

LASTING IMPRESSIONS

Commentaries for Interscholastic Athletics

Volume 2

John E. (Jack) Roberts

LASTING IMPRESSIONS

COMMENTARIES FOR INTERSCHOLASTIC ATHLETICS

VOLUME 2

John E. (Jack) Roberts

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INTRODUCTION

In 2000, the Michigan High School Athletic Association published *Raising Expectations*, 44 selections from the first 14 years of Executive Director John E. (Jack) Roberts' essays on educational athletics. That volume has helped administrators, coaches and parents appreciate the mission and core values of interscholastic athletics in Michigan.

This volume, *Lasting Impressions*, contains 58 more essays selected from the 2000-01 school year until publishing of the *Bulletin* was discontinued after the 2008-09 school year. These editorials not only raise the bar even higher for school sports, but also emphasize the lifelong impact of the teachable moments in the extracurricular programs of Michigan and the nation. It is hoped that this book will inspire this and the next generation of administrators, coaches and parents to guide the unique American tradition of school sports with courageous heart and almost reverent spirit.

FOREWORD



Many years ago I helped to write the autobiography of Tom Osborne who, until that time, except for a few months of his life, never lived anywhere but in Nebraska, and who never coached anywhere but at the University of Nebraska. One state, one job, one wife – a boring story if it weren't for its extraordinary stability and sincerity. Coach Osborne told me his life story – in face-to-face conversations, over the telephone and in tapes he would send me – and I transcribed, edited and reorganized. The result isn't great literature, but I was most satisfied with the finished project when people told me the book "sounded like Tom."

A few years later the publisher asked me to do a book with Joe Gibbs, but the demands of my employment with the Michigan High School Athletic Association at that moment made it impossible for me to do it. Another few years later, after Coach Osborne's Cornhuskers finally won a national championship, the publisher inquired about my interest in doing a sequel. Can you imagine that, "Tom II?"

I told the publisher that I wasn't interested, that Tom's life had always been about "more than winning" (that was the title of our book together), and that to do a sequel after finally winning a national championship would contradict the theme of the first book. The publisher found someone else to write the second book, and it outsold the first.

Other publishing opportunities have come and gone. One was to prepare a kind of textbook on ethical policy development for educational athletics, but it required I fit a format that didn't fit me.

Another opportunity came from a publisher that heard me speak to a civic group about sportsmanship. That book would have been for kids, coaches and CEOs, entitled "Sportsmanship is a Way of Life." But again, employment demands would not allow me to do the research and writing to fill out the frame of a message that's in my soul and my bones.

I regret these lost opportunities. The dying central figure of Mitch Albom's book *Tuesdays with Morrie* said one of his few regrets was that he hadn't written more books. But he also said he regretted not doing more with his work; and it's doing so much with my work that keeps me from writing more books.

But, like *Raising Expectations* that the MHSAA published in 2000, this book is my work, a collection of articles published over school years 2000-01 through 2008-09, written as I served daily as executive director of the MHSAA.

Thornton Wilder stated, "A good writer tells stories that remind people of what they already know." I don't know if I'm a good writer, but my goal in writing for the MHSAA *Bulletin* each month for more than two decades was no loftier than that: to remind folks of what they already know.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "John E. Roberts". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, sweeping "J" and "R".

PART I

“ . . . IF SCHOOL SPORTS CAN BE CHARACTERIZED AS AN ENDURING INSTITUTION, IT MUST REGAIN ITS FIGHTING SPIRIT FOR THE POLICIES OF EDUCATIONAL ATHLETICS. IT MUST RECAPTURE SOME OF ITS MISSIONARY ZEAL FOR THE PHILOSOPHY BEHIND SCHOOL SPORTS, FOR THE MESSAGE OF EDUCATIONAL ATHLETICS.”

A LAKE LESSON

NOVEMBER 2000

Among the very many very beautiful drives in this state, one of my favorites is US Highway 2 between St. Ignace and Engadine. Lake Michigan on one side, dense forests on the other. When the sun is shining on the water, when the leaves are turning, or when a new fallen snow is clinging, it's breathtaking.

During a recent journey, I recalled a trip many years earlier when one of my young sons found it difficult to comprehend that the water we saw here was of the same body that washed up on the shores of the Leelanau Peninsula, the Indiana Dunes, Lakeshore Drive in Chicago and Door County in Wisconsin.

The same water touching shores in many parts of Michigan, as well as Indiana, Illinois and Wisconsin.

As the water of Lake Michigan connects many points of this state and nearby states, so do certain principles connect the high school athletic programs of different parts of this state and different states. Separated by hundreds of miles and situated in different time zones, schools and their communities approach the sponsorship of interscholastic athletics with common themes: that these programs are ama-

teur, educational athletics – pure, wholesome, inexpensive, local school sports.

The waters of Lake Michigan are pretty clean now, purer than several decades ago because people grew concerned for this fabulous natural resource and became committed to its improvement and preservation. So can it be with the unique American tradition of interscholastic

“. . . with a commitment to amateur, educational athletics, this great resource for our schools and society can be preserved and even improved.”

athletics: the programs are not perfect, they can be made better; and with a commitment to amateur, educational athletics, this great resource for our schools and society can be preserved and even improved.

It won't happen because a national organization says it should. It won't come from state level rules and regulations. The improvement will come only if, at the local level, those in charge of the program and those working directly with young people want it to happen and work for it, diligently and daily.

The effort is not life or death, any more than purifying a lake or saving a national forest will cure world hunger or cause world peace. But, just as with our ecological efforts, improving educational athletics is worthwhile, worth

committing one's life to.

And those who commit their lives to school sports, particularly at the local level, reap rewards that people in few other professions will ever know. They witness the return of boys and

girls turned into men and women who will say to you, "Thanks, you made a difference."

May you find peace, satisfaction and happiness through your role in school sports. ■

LESSONS OF WAR

MAY 2003

Educational athletics tiptoes through the tragedies of life.

War in Iraq.
September 11th.
Oklahoma City
b o m b i n g .
Natural disasters.
Fatal injuries and illnesses to colleagues, friends and family.
Scandals in corporations, charities and churches.

And still we play our games.

We can do this without apologies, if we do so with care and compassion, if we remember what we are and what we are not.

Now is a good time, for example, to remind players, coaches and spectators that sport is not war. That using words like "kill," "battle" and even "fight" are inappropriate in describing our contests, motivating our athletes and rooting for our teams.

Now is the perfect time to remind people that our contests are not life

and death and to require that we behave accordingly as we coach and watch.

We talk in sports of discipline, dedication and sacrifice. But what we talk of –

like the discipline of being to practice on time daily or the sacrifice of being a role player – is ghostly pale in comparison to what some people are going through in the real world.

We can continue to play our games if we take care to neither ignore the world's condition nor use that condition to promote our programs or ourselves. We diminish real human struggle if we err in either direction. ■

"We can continue to play our games if we take care to neither ignore the world's condition nor use that condition to promote our programs or ourselves."

AN ENDURING INSTITUTION

NOVEMBER 2005

The following are excerpts of the closing message of MHSAA Executive Director John E. (Jack) Roberts at the 2005 MHSAA Update Meetings across Michigan.

In preparing for this meeting, you have to know that I asked the question, “How does one talk about school sports in times such as these?”

When thousands of U.S. kids have recently been without schools, how do we talk about school sports? When thousands of U.S. kids have recently been without teachers, how do we talk about better coaches? When thousands of U.S. kids have recently been without food and shelter, how do we talk about health and safety in sports? And when thousands of U.S. kids have recently been surrounded by a kind of anarchy, how do we talk about sports rules and regulations? Our topics all seem so trivial.

Tragedies such as September 11, last winter’s tsunami, and this fall’s hurricanes, floods and earthquakes serve to remind us of how precious each day is, and how important it is to use each day well. Nevertheless, none of us would be normal, human, if we didn’t ask at times like these if what we do really matters, and if what we do will last.

Early this year, the global consulting firm Booz, Allen, Hamilton

announced the conclusion of a project to determine the world’s most enduring institutions. They included the Salvation Army, General Electric, Sony, the American Constitution. In the area of education, it named Oxford University in England and my alma mater, Dartmouth College in New Hampshire.

The CEO of Booz, Allen, Hamilton defined an “enduring institution” as follows: “One that has changed and grown in unswerving pursuit of success and relevance – yet remains true through time to its founding principles.”

Can we say that about school sports? Can we say that interscholastic athletics, introduced to schools more than a hundred years ago, is an enduring institution?

We *can* say that interscholastic athletics is an unique American tradition: nowhere else in the world do schools sponsor competitive athletic programs quite like we do in the USA.

We *can* say that this American tradition has never been stronger by several measurable criteria. For example, both in total number and as a percent of the student body, participation has never been greater than today. And while it may not seem like it, because the focus is no longer on one gender and just two sports, attendance at high school sports

today has never been greater.

But can we say that interscholastic athletics, this American tradition, is an **enduring institution**?

As I read about the most enduring institutions, I noticed that rather than enjoying smooth sailing at all times, these most enduring institutions frequently endured tension and regularly experienced controversy. I noticed that as competition tried to change some of them, like General Electric and Sony, and as the culture tried to change others of them, such as the Salvation Army, each fought back to preserve core principles.

Throughout our history, sports in schools have been recognizable and distinguishable from sports of most other sponsors on all other levels by its core principles, for example, the emphasis on scholarship, sportsmanship, safety and the scope of our programs.

Schools said these programs would be after school: chronologically after the school day and also after the school day in importance. They said the tail would not wag the dog; academics would come before athletics, school before sports.

Schools said these programs would stress sportsmanship. They said these programs would teach sportsmanship. They said without

sportsmanship, the athletic program was not a program schools could justify, not a tool schools could use to reach and motivate young people in school.

Schools said these programs would put the health and welfare of students above the fame and fortune of coaches and above the outcome of any contest. They said the program would have policies and procedures that were appropriate for school-age athletes, regardless of what gained popularity at other levels.

Schools said these programs would be of reasonable scope. They said they would ask and answer often the questions that are rarely asked and answered at other levels by other sponsors, questions like how early, how late,

how far, how long, how many is too much for adolescents who are students first and athletes second.

Over their first 50 years in schools, interscholastic athletics regularly distinguished itself and defined itself with policies and procedures that institutionalized differences between school sports and non-school sports, between school sports and college athletics, and between school sports and professional sports.

Over at least the second half of the second 50 years in schools, on

“As I read about the most enduring institutions, I noticed that rather than enjoying smooth sailing at all times, these most enduring institutions frequently endured tension and regularly experienced controversy.”

issue after issue, school sports has lost its missionary zeal to be different, and/or school sports has been beaten into submission to be more like non-school sports. Over the years and across the country, as forces tried to change school sports, school sports has less frequently and less forcefully and therefore less effectively fought back to preserve core principles.

The history of almost every rule in the *MHSAA Handbook* is the same. For the first 50 years, the rule got tougher, with broader reach and stiffer penalty. For the next 50 years, the rule got weaker.

The historical pattern for rule after rule is the same: schools faced a problem, they adopted a rule to solve the problem. Years went by. Eventually, people began to question the rule and then to modify the rule. And gradually, the problems that the rule had solved returned.

If school sports is to continue as an American tradition, if school sports can be characterized as an enduring institution, it must regain its fighting spirit for the policies of educational athletics. It must recapture some of its missionary zeal for the philosophy behind school sports, for the message of educational athletics.

Some may question if a place remains for interscholastic athletics in today's schools. In a time of severely limited resources in schools, of unfunded mandates to educate every child, of public and policy demands to improve test scores, is there time to waste on extracurricular programs?

My answer is this: for a program that is educational in its means and its ends, for a program that is student-focused and message-driven, there has never been a better time. School sports has survived the Great Depression, two world wars, the Korean conflict and Vietnam; school sports can survive these times as well.

One hundred years after being introduced to schools, with record participation by high school students, educational athletics survives. It survives because it has a clear mission that is greater than games, because it remains a tool of schools to reach and motivate young people to stay in school and like school and do well in school, and because it is different than sports on all other levels by all other sponsors. It is in this difference that sports has a place in schools and school sports has a place in the hearts of communities and a niche in the world of sports.

It is in this difference that educational athletics becomes an enduring institution. ■

CHARGE!

AUGUST 2007

Last Easter Sunday, our church organist brought the worship service to a close with a loud hymn that resonated in the sanctuary for several moments after the final note was played. Nobody moved.

Whereupon my wife leaned toward me and whispered: "If you play that loudly, you'd better not make a mistake."

I think she was cautioning me, not the organist.

"Words are the bugles of social change," states writer, lecturer, broadcaster Charles Handy in *The Leader of the Future*.

Concepts are needed, both ethereal and practical; stretching but also thoughtful of unintended consequences.

