

“We went bowling on Monday,” Vandagriff said. “They didn’t have any idea. We acted like we were going to get conditioning in, and we ran them to the bus and said, ‘Let’s go,’ and we went bowling just to have some fun.”

These longer breaks between the regular season and the playoffs are one of the challenges private schools are facing under a new Georgia High School Association (GHSA) playoff format.

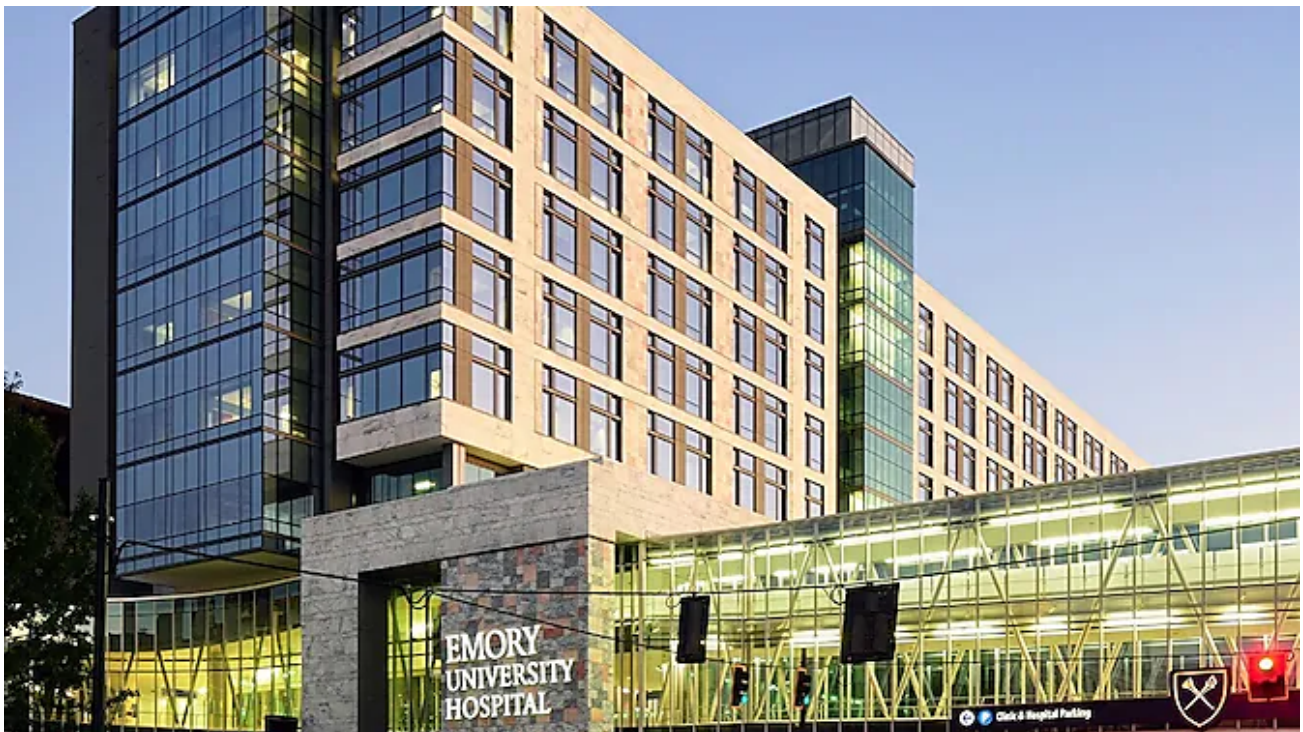
For these two schools, this was a reality they tried to avoid. In September 2023, a GHSA reclassification committee consisting mostly of public-school athletic directors voted 12-2 to recommend separating

the private schools in classes 1A, 2A and 3A from the public schools in the playoffs.

Prince Avenue Christian athletic director Richard Ricketts and Athens Academy athletic director Kevin Petroski cast the only “no” votes.

