

# Opinion | Despite criticism, AHSAA transfer rules necessary to curtail illegal recruiting

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Several years ago, a number of private schools in Alabama were caught red-handed by the Alabama High School Athletic Association using “scholarship” and “hardship” funds to entice the top student-athletes at surrounding public schools to transfer to the private schools.

It was a tactic that the AHSAA was, at the time, powerless to stop, because private schools, unlike their public counterparts, are unburdened by zoning lines. There is no address that can be verified. No residency that must be established.

Private school student-athletes can, quite literally, reside anywhere. As long as they pay the tuition and meet the basic eligibility requirements, they are eligible to play sports.

Private schools, in some cases, were stacking rosters with the best players, racking up wins and leaving nearby public school teams decimated.

It was unfair, and everyone knew it. So, the AHSAA—which is far less a shadow organization governed by a few bureaucrats in a backroom somewhere and much more an organization governed by a board made up of members from private and public schools all across Alabama—set about correcting the unfairness.

To do so, they implemented a few rules. One of those was a rule that required all transfer student-athletes to sit out one year. It was similar to the now-defunct college rule that also required transferring student-athletes to sit out a year.

The players can be on a team. They can practice with the team. They can attend team functions. They can help their teammates. But they cannot play in games for one calendar year.

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This rule has, of late, come under fire from the “school choice” crowd—the elitist set of whiners who are determined to destroy public education and steal every taxpayer dollar earmarked for the education of our society.

They’re angry now—because they’re always angry about some perceived injustice—because the AHSAA refuses to alter its transfer rule for student-athletes who receive CHOOSE Act funding. That’s the \$7,000-per-year voucher that the state is robbing from poor kids and poor public schools to give to rich families to supplement their kids’ private education.

And now, they also want to make sure they can destroy the public schools’ sports programs as well.

That’s exactly what will happen if this rule is pulled. It will be like the transfer portal in college. Overnight, private school programs that have better resources and more money will somehow find it possible to offer \$7,000-per-year tuition to the best athletes from around the state, and the floodgates will open.

Struggling rural schools that barely have enough money to keep the field lights on will lose out on the handful of players who make their programs the pride of the town. The kids whose names would be stenciled on gym walls and above the doors of fieldhouses in 1,200-population towns will instead be suiting up at St. Bishop Baptist the Catholic Academy, where they and other top-tier players from around the region are dominating the decimated programs they've left behind.

Anyone who has spent a second around high school athletics in this state knows this to be true. Hell, even with all of the rules imposed by the AHSAA, the cheating in high school athletics is rampant. Especially the illegal recruitment of players.

A couple of years ago, one of the top public schools in the state—Gulf Shores High—was investigated by the AHSAA after court documents revealed a local fitness company had paid the rent and property leases for families of top athletes willing to transfer to the school. The school had welcomed at least 100 athlete transfers in a single year.

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This is what the AHSAA is up against.

High school athletics in this state, especially high school football, is big business. Programs rake in cash. Top coaches earn hundreds of thousands of dollars. And with NIL money awaiting players at the college level, the incentive to cut corners and align with a program better positioned to get a player a D-I scholarship has never been higher.

The AHSAA is not perfect, not by any stretch. But in this case, despite the outcry from those who are convinced that if they're not receiving an

advantage then they're at a disadvantage, the Association is exactly right to stand its ground.

Doing away with the one-year rule is a dumb idea. And lawmakers pounding their chests and pretending that they have sway over the AHSAA—an organization established by federal court decree to govern Alabama high school athletics—is even dumber.

What could be done, however, is a compromise. Some sort of a waiver system in which coaches and school officials could sign off on transfers that are clearly for academic purposes or other issues, or in situations in which the transfer is clearly not an attempt by a private school to stack a team with recruited top athletes. Doing so would virtually eliminate the impact to student-athletes who are transferring for legitimate reasons while also maintaining a proper penalty for those seeking a transfer simply for athletic purposes.

Whatever the solution, it certainly is not to kill the transfer rule. Because doing so would kill high school sports as we know it in this state.