And of course, it is action that is ultimately required ("one's philosophy is not expressed in words; it's expressed in the choices one makes" - Eleanor Roosevelt).

But words sound the charge. They shape and share the message. They describe and detail the course. They motivate the bold to move and many more to follow.

An extraordinary communicator can do this in a quiet voice. Like Emerson. In her introduction to *The*

Essential Writings of Ralph Waldo Emerson, Bennington College teacher and author Mary Oliver writes: ". . . it is not a simple matter to be both inspirational and moderate." Emerson's prose was like a slow, wandering brook, not a rushing river of rhetoric. He could touch both banks, present both sides, and yet move people in one intended direction.

"If we sound the bugle,
we must also be prepared
to lead the charge."

But for most mortals of letters, arguments must sometimes be overstated and

language a bit edgy to get the attention of people and to push them where we want them to go.

Those who speak and write as often and as intemperately as I about the highest ideals of school sports have the same responsibility as that organist on Easter Sunday. A wrong note won't be missed, and it will greatly compromise the message.

If we merely whisper our beliefs, not much will be made of the mistakes we make. But neither will much become of our message.

If we boldly broadcast our beliefs, our missteps will not be overlooked. If we sound the bugle, we must be prepared also to lead the charge. ■

PART II

“IT IS EXTRAORDINARILY DIFFICULT RAISING KIDS. WE PARENTS FIND OURSELVES WANTING TO SMOOTH OUT EVERY ROUGH SPOT IN OUR CHILDREN'S LIVES, EVEN THOUGH WE KNOW THAT IT IS IN DIFFICULTIES AND DISAPPOINTMENTS THAT THEY LEARN AND GROW AND DEVELOP THE COURAGE AND CHARACTER TO BECOME THE BEST ADULTS THEY ARE CAPABLE OF BEING.”

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO FOR THEIR KIDS

SEPTEMBER / OCTOBER 2000

Like many Americans, I have helped keep Tom Brokaw's book, *The Greatest Generation*, on the "best-seller" lists for many months. It's a stirring tribute to the sacrifices and successes of my parents' generation. In fact, Brokaw's prototype for the generation was born in 1920, the year of my father's birth. When they might have enjoyed a teenager's foolishness, they had the great depression.

When they might have turned college degrees into job offers, they had World War II.

Subsequent generations know nothing of the suffering, fear and delayed gratification that forged discipline, dedication and persistence that we don't really fully appreciate.

Maybe that's part of the reason my generation has been so lousy about our kids and their sports.

The youth sports image of parents today is that, against all odds, we believe our child has a college athletic scholarship in his or her future; we criticize our children, even publicly, for every idle moment or any momentary lapse of focus or proficiency in competition; we challenge the coach regarding decisions on position, playing time

and strategy; and we loudly chastise officials for cheating our kids.

Of course, the kids need none of this. Here's what they really need.

Jim Abbott was born without a hand but went on to be a star high school athlete in Flint, Michigan, and to pitch for the University of Michigan baseball team, pitch the United States to a Pan American Games gold medal, and pitch successfully in

“My dad and I did what was necessary to play catch. We didn't form the basis for a major league career. We just played catch.”

Major League Baseball. When asked what his father did to prepare him for a major league baseball career, Abbott said: "My dad and I did what was necessary to play catch. We didn't form the basis for a major league career. We just played catch."

What do kids need from us?

To just play catch. They just need a **fan**.

They need a fan, not a fanatic; they need an encourager, not an embarrassment. They need us to let them live their lives, not relive our lives with all the rough spots smoothed out. They need us to delay our gratification in **their** lives permanently.

I didn't make this up. This is what my kid told me. ■

THE ABUNDANT LIFE

APRIL 2002

Dear Sons,

Your mother and I attended the funeral of Dr. Al Jacobs recently, and for some reason I feel compelled to tell you about it.

You see, Dr. Jacobs never made national news. He wasn't a topic of statewide media. He was rarely mentioned by local media . . . no more so than an average citizen.

But more than 800 people attended his funeral. Eight hundred! Movie stars, millionaires and statesmen have not seen the outpouring of respect and gratitude that was given Dr. Jacobs.

I sat in awe among the 800. No words would need to be spoken for me to know this was some man.

When all those who had been Dr. Jacobs' students at Michigan State University and all those who had been players on high school sports team for which he was team physician were asked to stand, hundreds of people rose to their feet.

Each of you, like hundreds of thousands of young men and women, is at crossroads in your life. Do I stay in teaching and coaching? Do I go to seminary? Do I take this life path or that?

There are professions that pay better than teaching and preaching,

than education and ministry; but it's not often in higher paying professions that people return to you in 10, 20 or 30 years and say, "Thanks, you made a difference." How much is that worth?

Fifty years after coaching an undefeated high school football season, your grandpa was honored at a reunion of his players last fall and asked by the 2001 coach to give the pregame pep talk, and the team scored on its first play from scrimmage! How much is that worth?

The old saw, "You can't take it with you," is true. You can't take the possessions with you to the next life. All you can do is leave influence behind. Like Dr. Jacobs. Like your grandpa. Like great teachers and coaches, great ministers and missionaries.

At this crossroads, choose service over stuff. Choose giving over gathering. Then quietly just do your very best. Someday, more people than you can imagine will leap to their feet to honor your name and memory. As the advertising slogan goes, "It's not the hands you shake, it's the lives you touch."

Love, Dad

"It's not the hands
you shake, it's the
lives you touch."

WHERE THE BOYS ARE

SEPTEMBER / OCTOBER 2002

Year after year I go to league and conference scholar-athlete awards banquets and see girls outnumber boys by wide margins: 54 girls to 33 boys honored at a March event in mid-Michigan is typical of what has occurred many places over many years.

Year after year, I attend senior honors programs and see girls outnumber boys: 147 awards to girls versus 70 awards to boys honored at a May event in mid-Michigan is typical.

It is possible, perhaps likely, that a generation of young males is at risk.

Is it possible for us to do anything about it?

Why is there **so much** talk about girls and sports, and **so little** talk about boys and non-athletic activities, which have done every bit as much for me and my sons as sports?

Why do we have a federal agency – the Office for Civil Rights – making some colleges and schools turn themselves upside down and inside out, including eliminating sports teams for males, in order to provide – regardless of demonstrated interest

– not only equal numbers of male and female athletes, but also the same percentage of athletic opportunities for females

as there are females enrolled in the institution – proportionality, it's called – while OCR is doing little or nothing for males in speech, music, debate or drama? Look at these figures from the National Federation of State High School Associations:

“Want to do something to curb juvenile delinquency and all kinds of abusive behavior by boys? Devote as much brain power and money to advocating opportunity for boys in non-athletic activities as we devote to girls in sports. That would be a good start.”

- 68.3% of vocal music participants are girls.
- 66.4% of participants in group interpretation speech activities are girls.
- 63.3% of participants in individual speech events are girls.
- 62.7% of orchestra members are girls.
- 61% of dramatics participants are girls.

Where is the outrage? Where are the bureaucrats to investigate this discrimination, if that's what it is? By every other measure but sports, boys are **under**-represented in school

activities. And worse, boys are **over-**represented in academic failures, dropouts, discipline problems, drug use and crime statistics. Where's the remedial action? Where's the affirmative action? Where are the quotas?

If it is unfair for schools to provide **athletic** opportunities that are not proportionate to the enrollment of girls in schools – even when girls may not have expressed similar interests in sports – then it's unfair for schools to provide opportunities for **boys** in **non-**athletic activities that are not in proportion to the percentage of boys enrolled in those schools, regardless of boys' interests.

Proportionality is a deeply flawed principle for enforcing Title IX, but it's made even worse when the enforcers use it selectively, aiming at high-profile sports rather than **all** of the educational activities of schools.

We are in desperate need of advocates for **all** of our students in **all** of our programs.

Want to do something to curb juvenile delinquency and all kinds of abusive behavior by boys? Devote as much brain power and money to advocating opportunity for boys in non-athletic activities as we devote to girls in sports. That would be a good start. ■

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

FEBRUARY 2003

My first year of college football wasn't what I expected. And that made all the difference.

I expected to play. In fact, I expected to start. What I did not expect was to never get in a game.

There were 144 candidates for the Dartmouth College freshman football team in 1966. I and 45 others had been captains of their high school teams. I wasn't big or fast or carrying a lot of high school accolades. While I never missed a minute of practice that college freshman season, I never played a down in a game.

I had expected to play, I believed I should have played, believed the coaches were wrong in not playing

me, believed I was a better player than some who did play. I believed it so strongly that I returned for my sophomore year.

And by mid-season – because a lot of the original 144 on the freshman team did not return for the varsity program, and one veteran was switched to another position, and the starter was injured – I became a starter at defensive back.

More than any other reason, this happened because I expected to play college football. I didn't allow the events of my freshman year to define my college football career; my expectations defined my career.

It is this spirit that has guided me in adulthood. Since arriving at the

MHSAA, we have had great expectations for educational athletics in this state.

For example:

- We have expected that student-athletes would be students first and athletes second.
- We have expected that the environment surrounding interscholastic athletic events would be compatible with the goals and objectives of the sponsoring organizations: educational institutions.
- We have expected that administrators, coaches and officials would seek and could obtain regular in-service training to assure they are aware of the "best practices" for their vocation/avocation.
- We have expected a relatively non-commercial program that focuses on regular season contests at the local level, that emphasizes team values more than individual stars, that provides practical learning experiences in leadership and sportsmanship, hard work and teamwork, discipline and dedication, sacrifice and fair play.

Sometimes we have had to sit on the bench, unable to force people to

"If we expect the best,
if we expect
improvement, we are
far more likely to get it
than if we take
ourselves off the team
and ultimately out of
the game."

do what we think would more effectively achieve our high expectations. After all, this is a voluntary association of schools which requires local decision-making and control; so we don't get to call all the plays. But eventually,

it seems, if we're patient and come back out the next year and the next, we're provided the opportunity to get in the game and to influence the outcome.

On every level of school sports in Michigan, great expectations can and will prevail if we stay on the team. If we expect the best, if we expect improvement, we are far more likely to get it than if we take ourselves off the team and ultimately out of the game.

One of my sons tried five times to make a travel soccer team. Four times he failed, and through the tears at home, we told him to try again the next year. "Make them cut you again, don't cut yourself," we told him.

Eventually he made that travel team, and then his high school soccer team. He did so because he had extraordinary courage, and great expectations. ■

“AMERICA’S MOST COMPETITIVE ADULT SPORT”

AUGUST 2004

One of the most elusive of blessings is a well balanced life.

Think about that. How much mental illness is a part of one's body, mind or soul out of control? How much physical fatigue is a result of too much of one thing or too little of another, like too much work and too few workouts? How much emotional discomfort is caused by lack of time for spouse, children, charity, church, for recreation . . . re-creation?

One of the most elusive blessings of life is a well balanced life.

For children, there is danger in too much idle time. “The Music Man” preyed on the fears of the parents of River City, Iowa, haunting them that idle time would lead to boys' ruin.

But that was then, now is now. And the dangers to many kids may have more to do with too much to do than too little to do.

Certainly this is not the case for all children. Many underprivileged children are under-scheduled, under-supervised and under-challenged.

But for very many children who are involved in sports, in very many communities and circumstances, their quality of life is harmed at least as much as helped by the over-sched-

uling of adolescent lives by adult leaders, some with the best of intentions, some with bad intentions, and many with no clue at all.

Psychiatrist Alvin Rosenfeld writes of his concerns, using phrases such as, “the over-scheduled child rearing style” and saying “Parenting is now America's most competitive adult sport.”

Now coming to a high school near you are parents who have carried their crying five-year-olds to and from the mats of freestyle wrestling meets. Coming to a high school near

you are parents who enrolled their six-year-olds in competitive soccer leagues and coached their seven-year-olds' teams to be sure “it

is a good experience.” Coming to a high school near you are parents who have paid for private tennis lessons for their children since they were eight years old, paid for private softball pitching lessons since they were nine years old, and paid for individual and team basketball camps since they were ten years old. Coming to a high school near you are parents who have taxied their children across town, state and country for competitions in ice hockey, soccer, volleyball, basketball, baseball, golf, tennis and more.

“We are fighting to keep sensible limits in Michigan. That's a hard fight; it's a noble fight.”

Now coming to us with high school students are parents who have exhausted themselves and their pocketbooks and are now saying, "You do it. You provide the uniforms, the transportation, the coaches; and most of all, you keep pushing, you keep over-scheduling, you keep doing it because they won't listen to their parents anymore."

The loudest objections to any proposals to restrict the number or length of high school practices, the number of contests, the length of travel, coaching contacts out of season, and participation out of season have come from parents. Some objections have come from coaches, but the most objections and the loudest ones come from parents.