“While we are members of [the reclassification committee],” said Petroski, “we have a very small voice because we are outnumbered considerably by other people who were in favor of [the new playoff format].”

Curt Miller, the athletic director at Oconee County High School, a 3A public school, was the committee’s chairman. He noted how difficult it is to represent the best interests of all schools across Georgia.



[By Emory Healthcare](#)
[Advertiser Content](#)

[**How Emory nurses exude excellence in care**](#)

"When you're in the position of chairman, you really get information from all-sized schools in the state," Miller said. "The majority of people who called me had concerns about playing against the private schools [in the playoffs], and they just felt like the private school and the public school are just completely different."

The long breaks — which this year were extended by an extra regular-season week following Hurricane Helene — aren't the only potential complication for the two Athens-area private-school title contenders. The GHSA is using its Post Season Ranking Formula (PSRF) to seed teams in the playoffs because teams were allowed to compete in regions in the classification that they are assigned. This system has been questioned by private school coaches like Vandagriff, who believes his team has been punished for playing a difficult schedule.

"[The power ranking] in itself is a flawed system," said Vandagriff. "You're rewarded if you play teams that are no good."

Prince Avenue won its region over Hebron Christian but is seeded fifth in the state playoffs due to its 7-3 record. The only losses for the Wolverines came at the hands of 9-1 Blessed Trinity (4A) and two highly touted out-of-state programs.

Those out-of-state losses damaged Prince Avenue's Post Season Ranking (PSR). The formula takes a team's winning percentage, opponents' winning percentage and the opponents' opponents' winning percentage into account.

The issue for Prince is that the formula does not consider the winning percentage of out-of-state teams, meaning that those losses do nothing to boost strength of record and only harm the Wolverines by

dropping their winning percentage.

"Now that we've played these two out-of-states and realized how much it hurt us in the seeding," Vandagriff said, "we are going to drop those two games and try to pick up other games."

Athens Academy is seeded third and enters the playoffs undefeated. With the third-highest PSR in the private-school playoff field, the Spartans are the top seed in their playoff-bracket quadrant.

The problem? The Spartans' quadrant also features 8-2 Hebron Christian and 9-2 Lovett. Hebron holds the fourth-best PSR but is seeded sixth after failing to win its region over Prince Avenue.

"The top four teams, arguably, maybe are not divided," Vandagriff said. "They could hit each other in the quarterfinals like Hebron is likely to play ACAD in the third round."

This is not a football-only issue. In this year's softball playoffs, for example, Hebron Christian was seeded fifth despite holding the second-best PSR because it lost the region to Prince Avenue Christian. Hebron went on to win its five playoff games, en route to a state championship berth, by a combined score of 43-4.

Prince Avenue softball ended up with the third-highest PSR behind Hebron, a team the Wolverines beat twice in the regular season. It didn't matter in the end as Prince Avenue was granted the two-seed because Hebron didn't win the region, but the point still stands.

"It came down to our opponents' opponents' records, which you can't predict or control," said Prince Avenue head softball coach Donnie Byrom, whose team also had a 15-day break between the end of

regular season and playoffs.

A new GHSA reclassification committee has already been formed to address the issues. An idea supported by Ricketts features a "competitive-balance" model similar to a promotion-relegation system in European soccer, where the top few schools would be promoted a class, and the bottom few would be moved down based on across-the-board performance.

"I think that's probably the fairest system we have," Ricketts said. "It keeps us from reinventing the wheel every two years."

For now, Prince Avenue Christian and Athens Academy have put all those concerns behind them and are ready to compete for a state title.

"You can get mad about it, or you can just deal with it," Alexander said. "There is no fix-all formula, and GHSA does the best they can with it, and you take it and just deal with it."

Said Vandagriff: "To waste time worrying about it is to waste time."

Jack Little is a student in the University of Georgia's undergraduate Sports Media Certificate program.