Not all parents fit this stereotype. Some parents criticize state high school associations for allowing too much, leaving no time for family vacations and insufficient time for the students' school work and church life. But these parents complain less now than other parents would complain later if new limits on athletic expectations were proposed.

The typical child involved in school sports lives in three worlds. There is the athletic world, both school and non-school. There is the academic world. And there is the personal world that includes non-athletic activities, church and community activities, after-school jobs and, of course, friends.

In school sports we're supposed to believe, and we're supposed to advance policies, that assure academ-

ics are placed ahead of athletics in the lives of students, at least within the academic day, week and year.

I suppose all sports have their bad moments, but these situations stand out as obvious problems, as obvious cases of misplaced priorities:

1. High school swimming - it's the only sport high school administrators will allow to practice two times a day, even on school days, all season long.
2. Non-school ice hockey, soccer, volleyball and basketball - students travel great distances almost daily to practice and compete with elite teams in other towns, often playing more games outside the high school season than during the high school season.
3. Gymnastics - students start in the fall in clubs; and by the time the winter high school season is finished, so are these students' bodies: bruised, battered and bandaged. Child abuse might have fewer scars than what I have seen at MHSAA Girls Gymnastics Finals in March.
4. Baseball and softball and golf - students missing classes day in and day out to participate in regular season contests.

Obvious as these abuses are to educators, we doubt we could get consensus to change anything. School administrators will agree, but parents will object to a reduction in swimming practices, restriction on non-school sports out of season, and prohibition on playing Sport A in a

non-school program while on the school team in Sport B.

We are fighting to keep sensible limits in Michigan. That's a hard fight; it's a noble fight. Pushing for more restrictions, we would likely end up with less, so the cost benefit analysis of a fight for what's good for kids is a high risk enterprise with very low chance of reward or success.

Eighty percent of all youngsters who ever participated in sports have stopped doing so by the time they

reach 13 years of age. It is no wonder.

And there is a corollary to this burnout among the students: the more we push (or simply allow) the over-scheduling of students, the harder it will be for us to find and keep their high school coaches. Excessive demands on athletes lead to excessive demands on coaches, burnout and exacerbation of the coaching shortage in educational athletics. ■

OVERSCHEDULING ISN'T JUST THE FAULT OF PARENTS

MARCH 2007

Parents receive much criticism from school administrators, coaches and even the student-athletes in our programs who cite parents that are too often over-involved, under-informed and out of control. An overused joke describes a recently fired coach who vows his next coaching job will only be at an orphanage.

In criticisms like this are found some kernels of truth. But the greater truth is that we need parents to help school sports reach their full potential. We need parent volunteers, in front of our boards of education asking for things and behind the scenes supporting those things.

It is extraordinarily difficult raising kids. We parents find ourselves wanting to smooth out every rough spot in our children's lives, even though

we know that it is in difficulties and disappointments that they learn and grow and develop the courage and character to become the best adults they are capable of being.

In our love for them more than any vicarious effort to live through them, we sign them up for and drive them to every conceivable camp and clinic and every scheduled practice and game. We feel if we don't keep pushing, our kids will fall behind and perhaps not make that school team or get the playing time they should, or receive the college scholarship they (or we) dream of.

We do this in spite of the growing body of evidence that it would be a shrewder investment to buy them books than balls. Statistically, the chances of a college athletic scholar-

ship are remote; but we talk about it anyway, the rush of doing so pumping us up.

We do this in spite of the growing library of publications that chastises our ways, like *The Hurried Child* and *The Power of Play* (David Elkind), *A Parents' Guide to Building Resilience in Children and Teens* (American Academy of Pediatrics) and *Confessions of a Slacker Mom* (Muffy Mead-Ferro).

I'm thinking it's time we let up on these parents. Or at least time that we parents who also are sports administrators share the responsibility for this madness. Ellen Galinsky, president of the Families and Work Institute in New York, says that we need to address not only parents but those who are creating the environment.

Galinsky cites, and says doctors should confront, the "marketers who push all those 'drill and practice'

toys." Galinsky says, "Pediatricians need to be talking not only to parents but people who create the world in which parents are raising kids today."

"If we design a program that demands year-round specialization in sports, perhaps we are also to blame. If we merely allow such overemphasis on sports, perhaps we also share some blame. "

It's not much of a stretch to include those of us who design and/or regulate school sports. We are creators of this world too. If we design a program that demands year-round specialization in sports, perhaps we are also to blame. If we merely allow such

overemphasis on sports, perhaps we also share some blame.

All of this suggests that defined starting and ending dates for school sports seasons and limitations on activities between school coaches and student-athletes out of season are not only sensible but necessary, and that efforts to shorten school seasons and reduce out-of-season coaching are not only appropriate but overdue. ■

PART III

“SPORTSMANSHIP REVEALS MORE ABOUT US THAN ANYTHING ELSE WE DO. SPORTSMANSHIP REVEALS MORE ABOUT OUR CHARACTER THAN ANY ATHLETIC ACHIEVEMENT, ANY VICTORY, ANY TROPHY OR MEDAL.”

PLAY LIKE A CHAMPION

DECEMBER / JANUARY 2004-05

What follows are portions of the closing address by MHSAA Executive Director John E. "Jack" Roberts at the MHSAA's four regional Sportsmanship Summits during the fall of 2004.

If you and I are playing tennis, and I don't try to win and you defeat me, I cheapen your victory. And by cheapening your victory, I've been a poor sport.

So trying to win is a goal of school sports. Trying in the **best** way to win, within the rules, with all our effort, and with grace regardless of the outcome.

The most satisfying victory in sports is defeating your best opponent on his or her best day. The least satisfying victory is against a much weaker opponent, or as a result of a glaring mistake, or a bad call, or worst of all, cheating. You want the best opponent on his or her best day. You feel the best when you beat the best, playing your best. I'm here to help you do that.

One of the great lessons of the academic classroom, and one of the great lessons of the athletic arena, is

this: as you prepare, you will perform. How you study generally affects your grades. How you practice affects your performance, whether that is in band or basketball.

And one of the areas that needs thought, one of the areas that needs study, and one of the areas that needs practice in sports, is sportsmanship. I want to convey to you, I want to convince you, that sportsmanship is not corny, and it's not out of style in our "in-your-face" society. And it needs practice.

"Sportsmanship is not dead, and it's not out of fashion. In fact, the natural instinct of people is toward sportsmanship. The natural tendency of people is toward fairness, courtesy, kindness and respect."

Sportsmanship is not dead, and it's not out of fashion. In fact, the natural instinct of people is toward sportsmanship. The natural tendency of people is toward fairness, courtesy, kindness and respect.

Once when my son was playing soccer – he was about eight years old at the time – he tumbled out of bounds and down a little hill. Luke returned to the field covered with burrs from head to toe. As he began to delicately remove the burrs, play continued, except that a player on the other team – the player marking him – stopped to assist Luke, contin-

uing to help him until all the burrs were removed. And only then did the two players go back to the game.

Sportsmanship is not dead. It's the natural instinct of young people. Even before you could pronounce the word, even before you could define the concept as you've been trying to do today, you knew what sportsmanship was. If, in the middle of a card game, I were to change the rules of the game when you were six, seven or eight years old, you would shout, "Hey, that's not fair!" We must assure that as 16-, 17- and 18-year-olds, you will still feel the same way.

But sportsmanship is more than this, as the following example demonstrates.

A number of autumns ago, Wheaton Christian High School was playing Waubonsie Valley High School in boys soccer; and with one minute remaining, Waubonsie Valley scored to go ahead 3-2, and their crowd went wild. The ball was put back in play, and as the clock ticked down, Wheaton Christian made its last offensive. The ball was moved to the senior captain, the highest scorer in the school's history, who got by a couple of defenders and close enough to the goal that he faked the keeper one way and then kicked the ball high into the net the other way, tying the score 3-3. Wheaton Christian's crowd went nuts.

However, the senior captain had noticed something. He had noticed that the clock at the end of the field behind the goal to which he had

kicked had ticked down to zero before the ball had entered the net. So he walked over to the referee and asked, "Is the scoreboard clock official, or are you keeping the time here on the field?" The referee said the scoreboard clock was official, and the senior captain told the referee what had happened. And then he told his coaches what had happened: that the kick was late, that the goal shouldn't count, that the other team should win.

Which is exactly what happened that day.

Here's how the senior captain was quoted in the *Chicago Tribune* a few days later. "Doing the right thing is important. It lets you have peace. In my opinion, every time you're lucky enough to be given the opportunity to do something right, you shouldn't pass it up."

Sportsmanship is not dead, and it's not out of style or out of fashion.

There is this notion that sportsmanship is only observing a list of don'ts. But sportsmanship is also observing a list of dos. It's seizing the opportunity to do something right.

Not only do good sports refrain from booing opponents and officials and from chanting, "Air ball, air ball" and "You, you, you" after fouls. Really good sports restrain others from doing those things.

Not only do good sports refuse to shout, "We're No. 1, we're No. 1" or sing that terrible song, "Na Na, Hey Hey, Goodbye." Really good sports remind others that this is

childish at best, and spiteful at worst.

Not only do good sports refuse to do sack dances and end zone prances. Really good sports return to help up the quarterback and hand the ball to the official after touchdowns. I am sick in my heart at the behavior of college and professional football players: college defenders who strut and point after they make a tackle, and professional players who prance and dance in the end zone after they score.

The best behaved football players on any level in Michigan are those engaged in the high school game.

Why is sportsmanship so important? Because sportsmanship is the starting point, if not the essence, of citizenship. And because sportsmanship is what we're supposed to teach and learn in educational athletics more than anything else. More than fitness, skills and strategies, we're to teach and learn sportsmanship. More than discipline, sacrifice, hard work and teamwork, we're to teach and learn sportsmanship. That's our product. Educational athletics without sportsmanship is like General Motors without cars: there would be no reason for being.

In the book *Discovery of Morals*, which is not about sports at all, the author, who is a sociologist and not

an athlete at all, writes this: "Sportsmanship is probably the clearest and most popular expression of morals. Sportsmanship is a thing of the spirit. It is timeless and endless; and we should strive to make it universal to our races, creeds and walks in life."

Sportsmanship reveals more about us than anything else we do. Sportsmanship reveals more about our character than any athletic achievement, any victory, any trophy or medal.

Sportsmanship is more than a list of don'ts and dos. It's more than grace in defeat and victory. It's more than how we play the game and how we watch the game.

It is how we live our lives.

Sportsmanship begins in our homes. We work on it in practice. It extends to games. It reaches up into the crowd and permeates the school halls and shopping malls, and it infects society for good or for bad. The quality of sportsmanship in our schools is related to the quality of citizenship in our society.

All across the state, the MHSAA is trying to help schools keep their grip on sportsmanship when, on all other levels of sports, sportsmanship seems to be declining. All across the state, the MHSAA is trying to help schools keep a hold of high standards when,

"Sportsmanship is probably the clearest and most popular expression of morals. Sportsmanship is a thing of the spirit. It is timeless and endless; and we should strive to make it universal to our races, creeds and walks in life."

on all other levels, standards seem to be slipping.

I'm certain you have heard the expression, "Get a grip." Or, "Get a grip on yourself," when someone is losing control of himself or herself. That's exactly what sportsmanship requires: getting a grip on oneself emotionally, and remembering what school sports is about. And what school sports is mostly about is sportsmanship.

What you're doing here today and what you're intending to accomplish in your schools in all sports throughout the entire school year will strengthen your program and will help the entire state keep a strong grip on sportsmanship. As you

improve the standards of sportsmanship at your school, so will those standards be elevated in the schools you oppose in athletic participation and in your entire league or conference.

So let's practice like champions; let's play like champions; and let's act like champions, win or lose, in season or out.

Live with pure thoughts, kind words, good deeds, positive habits and uncompromising character, championship character; and you will be a champion in life, and you will be a champion **for** life. Make it your destiny to play like a champion, and lead others to do the same. ■

ETHICS IN SPORTS

APRIL 2005

The following is excerpted from comments by MHSAA Executive Director John E. Roberts at the Olivet College "Ethics in Today's Society" program, March 16, 2005.

What does it mean to be ethical and responsible in sports?

I won't speak for the professional level, which has a commercial goal involving adults. I won't speak for the intercollegiate level, which has the same goal in some sports (for example, Division I basketball and football) and goals more akin to school sports at other levels or in

other sports of Division I. I won't speak for Olympic sports which, in some sports, have stooped to become about as amateur in their ethics as professional and Division I football and basketball. And I can't speak for the purely recreational level of sports.

I can only speak for **school** sports, interscholastic athletics, what we call "educational athletics."

School sports have rules – lots of them. We believe participation alone is not enough; we believe participation with standards is required. It is not participation alone that has

value, but the standards we require for the privilege of participation that infuse participation with value. We believe if we raise the standards of eligibility and conduct, we raise the value of participation; and we also believe if we lower the standards, we lower the value.

School sports can't afford teams of auditors and investigators to assure rules are being followed. In school sports, we adhere to the principle of self-governance where, in most cases, schools discover their own violations, report them to opponents and the MHSAA office, and assess the prescribed penalties. In nine out of ten violations, that's what occurs. Sometimes, of course, dishonorable people hide violations.

Sometimes, even honorable people seek relief from penalties because they don't feel the penalty is fair or because the violation wasn't their fault. These are some of the toughest days of my job.

Over my 19 years, the MHSAA has processed hundreds of cases of ineligible athletes participating in interscholastic athletic events. The vast majority of these cases have been self-discovered and self-reported, and the penalty of forfeiture was self-imposed. The MHSAA merely got a letter from the school indicating the error and providing a copy of the notices of forfeiture to opposing teams.

When the activity is at the varsity level, the stakes are higher than at the subvarsity level. When varsity football is involved, the stakes seem higher still because the cost of forfeiture might be loss of a place among the District qualifiers of the Football Playoffs.

The MHSAA has processed many cases involving varsity football over the years. They're virtually all self-discovered and self-reported violations. Sometimes, the penalty of forfeiture was appealed; and in all cases

where the penalty of forfeiture was appealed, the penalty was upheld.

Usually the appeal was based on the fact that the violation was self-discovered, self-reported and committed by a player who made limited contributions in lopsided victories. And sometimes the people of the affected

community argued that by not making an exception for their case, the MHSAA was (1) discouraging other schools from reporting their violations in the future; and (2) telling their kids that honesty doesn't pay. Let's examine these arguments.

By not making an exception, it was argued, the MHSAA was discouraging other schools from reporting their violations in the future; in other words, discouraging honesty. But it is the experience of the MHSAA's leadership that it is more likely, rather than less, that consistent

“Ultimately, sportsmanship – ethical and responsible behavior – is the most important product of school sports.”

cy of enforcement encourages self-reporting. That it promotes honesty.

It is more likely that I will report my violations and accept my forfeitures now if I know that you have reported your violations and received forfeitures in the past, and that you will report your violations and receive forfeitures in the future. In other words, if I know you will receive the same result I receive, without uncertainty, I will step forward. I don't know if that's ethical and responsible behavior, but that's a fact of human nature.

The second argument advanced is that by not making an exception, the MHSAA is telling kids that honesty doesn't pay. Of course, if the community involved allows that to be the lesson learned, it certainly will be learned. But these situations are ripe for better lessons: that honesty is its own reward; that it isn't really honesty if there is some prize; that the true test of honesty is what a person does when no one is watching; and the truer test still is when it takes courage to be honest, when there is a cost. Not a prize for being honest, but a penalty.

It doesn't take courage for administrators to report a violation when their team lost the game in which the ineligible student played, or it's on the subvarsity level, or even on the varsity level in most sports at most times. But it takes courage – and it's

really ethical and responsible behavior – if the report will disqualify the team from the MHSAA tournament.

Ethical and responsible behavior sometimes comes with a prize. Just as often, ethical and responsible behavior comes at a price.

Fortunately, such controversies as these only happen a couple of times each year. But in school sports, the opportunity to demonstrate ethical and responsible behavior occurs in every school, every day, multiple times each day. At home weigh-ins in wrestling. In teaching ethical play in practice. In curtailng gamesmanship in games. In treating officials and opponents in a sportsmanlike way.

I believe that the quality of sportsmanship in our schools is linked to the quality of citizenship in our communities. Sportsmanship begins at home; we work on it in practice; it extends to the games; it reaches up into the crowd; it permeates the school halls and shopping malls; and it begins to infect society, for good or bad.

Ultimately, sportsmanship – ethical and responsible behavior – is the most important product of school sports. We are to teach it, preach it, practice it and promote it. We reward it a thousand times yearly at the MHSAA, and a thousand times daily it is quietly reinforced in our member schools, at least in the schools which realize what's at stake. ■

CHEERING FOR SPORTSMANSHIP

DECEMBER 2006 / JANUARY 2007

This is an abbreviated version of the keynote address by John E. "Jack" Roberts at the MHSAA's regional sportsmanship summits throughout Michigan in October 2006.

Last summer at a journalism camp, I spoke for an hour about high school sports in Michigan and the role of the Michigan High School Athletic Association. When I stopped to ask for questions, a hand and arm immediately shot up from a boy in the back, who asked: "Mr. Roberts, so what's your job?"

I paused briefly and then I said slowly, "I guess I'm the head cheerleader for high school sports in Michigan."

So then this precocious student asked: "Okay, what do you cheer for?"

This time, without pausing, I said, "I'm glad you asked." And I told him then, and I tell you today, "This is what I really cheer for in high school sports in Michigan."

I cheer for sportsmanship. Not merely good sportsmanship, but great sportsmanship throughout the Great Lakes state.

I cheer for sportsmanship, not gamesmanship.

I cheer for playing by the rules, all the time, both the letter and the spirit of the rules.

I cheer for rivalries between schools, great rivalries, based on respect, not ridicule and rudeness.

I cheer for maximum effort to win each and every competition in which we engage. I don't cheer for winning at any cost; I do cheer for learning at every opportunity.

I cheer for losing with grace, and winning with even greater grace, with modesty, with humility.

I cheer for the multi-sport student-

athletes among us. I cheer for the student who is a star in one sport, perhaps a substitute in another sport, and in the stands cheering for classmates in two or three other sports.

I cheer for the student who participates in both athletic and non-athletic activities. Who is sometimes onstage, and sometimes backstage; who's sometimes in solo, sometimes in ensemble.

I cheer for successes and setbacks in almost equal proportions. Because I cheer for the lessons of victory, and the even greater lessons of defeat.

Think with me for a moment. Which sunset is the more beautiful? The one without any clouds in the sky, or the one on a partly cloudy evening?

The sunsets with the most color, the most different colors, the most

"I cheer for those who will judge school sports differently than it is evaluated on all other levels of sports, by all other sponsors of sports."

richness and texture, the most uniqueness, the most character, are the sunsets on partly cloudy evenings.

And as clouds add character to a late afternoon and early evening sky, so do disappointments add depth and meaning in life. Without losses in sports, victories are far less sweet.

As a player, coach, parent of players and administrator of a sports program, I know with certainty that the experience of defeat is a large part of what gives value to victory.

I cheer for a definition of winning in high school sports that is different than what we see on television and elsewhere. It's not Nike's definition: that second place is the first loser. They should be ashamed of that slogan.

Ours is a definition that goes beyond the scoreboard. Win or lose, did we play our best? Win or lose, did we play by the rules? Win or lose, did we hustle? Win or lose, did we have teamwork? Win or lose, did we show heart? Win or lose, was the performance the best that we were capable of doing?

Ours is a definition that goes beyond trophies and medals. Win or lose, was there sound teaching? Win or lose, was there real learning? Win or lose, was there pursuit of character, or merely a pursuit of championships? Win or lose, did we grow as human beings through this enterprise?

It is within your power – it's totally up to each one of you individually – to be victorious in every game, meet or match that you play. Everyone here can go undefeated in every season. This happens when you set the standards, and when you define the victory.

If victory is only by the scoreboard or the stopwatch, there are too many variables, and losses are unavoidable.

But it is in your power to be the one whom people point to after every contest and say, “Did you see that hustle? Didn't she show heart? Didn't he give us great effort? What character that kid has.” Regardless of the scoreboard, and ultimately in life, that will be more important, and that will define victory.

Do you see how freeing this is? You don't have to be nervous before contests, for you will know the outcome before they start . . . if you define winning by your standards - by heart, hustle, integrity, respect, teamwork - then you can be undefeated in every competition. And I cheer for those who will define victory in this way.

I cheer for those who will judge school sports differently than it is evaluated on all other levels of sports, by all other sponsors of sports. I cheer for those who value school before sports, academics before athletics, safety before competition. I cheer for those who value sportsmanship – a precursor to citizenship, a way of life that goes way beyond sports.

I cheer for those who cheer the positive things at games, and not jeer in negative ways. I cheer for those who cheer for our teams, not against the other team.

I cheer for clever chants, not vulgar ones. I cheer for creative signs, not mean-spirited ones.

I cheer for respect, not ridicule or rudeness, for officials and opponents.

And I cheer for each and every one of you who will cheer for these same

things in these same kinds of ways in your school and conference. I will cheer for you to set the example, and to be the model.

I cheer for you to seize the opportunities to do things right. Choices will come to you in many ways every day. In almost every game, every

practice and in every day, in the school halls and shopping malls. Choose to do what is right. Choose what will uplift your teammates and classmates, promote them and encourage them.

Good sportsmanship, no . . . great sportsmanship, depends on you. ■

TO BOO IS TABOO

APRIL 2007

A misleading headline from Washington State made national news, and initiated a national discussion that shouldn't end quickly in the state of Michigan.

The headline reported that the Washington Interscholastic Activities Association was considering a ban on booing at high school sports events. In fact, the association was examining the different standards of sportsmanship at local, league, region and state levels, and it was exploring if one common set of expectations could be adopted.

Intended or not, the notion of no booing stimulated discussion in the news and sports portions of print and broadcast media on all levels nationwide. Brilliant. We need such discussion, at least in school sports, to draw us toward accountability between our mission statements and the ways and means of our programs.

The notion that a ban on booing is absurd, is absurd itself. The fact is that at most of the events in most of the sports the MHSAA sponsors, no

booing ever occurs, and in most of the other sports, it rarely occurs.

Which begs the question: why? Why is the boo okay in one sport when it's taboo in another?

If we can operate events in bowling without booing, why not also in baseball and basketball? If there are never boos in competitive cheer, cross country, golf and gymnastics, why not also in football? If never in skiing, why not also in ice hockey? If never in tennis or track & field, why not also in soccer and softball? If rarely here, why then commonly there? Why should it be okay in some sports but rarely or never in others?

Any of us can make a few excuses for the differing behaviors, but it still begs the question: why? Really, why?

I'm grateful some guy in Washington State goofed up a headline. We need to focus on why. And we need to say, "To boo is taboo," in more school sports settings. ■

PART IV

“DO NOT BE DECEIVED BY SIMPLEMINDED POLICIES THAT MERELY ARE ESCAPES FROM THE RESPONSIBILITY OF REGULATING THIS PROGRAM, OF NOT ONLY PROMOTING IT BUT MOSTLY PROTECTING SCHOOL SPORTS.”

NEW WAYS TO SAY OLD THINGS

DECEMBER 2000 / JANUARY 2001

Closing comments at MHSAA Update Meetings, October 2000.

We're always looking for new ways to say old things. When we had the breakdown of sportsmanship during the 1995-96 school year, we sought new ways to talk about sportsmanship. People had begun to tune out, so we spoke with new vocabulary and new volume.

When you believe in what you're doing, you don't seek to change what you're doing when people tune out; you seek to find new ways to say old things.

This really wasn't on my mind, but it happened anyway, as I was reading Steven L. Carter's book, *God's Name in Vain: The Wrongs and Rights of Religion in Politics*. Carter makes the statement, "If faith lives by resisting, it dies by conforming."

I believe the same is true for educational athletics.

School sports survive so long as they resist characteristics common to other sports programs, such as nationalism, commercialism, professionalism and hooliganism.

School sports will die by conforming to nationalism, commercialism, professionalism, hooliganism, and to

the absurd policies and excessive practices of non-school youth sports, much of intercollegiate athletics and professional programs. If we try to be like them, we will lose our place and our purpose.

School sports were created several generations ago to be different than the opportunities that were available to school-age students at that time, which were run by colleges or were semi-professional programs in which it was not unusual for 15-year-olds to be matched with 25-year-olds, some of whom were "professionals" and some of whom were not even enrolled in the schools they were representing.

It is by our separation, our differences, that school sports exist and have a place and a purpose both within schools and within sports. Our niche in the world of education, and our niche in the world of athletics, is local, wholesome, pure, amateur, low-commercial, sportsmanlike, educational athletics.

If we look at other sports programs and say, "Everybody does it," or, "If you can't beat 'em, then join 'em," then we assure we will be beaten.

Our purpose and place, our strength and survival, is in not doing

"If we look at other sports programs and say, 'Everybody does it,' or, 'If you can't beat 'em, then join 'em,' then we assure we will be beaten."

what everybody else does. Our purpose and place, our strength and survival, is by not joining in the excessive and absurd. Our purpose and place, our strength and survival, is in our difference. Our future is in being different.

If there is no difference between a high school program and a non-school program, then there is no reason for a high school to bother with that program. There has to be a dif-

ference for schools to make the effort. There has to be a difference for the MHSAA to make the effort. There has to be a difference for you to make the effort.

So in closing on this day, I use with new meaning the over-used phrase, "Make a difference." Make our program different than sports by any other sponsor on any other level. Do this to preserve our place in schools and our place in sports. ■

NEED FOR BRIGHTER LINES

MARCH 2002

For 15 years I have identified sportsmanship atop the lists of both the major problems confronting school sports and the significant projects we would be undertaking in future years.

I'm moving a new topic to the top of these lists.

I now believe the major problem confronting school sports and the most significant project we must undertake has to do with the blurring of the line between school sports and community sports.

There's nothing wrong with most community sports programs – they're usually good, healthy recreation for youth, with positive skill and life lessons, and some of these programs do a better job than school sports with officials' training, safety and sportsmanship. However, for the most part, community sports are not – and must not be – school sports.

There is a place for sports in schools because the interscholastic athletic program is different than what is available outside of schools. The differences justify the time, money and sponsorship of schools. Without the differences, schools have no business wasting educators' time and taxpayers' money.

The differences should be seen in **what** school sports seek to do and **how** they seek to do it.

In school sports, the emphasis is on local participation, not regional and national tournaments. The schedule respects the academic day and school year. It respects the desire and need for students to participate in more than one sport and in more than sports. It leaves time for other school activities and for studies.

The program is not intended to promote a single elite or travel team or one particular high-profile sport.

It has a place for subvarsity as well as varsity teams, junior high school as well as high school teams, and non-revenue producing sports as well as those with substantial gate receipts.

The program is intended to be governed by school boards, managed by school administrators and coached by school employees, or those directly responsible to school employees.

The travel is short, the awards are modest, the officials are registered, and proper attention is given to sportsmanship and safety.

Some of these hallmark characteristics of educational athletics are not as common as they once were. For example, program expansion and resource contraction have caused many local schools to seek funding sources outside the school's operating budget and to hire coaches from outside the school faculty. Gradually, this blurs the line between school and community programs.

A generation ago, sports started in the schools and community programs followed. Today, more often the opposite is true: community programs gain popularity and then those citizens ask schools to have programs as well. That's the common model for introducing to school such sports as soccer, ice hockey and skiing. Those programs **begin** with blurred lines.

As I contemplated what the MHSAA might do to slow the blurring of lines and perhaps reestablish brighter lines, I realized that the local pressures have also led schools to modify the policies and procedures of their state organization. So today, even the *MHSAA Handbook* adds to the blurred lines. For example:

“School sports' future depends on bright lines, on distinct contrasts with all other sports programs.”

1. **Certified Teachers:** When athletic programs expanded after World War II to accommodate new and different sports and more levels of teams, and then expanded in the 1960's and 1970's to provide opportunities for girls, schools were forced to relax and then eliminate the requirement that only certified teachers serve as coaches.
2. **Cooperative Programs:** This initiative began in 1988 to allow students at our very smallest schools, which lack the participants and resources to sponsor certain sports, to join with other schools to jointly sponsor teams.
3. **Eligibility Lists:** Required to be sent to the MHSAA until 1990, and relaxed in 1997 to be exchanged between opponents, Master Eligibility Lists must now only to be kept on file at each school and produced upon request.

4. **Non-School Opponents:** In the earliest years of school sports, competition by school teams against non-school teams was common until regulated out of existence. Since 1994, school competition against non-school teams has been allowed again, in all sports except football.
5. **Continuing Eligibility:** This provision was adopted in 1996 to permit students to remain eligible at one school after they transfer to another MHSAA member school

which has a specialized curriculum but no interscholastic athletic teams.

The MHSAA has participated in the blurring of lines because it has listened to and responded to its member schools' needs. But I submit, what is needed most now is a loud and steady voice to resist any more blurring of lines and to reestablish some brighter lines.

School sports' future depends on bright lines, on distinct contrasts with all other sports programs. ■

GUT CHECK

DECEMBER 2002 / JANUARY 2003

These are portions of the closing comments of MHSAA Executive Director John E. "Jack" Roberts at MHSAA Update Meetings across Michigan during October 2002.

You know and I know that ours is not a perfect organization, that we need to keep reviewing what we do, and we sometimes need to change what we do.

During September alone, in addition to the work of regular MHSAA committees, four other groups assembled to help us understand issues and shape policy proposals.

- An ad hoc committee on seeding met September 9 to discuss the desirability and feasibility of seeding the entry level of some team tournaments.

- A few days later an ad hoc committee on alternative education met to examine how alternative education is expanding and how eligibility rules should apply to different forms of non-traditional education.
- On September 19, an ad hoc committee on the transfer regulation met to consider definitions and applications of the one semester of ineligibility and 90 school day provision of Section 9(D).
- Also on September 19, we convened representatives of cooperative programs with combined enrollments that exceed the new 3500 student limit. We discussed how those existing large cooperative programs might be phased out, grandfathered or otherwise evaluated and processed.

It is obvious from September's activities alone, changes are always in the air at the MHSAA: studied change, democratic change.

It has been repeated so often that it is a cliché: "If we don't keep changing, we start dying."

While it may be true that people need to keep learning and growing to stay alive in mind, body and spirit, and it may be necessary that small businesses and large must keep reinventing themselves to have profitable products and a market niche, it is not necessarily true that change is good or beneficial for organizations formed and fueled by philosophy.

If a non-profit organization alters its purposes and activities so much as to contradict its founding philosophy, why should it continue to exist? If such an organization must change to survive, maybe it deserves to die.

Some people suggest that school sports must change to survive: must become more like youth soccer to keep up with youth soccer, must become more like travel hockey to keep up with travel hockey, must become more like AAU basketball to keep up with AAU basketball. Must have huge trophies like others, long travel like others. Be commercialized like others, professionalized like others.

This is a very real and relevant debate on the local level of high

school sports, and it is again a real and relevant debate on the state and national levels of high school sports. Our National Federation of State High School Associations is again advancing the need for (or its desire for) national invitational tourna-

ments in some sports and national high school championships in others.

“. . . it is not necessarily true that change is good or beneficial for organizations formed and fueled by philosophy.”

In fact, without vote or discussion by its membership, last June the

National Federation endorsed the Universal Cheerleading Association national competition. It did so in spite of the fact that the National Federation was formed in the 1920's to oppose national competition and that every relevant vote the organization's membership has taken has opposed national competition. The National Federation is doing this for 2.8 million reasons, for \$350,000 per year for eight years.

Our National Federation was formed to help educators restrain promoters and to ward off commercialism, professionalism, exploitation, and excess. The National Federation is intended to help educators keep extracurricular athletics within academic goals and schedules of schools.

But if our national association reverses its position on national high school championships because "Everybody is doing it" and well, "We need the money to do good

things for schools and students,” is that organization really needed?

Our national organization was formed to stand apart from everybody else. If our national organization reverses itself to become part of the problem, can it be part of the solution? Does it change so much that it ceases to have a legitimate purpose?

If our national not-for-profit organization puts philosophy behind profit, does it have a legitimate purpose? If our national organization puts its own survival before needed and requested service to its members, does it have a legitimate role?

The only good thing that might come out of our national association's obsession with national presence, which it wrongly believes can only come from its involvement with national competitions, is that it gives us a reality check; it gives us a gut check. It challenges us again to assess again what we stand for.

And should our state association ever begin to wander as this national example, we would expect to be held accountable by the good educators of Michigan. We would expect to be held accountable by the athletic directors, principals, superintendents and school board members of MHSAA member schools.

The purpose of school sports –

our market niche in the lives of schools and the world of sports – is pure, wholesome, amateur, local school sports. Any school sports championship beyond the venues of this state is beyond the scope of educational athletics.

If we have national high school championships, the schools of Michigan will no longer write the rules of high school sports in Michigan. Others will do so, and the lowest common denominator will prevail. Because one state doesn't have a transfer rule, we won't. Because another state doesn't have an amateur rule, we won't. Because another state

“Let's not go far and wide for national tournaments. Let's go deeper and still deeper into the lives of our students and communities.”

allows thirty-some regular season high school basketball games, we will have to. The schools of Michigan will no longer control their own programs.

It is a very difficult and delicate balance to fit state championships in the lives of students and schools, for example, around ACT and SAT test dates, proms and graduations.

Imagine what national championships would do. The stress on coaches and strains on budgets are already phenomenal. Imagine what national championships would do. Major colleges have had national championships for years and there's not one of them without financial problems. National championships

solve no financial problems but create a host of new problems.

No, rather than imagining those bad things, imagine a high school sports program with greater breadth and depth, with many sports and lots of participants. Imagine a high school sports program with as much attention on sub-varsity as varsity teams, on non-revenue as revenue sports, on girls as boys programs, on character building as win/loss records.

Let's not go far and wide for national tournaments. Let's go deeper and still deeper into the lives of our students and communities.

A postscript from the book *Built to Last*, subtitled "Successful Habits of Visionary Companies." Authors James C. Collins and Jerry I. Porras, list "twelve shattered myths" by great companies in a chapter entitled

"The Best of the Best." Myth 5 is this: "The only constant is change." Here's what the authors say:

"A visionary company almost religiously preserves its core ideology – changing it seldom, if ever. Core values in a visionary company form a rock-solid foundation and do not drift with the trends and fashions of the day; in some cases, the core values have remained intact for well over one hundred years. And the basic purpose of a visionary company – its reason for being – can serve as a guiding beacon for centuries, like an enduring star on the horizon. Yet, while keeping their core ideologies tightly fixed, visionary companies display a powerful drive for progress that enables them to change and adapt without compromising their cherished core ideals." ■

COUNT ON US

DECEMBER 2004 / JANUARY 2005

This is a portion of the closing message of MHSAA Executive Director John E. "Jack" Roberts at 2004 Update Meetings across Michigan.

Sometimes the simplest advice is the best. As simple as this, from that great thinker/philosopher, Bobby Cox, manager of the Atlanta Braves. Mired in a midseason slump, the team heard this from its veteran manager: "Play together. Back each

other up. And everything will turn out all right."

How's that for a great message to a school faculty? And how's that for a great thought for the MHSAA membership?

Sometimes I hear a person say regarding the sports seasons litigation, "The Michigan Association of School Boards supports us," or "The Michigan Association of Secondary School Principals supports us," or

“The Michigan Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association supports us,” or “The Michigan High School Coaches Association supports us.”

Actually, they have it backward: the MHSAA has been supporting them. The MHSAA has been supporting local school boards, their control of school sports, and their opposition to the seasons change.

The MHSAA has been supporting high school principals and their historical position and ongoing conviction that coordinated seasons maximizes participation while simultaneous seasons hurts participation. The MHSAA has been supporting athletic directors and coaches and their “in the trenches”

knowledge about what works best in school sports. The MHSAA has been supporting officials, students and the sports media.

It's not that they support us that matters, it's that we support them that matters. We haven't created their opinion. We echo it, and we defend it.

The sports seasons of Michigan are not mine. I wasn't a resident of this state when they were established. The sports seasons of Michigan are

not the MHSAA's; schools determined what sports they would sponsor and when they would sponsor them, and history proves that the MHSAA merely placed its tournaments at the end of the seasons previously determined by schools. The MHSAA was a convenient defendant in the sports seasons litigation, not the correct defendant.

The sports seasons litigation has

“All I want is to preserve the positive core values of school sports as a tool for schools to reach and motivate students to stay in school, like school and do well in school; and on occasion, to actually raise not only the expectations of school sports, but also the operating standards for school sports.”

served one very good purpose: it has spotlighted whom schools can count on, and whom they can't. It has identified who really listens to schools, and who doesn't. It has exposed who really serves schools, and who serves other political agendas; who serves when it's convenient and who also serves

when it is not.

In the early 1980s, my predecessor was asked by a *Lansing State Journal* writer, “If schools wanted the seasons changed, would the MHSAA do it?” My predecessor snapped his fingers and said, “In a minute.” But schools didn't want the seasons changed. In fact, the first of 11 points in the 1982 MASSP Position Statement on Separate Seasons gave this reason for separate seasons: “A greater number of athletes may par-

ticipate in sports.” This rationale preceded any litigation. It wasn't convenient retrospective; it gives the reasons for the separate seasons.

In the early 1990s, the MHSAA attempted to change its Girls Swimming & Diving Tournament from the fall to the winter without a vote of the member schools, and this was met with great hostility from all quarters – from kids, their parents, coaches, administrators and legislators. They all said, “Don't mess with the seasons!” Lesson learned.

In the mid 1990s, an advocate for seasons change said to me, “I assume MHSAA staff will be neutral if I advance a seasons change proposal.” I said, “No. Neutrality won't be an option.” When the vast majority of the membership, time and again, opposes change, they will expect the staff to oppose change as well. Neutrality is not an option of leadership.

On the other hand, I have met many times with groups of female students and I have said to them many times, “If you tell me you want the sports seasons changed, then to the limits of my authority, I will advocate to schools that the seasons change.” The athletes haven't asked, and I have not advocated for a change.

Of course, I worry that at the end of the day, some reviewers will overlook all the good of many years of service and focus on this topic that has now been with us more than six years. Rather than being seen as an organization that communicates, the

MHSAA may be seen as an organization that litigates. Instead of being seen as an organization that is a champion of core values in school sports, the MHSAA will be seen as the champion of court orders in school sports. Instead of being seen as a consensus builder for dozens of positive changes in educational athletics, the MHSAA might be seen more as the obstacle of one change, but it is the change schools wish to see least – a change in their sports seasons.

What I want for the MHSAA is to be seen as a servant, putting the needs of schools before our own.

What I want is for the MHSAA to be seen as an organization that is conscious of this state's great diversity and made great efforts to find the greatest good in policies, procedures and programs; who worked for large schools and helped them without hurting small schools, and vice versa; who worked for rural schools and helped them without hurting urban schools, and vice versa; who worked for public schools and helped them without hurting nonpublic schools, and vice versa; and who worked for schools from the northland and helped them without hurting schools from the southern part of our state, and vice versa.

All we want – and I want it desperately and I work on it daily – is to root out some of the worst and retain most of the best of interscholastic athletics; to promote pure, wholesome, local, amateur, educational athletics, and to protect this

program from the excesses of athletics on almost every other level by every other sponsor.

All I want is to preserve the positive core values of school sports as a tool for schools to reach and motivate students to stay in school, like school and do well in school; and on

occasion, to actually raise not only the expectations of school sports, but also the operating standards for school sports.

Let's work on this together, back each other up; and maybe, everything just might turn out all right. ■

HERE WE STAND

MAY 2006

What follows are excerpts of the closing message of Executive Director John E. "Jack" Roberts at the Midwinter Conference of the Michigan Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association, March 19, 2006.

Because of the laws of this state, the Michigan High School Athletic Association actually has little authority for school sports, far less authority over local programming than is the case in many other states. Yet I know of no state high school association that has any more influence than this one.

Authority is something confirmed on an organization by laws. Influence is something earned through the hard labor of listening and leading in a way that people want to follow.

And I know of no state where

there is more consensus between the state athletic association and the athletic directors of the state than right here. Like no other state in the nation, local administrators are on the same page as the state high school association. They are aimed in the same direction, addressing issues from the same perspectives, and aspiring for the same outcomes. In no other state in the nation is there less confusion about goals and objectives for educational athletics.

Does anyone here not know our stance

on national competition? A *Sports Illustrated* feature two weeks ago said it's time to reexamine national tournaments and telecasts that are taking place; but we've already gone through that process, we know where we stand, and we are adamantly opposed to both.

"We need to raise questions about what we do and how we do it, and then raise standards for what we do and how we do it."

Is anyone here surprised that again we are taking the National Federation to task for again promoting a national invitational basketball tournament?

Was anyone here surprised we would not waive rules so that high school football players might play in multiple all-star games in January related to the Super Bowl?

Does anyone here not know the MHSAA philosophy that school sports are a secondary mission of schools, supporting the educational mission of schools?

Does anyone here doubt that we believe what maximizes the number of participants in school sports is more important than what maximizes the performance of any one participant?

Does anyone here doubt that the MHSAA believes in the value of school sports, and also believes that tough rules, rarely waived, tend to increase the value of that participation for students, schools and communities?

Has anyone here not heard at least one thousand MHSAA sportsmanship messages? Does anyone here doubt that you will hear at least one thousand more?

Does anyone here not know about the Coaches Advancement Program, and the MHSAA's position that con-

tinuing education for coaches is our number one strategic priority, not only for improving school sports now, but also for saving school sports for another generation or two of young people?

And does anyone here doubt that, proud as we are of some things, the MHSAA is dissatisfied with even more things about school sports in Michigan, and is neither resting on its laurels for what has been done nor quitting in frustration for all that still needs to be done?

We need to raise questions about what we do and how we do it, and then raise standards for what we do and how we do it, and ultimately raise up students who will do the same, students who raise standards for their lives, your schools and our society.

Bottom line, that's what the rules are for. That's what the tournaments are about. That's what CAP is trying to accomplish. That's what's behind the Sportsmanship Summits and awards, the Women in Sports Leadership Conference, the Captains Clinics and all the mini-grants and the Scholar-Athlete program . . . raising expectations, and raising standards.

This is hard work we have, and we will be disappointed at times. Boards will disappoint us, bosses will disap-

“Here we stand for some things and we fight for some things and we won't fall for just anything that comes along that pretends to have in mind the best interests of students or schools or school sports.”

point us, coaches will disappoint us, and kids will disappoint us, as will their parents from time to time.

This is hard work indeed; but it is worthy work, which a lot of people in this world do not have, or at least do not feel that they have.

I'm privileged to support the positions we do, positions which are so much more clearly delineated, so much more consistently communicated, and so much more universally embraced and espoused here in Michigan than in any other state in the nation.

Here we stand for some things

and we fight for some things and we won't fall for just anything that comes along that pretends to have in mind the best interests of students or schools or school sports.

We – schools – will define what's best and we will articulate it to the public, press, promoters and politicians like no other state in the nation. That's what we do here in Michigan.

And even though we are far from perfect, we will be a beacon of what can be best in educational athletics, and keep working for it, so our light shines even brighter across America. ■

OUR STORY

APRIL 2007

This is a portion of the closing message of MHSAA Executive Director John E. (Jack) Roberts at the Mid-Winter Meeting of the Michigan Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association, March 18, 2007.

Last January I attended a training session on how to give interviews. It was really excellent; and of the several good tips and techniques I picked up, this one may have been the best, and the most useful beyond the interview setting. The trainer urged us to develop and rehearse our "I story," which he said is an explanation of how we got to where we are, who helped us, why we do what we do, what we believe, value and stand for.

Our trainer urged us to repeat this

"I story" to ourselves silently before each and every interview, regardless of the topic, and regardless of the importance of the audience. He said it would get us emotionally ready for the interview, more confident, sincere, passionate, persuasive, and more able to get across the points that we wanted to make.

I think this trainer is right. Thinking back, my best interviews, my best articles, my best speeches, my best meetings, my best days – in and out of the office and in and out of controversy – are the times I have remembered and repeated my "I story," how it is I got here, who helped along the way, why it is I do what I do, and what it is I believe, value and stand for.

So I ask you to reflect now: how it is that you got here; who helped you; why it is that you do what you do; and what it is you believe, value and stand for. Get that in mind. Keep it in mind every day. Let it guide you; let it motivate you; and let it reward you.

Those of you who read my little editorial in the December/January *Bulletin* know that I am intending to spend as much time reading about the history of our nation as I do about the trends of modern society. You may also know that I've summarized our high school association's litigation history and have prepared an instructional outline. I'm working on a written history and rationale for the essential rules of school sports in Michigan. Someday I hope to write a sequel to L. L. Forsythe's book on the first hundred years of high school sports in Michigan.

I think it's important to remember the people and policies that have preceded us in this work, and I strive to be equal parts change agent for our future, and custodian of what's important from our past. I think it's important to remember.

Stop for a moment now and think about the word "remember." Break it down. Remember. Consider the opposite. It's not "forget." The

opposite of remember is dis-member. To disconnect. To disengage. Remember means a lot more than merely to think back.

Remember means to connect and engage with the past and its people, policies and principles. Remember means to repeat our "I story" again and again. This kind of remembering is essential for our effective and inspired administration of school sports in Michigan.

What would your answer be if I asked you to think of high school sports in your community as a human body, and to choose the part of the body that you represent?

Would you be the head of the body? Would you be the arms and legs that carry out so many tasks? Would you be the heart of the body? Would you be the little toe, providing a little balance to this thing? Or might you be the liver – seeing some of the poison in the body, and doing something about it.

I think our respective "I stories" would reveal what part of this body we're each most like; and also it would reveal a feature common to all of our stories: we see ourselves as just one part of this thing, a part of a greater effort, a part of a team.

Last November at the MHSAA office, Jamie Gent, the veteran athletic director at Haslett High School,

"How it is that you got here; who helped you; why it is that you do what you do; and what it is you believe, value and stand for. Get that in mind. Keep it in mind every day. Let it guide you; let it motivate you; and let it reward you. "

gave a short talk to new members of this team at a New Athletic Directors Orientation. His talk was on time-management tips.

Of the many fine ideas that Jamie presented, none may have been more insightful than this. He said, "The little things are really the big things."

Now I've seen this stated other ways – like, "There are no little things." And yes, I've also read the book, *Don't Sweat the Small Stuff (and It's All Small Stuff)*. But that book is focusing on self-talk and management of emotions. It's not about organizational conversation and the management of a complicated and comprehensive community athletic program.

In our work, the little things are the heart of the matter. It's a series of little things that add up to a successfully run big event, whether that's at the local, league or MHSAA level.

And as the years have gone by, I've appreciated more and more on another level how little things matter so much. Most especially, how a kind word or a compliment here, or a note of encouragement or thanks there, can create or strengthen a human bond that makes a deep difference in how well things get done, and how much joy we have in the doing.

One of my worst failings is that I have not paused every day, in fact that I do not start every day, by jotting a note to a colleague in the office, or to a Representative Council member, or to a coach, or one of our officials, or one of you, every day. It

would do so much good, for both the sender and receiver. I know it would, because of how it makes me feel on those rare occasions when I receive such a note.

Ultimately, when my career is over, it will be these kinds of so-called little things that I'm most likely to remember and to value most. So just in case I don't get the opportunity – for how many of our colleagues have we lost unexpectedly this past year (Mike Popson, Gene Balawajder, Don Knight, and others you may have known) – just in case we don't have the opportunity later, here now is a corporate note of thanks and encouragement. It is this:

You people amaze me. Your ability, your likeability, your civility in tough times. The hours you give to local, league and MHSAA events. The student-centered, education-focused programs you run. It is gratifying and humbling to witness. It is energizing and keeps me wanting to serve you longer and better.

You – whatever body part you think you are – you are the heart and soul of educational athletics. You are preserving pure, wholesome, amateur, educational athletics like nowhere else in this country.

Please do not tire of this good work. Do not be seduced by ill-conceived and sexy-sounding promotions. Do not be deceived by simple-minded policies that merely are escapes from the responsibility of regulating this program, of not only promoting it but mostly protecting school sports.

If we don't stand tall against the rot that is in sports generally in this country and the ruin that is creeping into school sports in many parts of America, no one else will. It is only you that stands between a program of excellence and a program of

excesses in school sports. School sports are the last chance for sanity in sports in America, and we may be the best chance for sanity in school sports.

That's *my* story, and I'm sticking with it. ■

READY TO SWING

DECEMBER 2007 / JANUARY 2008

These are comments of MHSAA Executive Director John E. "Jack" Roberts at the closing of most Update Meetings across Michigan during October 2007.

Almost 105 years ago, William James delivered the address at the centenary of Ralph Waldo Emerson. To have a one hundred year anniversary of your birth observed is quite something; and to have a man, mind and mouth as gifted as William James be the speaker at that event is really something special. It means to me that there is a lot that might be learned from considering Emerson's life.

Ralph Waldo Emerson repeatedly told his youthful students (including Henry David Thoreau): "Stand by your order." By this he meant, according to James, to know your type and your mission.

Emerson's type was that of a scholar. His mission was that of a reporter.

James said about Emerson, "This duty of seeing and reporting deter-

mined his whole life." He lived in the country, according to James, "to shield it [his life] from invasion and distraction."

James wrote that Emerson "consistently declined to entangle himself with associations or to encumber himself with functions . . . causes [which] sought to enlist them as their worker all got his smile and word of sympathy, but did not entrap him into service."

Emerson was single-minded. He knew his calling, his gifts and his mission.

James said Emerson knew his limits, not so much the limits of his ability (what he could do), but the limits of his focus (what he should do). And within those limits, within his calling and mission, according to James, "He dauntlessly asserted himself." In other words, within his mission, Emerson knew few limits. Within his mission, he pushed matters without bounds on imagination or energy.

Placing this in modern times and our topics, and using a metaphor we

can relate to, “Emerson did not swing at every pitch, but he took a vigorous swing at every pitch in his strike zone.”

This is a good example for us who labor in school sports. Understanding what pitches to swing at, letting many balls pass by because they’re outside our strike zone, outside our mission and purpose. But when the matter is in our strike zone, when the matter is something not only we can do but also should do, then taking a mighty swing, giving it all we can. Sometimes baseball announcers will say a batter has a good eye.

Sometimes they will say a batter is a free swinger. We don’t have the luxury of time, money or staff to be free swingers in school sports. We need discernment, a good eye. We need to swing not at balls we might reach, but just at the strikes we should reach: the projects, programs and policies we are in a unique position to handle, that need to be handled, and that no one else can handle as well or will handle at all.

This is how the MHSAA has come to limit itself to serving four constituent groups above all others: coaches, officials, athletic directors and, more recently, student-athletes directly.

This is how we’ve come to limit our *Handbook* to rules unaddressed

by rules elsewhere. We have no rules about tobacco, alcohol and drug use by students, because schools do. We have no rules about DUI, assault or burglary, because society does.

And because rules don’t exist elsewhere, this is why we do have rules about transfer, recruitment and out-of-season coaching. This is why we do have policies about season limita-

tions, when they should start and end and how many contests in between. These are topics with which we should be concerned, and must be engaged.

Now having said all this, we recognize that the

opposing pitchers are improving. They’re not merely throwing fast-balls right down the middle; they’re also throwing curve balls and sliders and sinkers and changeups, and they’re painting the outside of the plate with their pitches.

So our strike zone in school sports is a little more subtle than it once was.

This is why we talk about actually running recruiting camps in April. This is why we reach out to youth sports organizations. This is why some people resist shorter seasons and even talk about earlier seasons and later seasons and summer seasons for school sports. This is why perhaps we should actually run and not merely try to regulate summer

“Life is throwing school sports some wicked pitches, low and on the outside corner. We’re trying to have school sports ready to swing when those pitches touch our strike zone.”

activity, provide what can happen in the summer rather than simply a list of what can't.

Life is throwing school sports some wicked pitches, low and on the outside corner. We're trying to have school sports ready to swing when those pitches touch our strike zone.

As Emerson told his young students, we must stand by our order. We must know what our type is and what our mission is and stick with it.

Emerson's type, with no apologies, was scholar. Our type of sport, with no apologies, is educational athletics. Our niche is the purest, most wholesome, amateur, local educational brand of athletics in America.

Emerson's mission, with intense focus, was reporter. Our mission, with intense focus, must be preserver of educational athletics: to promote its relevance to students and protect its usefulness for schools.

I look for us to do so without distraction by irrelevant bells and whistles, but with devotion to core principles. It's a difficult balancing act we have, but I predict we'll continue to find our place and perform our function.

It's an exciting process, and I'm glad you have been and continue to be along for the ride, stimulating and steering our journey. ■

STAYING BOTH PRINCIPLED AND PIONEERING

FEBRUARY 2008

This is an excerpt from "Planning for School Sports in Contemporary Society," prepared by the MHSAA staff for the Representative Council, Nov. 30, 2007.

Choice is spreading in all parts of life: where we go for groceries or gas; where we go for dinner or dental care; from where we get our news and entertainment.

In the past two decades, McDonald's menu has grown from one dozen to four dozen items. Magazine titles have more than doubled, while new book titles and radio stations have almost doubled. Television channels have increased 3,600 percent. And you can access all

of this no matter where you live in Michigan.

In such a world, being different is essential to survival. Having a niche is necessary for being noticed.

In school sports, this suggests we have to refuse to be like other sports programs. And when other programs copy us, it means we must seek ways to distinguish ourselves, to clarify our differences.

In *The Culting of Brands*, author Douglas Atkin writes: "Simply declaring that 'we're different' is obviously not enough . . ." The brand actually "needs to **be** different . . ." It "needs to separate itself from its surroundings." Atkin writes that an organization must **determine** its

difference, **declare** it with doctrine and language, and **demarkate** itself from all others.

In *Differentiate or Die*, author Jack Trout argues that quality and customer orientation are rarely differentiating, creativity is not differentiating, and price is rarely so. He argues that breadth of service or product line is a very difficult way to differentiate (although we should still try).

Among the more effective ways to differentiate, according to Mr. Trout – and they appear to be our strong suit – are through **leadership**, **heritage** and **market speciality**. He writes that “**memory**” is the key to maintaining difference, that “faulty memory [leads] to dramatic loss of market share.”

Trout urges “**consistency**,” reflecting the unique difference of the enterprise in everything: in both communications and operations, what the enterprise says and does.

Authors Chip and Dan Heath are not off the mark when they state in *Made to Stick*, “When you say three things, you say nothing.”

One of the more prominent themes of contemporary business management studies is that the most successful and enduring enterprises are often those which stay in most consistent, focused pursuit of the val-

ues that make them of unique value to customers.

- For Southwest Airlines, it has been its niche as “The low-cost airline,” rejecting any frills that are obstacles to cheap, efficient service. As a result, customers’

loyalty to and satisfaction with this no-frills flying experience is unparalleled in the industry, as is Southwest’s financial performance.

- For Dartmouth College, it has been its devotion to undergrad-

uate classroom instruction, rejecting the emphasis on research and publishing-based programming that puts more emphasis on professors than students, which is typical of the undergraduate experience at the much larger universities against which Dartmouth competes for students in the Ivy League. As a result, it is a coveted destination for students and faculty alike.

In interscholastic athletics there is a **core constituency**. The vast majority of the public who are disinterested in high school athletics cannot be made interested by any means other than their direct involvement: participation. The more students who participate, the more (now and later) they and their family and friends will develop interest in our programs.

“Planning well for school sports in contemporary society demands that we never forget where we’ve come from and what we stand for, and that we build on both to step out confidently into the unknown.”

In interscholastic athletics there are **core competencies**, things we do better than sports on all other levels by all other sponsors. What we are good at, and known for, are safe and sportsmanlike events, operating with a sensible scope in the school setting, low cost and local.

In interscholastic athletics there are **core concerns**, fundamental values on which we base our policies and programs to be good for kids and their schools and communities, and on which we base our financial decisions: how we will raise and spend money.

The challenge to the MHSAA's leadership between today and 2020 will be to diversify programming and revenue streams without distracting the leadership, staff and membership from the historical, essential core values of interscholastic athletics. We must be able to connect the dots directly between any new initiatives and the pursuit of our core values. . .

- to maximizing participation;
- to elevating standards of eligibility and conduct, and of
 - o scholarship
 - o sportsmanship
 - o safety
 - o and a sensible scope for school sports.

- to assuring that interscholastic athletics remains unsurpassed in identification with local, amateur, educational athletics and in opposition to nationalism, specialism, elitism and commercialism.

We must test our business diversification plan against these concepts every step of the way to 2020.

Jack Trout urges an enterprise to “evolve its difference.” Not merely tinker with it in a way that would cause confusion and undermine the difference; but, stay connected with the past without wallowing in it, keep looking forward, maintaining a “pioneering” spirit.

Planning well for school sports in contemporary society demands that we never forget where we've come from and what we stand for, and that we build on both to step out confidently into the unknown. “People perform better when they're trying something new,”¹ and so will we. ■

¹ This is referred to as the “Hawthorne Effect” based on a study of the Hawthorne Electric Company in 1932, cited in Peopeware by DeMarco and Lister.

A VALUED BRAND

FEBRUARY 2008

This is an excerpt from "Planning for School Sports in Contemporary Society," prepared by the MHSAA staff for the Representative Council, Nov. 30, 2007.

One of the apparent conclusions of the MHSAA "Have Your Say" opinion poll last fall is that the character of school sports is key to the appeal of school sports. This is true for both sponsoring school personnel and those participants and spectators regularly involved in school sports. This suggests that to keep our core customers, we must preserve our core characteristics. That whatever changes occur in school styles and structures, we must maintain by our policies and programs the features and values which our core customers have experienced and both want and expect to continue.

It may sometimes feel that we are swimming against the current of public opinion when we enforce rules that define student eligibility or the limits of competition and travel, but the development and implementation of such restrictions might be essential to the expectations of our core constituents for the experience they remember for themselves and want for their children or team.

Just because schools change, it is not necessary that rules of school sports change as well. Sometimes, perhaps. But not always or even often. Leadership must always consider the program without a rule before we do away with the rule.

Schools seek to join the MHSAA because of the positive reputation of the organization and prestige of its programs. It is not too strong to state that schools seek MHSAA membership precisely because there **are** rules. Just as participation by students is more valuable to them and schools where standards of eligibility and conduct are higher, so is membership by schools in an organization more valuable where such standards are developed and enforced.

The Culting of Brands is a good book with a bad title in which author Douglas Atkin writes about the success of "a meaning-driven brand." He says, "The product carries the message and then becomes it." These kinds of brands, he says, are really beliefs. "They have morals – embody values." They "stand up for things. They work hard; fight for what is right." Ultimately, it is exactly this that is expected of the high school brand of competitive athletics in Michigan. ■

"It is not too strong to state that schools seek MHSAA membership precisely because there **are** rules. "

PART V

**“THIS IS US, EDUCATIONAL ATHLETICS, A VISIONARY ENTERPRISE
WHERE CORE VALUES FORM A ROCK-SOLID FOUNDATION AND DO
NOT DRIFT WITH THE TRENDS AND FASHIONS OF THE DAY.”**

UPSIDE DOWN AND INSIDE OUT

NOVEMBER 2001

It was probably never perfectly so, but there was a time when we could say that the world of sport epitomized fairness. Certainly the sports world was as slow as the rest of society to treat the different races and genders even-handedly; but more than elsewhere, it was in sports where merit mattered. If you were good enough, you played; if not, you didn't.

In recent years, however, I've found myself looking at sports differently, now seeing that it epitomizes some of what is most unfair.

On the one hand I look at so many professional athletes with more money than they can ever spend, while on the other hand I see abject poverty in the cities cheering for those athletes.

On the one hand I see millionaires in the world of sports who lack brains, grace or both, while on the other hand I see teachers and pastors living hand to mouth.

The world's value system has been turned upside down. It's always bothered me. It bothers me even more that the world I love and serve – sports – is the most visible example of this perverted scheme.

We live at a time when much of life is turned upside down and inside out; and neither education nor educational athletics has been unaffected.

We pay college football and bas-

ketball coaches more than college physics and physical education professors. That's upside down. Then we support the exorbitant salaries of the football and basketball coaches with television revenue from advertisers whose products result in more dropouts and deaths to college-age youth than any other cause. That's inside out.

We pay one member of the Detroit Lions more in a year than we spend annually for the entire athletic program of the Detroit Public Schools. That's not uncommon, even understandable in a free enterprise system; but it's upside down.

We lower the standards of sportsmanship in direct proportion to the age and income of the athletes involved. The older the athlete, and the more we pay that athlete, the more immature the athlete is allowed to behave. Imperfect as it may be, the conduct of players, coaches and spectators at high school athletic events is far superior to that at college and professional events. That's good, from my perspective; but it's still upside down.

Try to find the physical education/intramurals/interscholastic athletics pyramid in our schools. If it can be found at all, it's upside down. We find communities much more inclined to give the elite athletes more and everyone else less.

In school athletics, we fire good

teachers with poor win/loss records, while retaining poor teachers who have good win/loss records. That's inside out.

When there are financial problems, we cut junior high school programs before high school sports, JV programs before varsity sports, and non-revenue programs before revenue producing sports; all of which is upside down. And we get so twisted inside out to fund what's left of our program that we must use rationale to justify our actions that once we were so sure was wrong that it didn't even require discussion.

In a discussion about the problems brought to school sports by outside sports programs, my counterpart in another state high school association stood at a National Federation meeting and said: "Ladies and gentlemen, we are in sales. We've got to sell our product, sell our programs; or get buried by all the other sports programs that do."

Maybe. But we'd better be careful we're not selling the wrong things.

What are we Selling?

One of the things I noticed in 1986 when I became director of the Michigan High School Athletic Association was that on every issue of our monthly *Bulletin* was a picture of a committee. A group of adults who

were busy making the rules and regulations for MHSAA tournaments.

I said to my colleagues that this featured the wrong things: the process, not the product; adults, not kids; rules, not results, not education.

So we changed our publication covers so that almost every issue has pictures of students competing. There are also coaches coaching and officials officiating; but mostly there are athletes competing on

the covers of the MHSAA monthly *Bulletin*.

I have a copy of the *Bulletin* of another state high school association that begs us to ask the question, what is it selling? There isn't a kid pictured anywhere, only logos of corporate sponsors – 16 of them – and it's like this with every issue.

Perhaps we are in sales, and maybe we're selling the wrong things.

I may be old fashioned, but knowing that I'm living at a time when wrong seems right, and knowing that we sometimes sell the wrong things, I worry when another state high school association that I respect very much adds a "slam dunk" contest and a three-point shooting contest to its state high school basketball tournament.

The intentions are good, certainly: to return fan interest to the state basketball tournament. But is this addition for a few athletes really healthy?

"We must delight in being different, for it is in these differences that the place of school sports is preserved in the world of sports and, more importantly, in the world of education."

Did these few athletes need any more attention? Are we selling education; or are we selling entertainment?

Are we selling education; or are we just selling seats in an arena?

We are in sales, I suppose; but too often we're selling the wrong things. Sometimes we're selling to expand our support and services to schools, which is good. But just as often we are selling to enhance our status as associations or to ensure our survival.

This is exactly what I think of when I hear that the National Federation of State High School Associations is again promoting the idea of its sponsorship of national high school championships.

Henry Merritt Wriston, former president of Lawrence University, said this about college athletics in *The Liberal Educator* in 1937: "The institution which exploits youth for profit or publicity betrays its calling; it impairs or destroys its capacity to fulfill its function."

In the video series "Questions of Faith," author Will Campbell states: "Sooner or later, every institution comes to exist for its own sake, for its own growth, for its own well-being, for those who are profiting by it." I think this describes many state high school associations, even occasionally the Michigan High School Athletic Association.

Campbell states: "Every institution eventually becomes corrupt, at least in the sense that it becomes focused on its own needs." That seems to describe many states which have turned to lotteries to help fund education and to many schools which promote 50/50 drawings to

support athletics. These gimmicks are regressive taxation at their best, and gambling at their worst; and they convey the not-so-hidden message that luck is more important than study, discipline and hard work, the opposite message we would hope to convey in education.

These are not activities consistent with our purposes; these are not activities **worthy** of our purposes. And the cost is the effectiveness of the very organizations formed to protect high school athletics, which means the cost is the programs themselves.

Campbell also states: "All organizations are disappointing because they do a lot that is different from and even contradictory to what they were created to do, designed to do, and originally intended to do." How many organizations, foundations and even colleges and universities are now operating in ways today that would be appalling to those who created them for different purposes?

How appalling would the agenda of today's National Federation look to those who created it in the 1920s?

Where is the Greatest Threat?

As disheartening as the lack of purpose and principle at the state and national levels has been, it is not the greatest threat to the future of educational athletics.

In the early 1990s we thought the greatest threat was posed at the national level with national tournaments, national television and commercialization and exploitation in so many ways, shapes and forms. So Michigan schools responded with

tighter limits on interstate travel, prohibitions on live television and prohibitions on outside compensation to coaches.

But now we see – made wiser by the passage of years – that the greatest threat to educational athletics wasn't and isn't at the national level, but comes from the local, grass roots level.

I refer to the attitudes and actions of people in our local communities who have forgotten or who have never known the pure purpose of educational athletics. Who see interscholastic athletics for their own glory more than students' education. Who see interscholastic athletics as a means for scholarships to college more than scholarship in high school.

Who not only want their team to win, but to win big. Who not only want their child to play, but to play all the time. Who see everything in life as a right they are owed, and who see everything that goes wrong as someone else's fault.

We have been contacted by a parent who was upset that his son did not win our Scholar-Athlete Award, and demanded to know what criteria was used, who the judges were, and the names and addresses and phone numbers of the finalists. We were worried that this father would call and harass the finalists for receiving what the father thought his son should get. Like he had a right to it. Like we owed it to his son.

When I say the greatest threat is not national but local and grass roots, I refer also to people I saw at

an all-day, all ages wrestling meet. Ten year olds with tattoos. Babies in arms carried to wrestling mats to compete and then be lifted from the mats to go back to the bleachers. Children who refused to wrestle. Many who cried before, during and after they wrestled.

I refer also to parents who bring to school sports an intractable zeal to have school sports run like community sports. With early and intense specialization; cutting and select teams for elementary school age children; state, regional and national championships for junior high youth; large trophies and long trips.

Unless we change those attitudes and actions, school sports are in danger. For if school sports (educational athletics) are not different from community sports programs, then there's no reason for schools to give their name or their money to them. Schools will drop their sponsorship of sports if school sports don't provide something unique from community sports programs.

We must delight in being different, for it is in these differences that the place of school sports is preserved in the world of sports and, more importantly, in the world of education, preserved as a tool for schools to reach and motivate students and to provide them practical experiences in teamwork and hard work, discipline and dedication, leadership and sportsmanship, loyalty and school spirit, sacrifice and self-control. Our nation has never, ever needed these qualities more than today. ■

TV EVENT MISSES THE POINT OF SCHOOL SPORTS

FEBRUARY 2003

This MHSAA editorial was released to the media Dec. 11, 2002.

ESPN2 is televising nationwide a high school basketball game between an Ohio school with a player who is presumed to be jumping from high school to the NBA and a Virginia school which follows no rules and regulations but its own. And the promoters say this is the wave of the future.

God help us!

For a century, high school sports have been an American tradition unlike any place in the world: a time for schools and communities to come together to cheer their friends and neighbors in cross-town and cross-county rivalries.

Covered by local newspapers and radio, the focus has been on education more than winning, on teams more than stars, and on local rivalries and league titles more than state championships and beyond.

It is a program that has as many participants and contests at the sub-varsity level as varsity level. It has been a pure, wholesome, amateur, unsophisticated, even sometimes corny setting.

And if it tries to compete for the glitz and glamour of major college and professional sports, it not only cannot win, it will become spoiled,

damaged goods - giving up its gentle spirit for guile and greed.

The ESPN2 telecast is being described as a defining moment for high school sports, using phrases such as "the quintessential act of the way things will be in high school basketball . . . a microcosm of the way basketball is moving into the future."

In fact, this event is an aberration in school sports, a wart on the face of high school basketball.

There are promoters who consider this view out of date, who believe this is "an avalanche that's moving down the mountain," a revealing choice of metaphor given that avalanches destroy everything in their path.

High school athletics is indeed changing, but not nearly at the pace of an avalanche and not necessarily for the good. Those who care about a school sports program that serves all kinds of students, male and female, tall and short, in many different sports, in schools of all sizes, types and locales have other, better plans for interscholastic athletics.

A generation or two of students from now, those who care about broad and deep school sports programs, may not win the struggle for the soul of school sports; but they are not going to be buried anytime soon. ■

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH

APRIL 2003

Following is the closing message of Executive Director John E. Roberts at the 2003 Mid-Winter Conference of the Michigan Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association.

The headlines atop the front page of the *Detroit News and Free Press* on Saturday, Jan. 25, 2003, read: "Wanted: A Leader who will Say 'Enough is Enough'." The topic was children, and specifically lead poisoning in our children; but nevertheless, that headline began to inspire my closing message for today.

In our school districts, in our state associations, and in our national organizations, we need leaders who will say, "Enough is enough."

Enough is enough. We play often enough, early enough, late enough. We travel far enough. We commercialize enough, we promote enough, we pamper the athletes enough, we pressure the kids to specialize enough, and we permit bad conduct by coaches and spectators quite enough.

Enough is enough. Intersectional travel is too much. Nationwide telecasts of local high school games is too much. The circus that surrounded LeBron James is too much. And National Federation-endorsed national competition is way too much.

Enough is enough. These things

have never been right for educational athletics philosophically. These things are now (again) not right for educational athletics practically.

This message is not anti-change. The list of changes that have occurred in the MHSAA over the past decade and a half is staggeringly long. We are not afraid of change. In fact, I advocate a lot more change, especially with respect to training of coaches and officials and higher standards of health and safety for our athletes.

But not all change is good. Some of our changes have been very good; some of our changes have been very bad; and most of our changes have fallen somewhere along the continuum in between. The point is, not all "progress" really is progress.

We are being bombarded by our National Federation of State High School Associations that change is inevitable. For example, that we can't enforce certain rules anymore, that we can't avoid specialization anymore, that we can't ignore national competition anymore.

The recitation is so frequent that this prophecy could be fulfilled, and the rebuttal is so ridiculed by our national leadership that many of my colleagues across the country are buying into it. Our National Federation exalts those who embrace

its changes, and condescends to those who carefully measure it or dare to criticize it.

The book, *Built to Last*, subtitled “Successful Habits of Visionary Companies,” lists 12 shattered myths in a chapter entitled “The Best of the Best” in which the authors attempt to identify what makes the best companies the best. One of the myths that they identify, Myth No. 5, is this: “The only constant is change.”

That's a myth, say the authors, who also say this:

“A visionary company almost religiously preserves its core ideology – changing it seldom, if ever. Core values in a visionary company form a rock-solid foundation and do not drift with the trends and fashions of the day; in some cases, the core values have remained intact for well over 100 years. And the basic purpose of a visionary company – its reason for being – can serve as a guiding beacon for centuries, like an enduring star on the horizon.”

This is **us**, educational athletics, a visionary enterprise where core values form a rock-solid foundation and do not drift with the trends and fashions of the day.

And in Michigan, **this** is us: A guiding beacon, and enduring star on the horizon of school sports.

I urge you all to stand up, speak out and write. To those who think rules are made to be broken or rules are made to be changed ... stand up, speak out and write.

To those who think that spectators may behave any way they please ... stand up, speak out and write.

To those who think that students should play year-round, that coaches must coach year-round, and that teams must travel the nation or world-round . . . stand up, speak out and write.

To those who think the National Federation does anything but make matters worse with national high school championships in cheerleading now or anything else later . . . stand up, speak out and write.

There is no secret formula for success in this struggle. No formula except consistency of message and the courage to deliver it. No formula except cooperation with and encouragement from the people in this room. This is the winning team. What we are doing in Michigan is a guiding beacon, an enduring star on the horizon of school sports.

The leaders we need are people who do not embrace all change and do not condescend to those who oppose change, but critically consider if change violates our core values,

“Remembering who we are and what we do in school sports will increase our faith and restore our hope in school sports, and we will reap the harvest for our young people and America if we do not give up.”

and who have the vision to see which do, and the courage to say so. Real leaders will look trends and fashions in the eye and say, "Enough is enough."

We need to spend 10 times or 20 times or 50 times more time and energy on the preservation of core values as we do on the consideration of change in our programs. Only that kind of time and attention and focus will assure that educational athletics remains a tool for schools to reach and motivate students. Only that kind of time and attention and focus will assure a niche for sports in schools, and a place for school sports in society.

There is not a non-school volleyball program anywhere in America that has the atmosphere and excitement and spirit of what I saw yesterday at the MHSAA Finals in Kalamazoo. We need not fear non-school programs if we emphasize what is special

about school sports.

We do not have to be like every other program. We do not have to be like the AAU to keep up with the AAU; we don't have to be like youth soccer to keep up with youth soccer; we don't have to be like youth hockey to keep up with youth hockey. We do not need to commercialize, professionalize or nationalize school sports. In fact, if we do these things, we will lose our place.

Ironically, the National Federation in its quest for a national presence, is losing its place altogether. It has abandoned the traditional values of

school sports. When it regains its identity as the champion of local educational athletics, it will have faith again that we can retain certain rules, we can refute specialization, and we can refuse national competition.

Forgive me this Bible analogy, but it is a Sunday, and it's Lent, so seldom would it be more permissible than today. When the apostle Paul learned that the Christian church at Galatia was wandering from its roots and basic tenets, Paul wrote them a letter. He admonished them to regain their identity and said only then would they restore their faith. If our national organization regains its identity it will regain its faith in sports' core values.

Recently I was asked what it is I do at the MHSAA. I responded with a few details of my job description, for example litigation, legislation, finance, staff supervision, eligibility rules and tournaments. But I don't see those details as my principal function anymore.

I think my most important role in these days may be to increase your faith in school sports, and to confirm your hope for school sports.

Paul's subject in his letter to the Galatians is not our subject today – his was a much more important subject – but Paul's words seem to apply. Listen: "You were running a good race . . . Who cut in on you? . . . Do not be deceived . . . Let us not become weary in doing good, for at the proper time, we will reap a harvest if we do not give up."

Remembering who we are and what we do in school sports will increase our faith and restore our hope in school sports, and we will reap the harvest for our young people and America if we do not give up.

In the lives of students and in the life of school sports in America, we are the guiding beacon, we are the enduring star on the horizon.

My colleagues in Michigan and

our guests from our neighboring states, go back to your schools and communities and organizations and tell the coaches and administrators and board members what it is we do and what it is we stand for.

Do not be deceived. Do not be deceived by non-school organizations or our own national organizations. Do not be deceived. And do not tire of doing good work. ■

THE PURPLE COW

SEPTEMBER / OCTOBER 2003

This title is borrowed from the Book "Purple Cow: Transform your Business by Being Remarkable" by Seth Godin

This message is about two topics, unrelated to one another, but similar in this respect: they threaten the future of school sports. They threaten the place that sports has in schools and the niche that school sports has in society.

The first topic is local: decisions that have been made at the local level about sports funding and management. The second is national: pressures being applied at the national level to promote national high school championships.

In more than a dozen small ways for more than a dozen years, the leaders of school sports have been giving up leadership of local programs. We have been transferring

responsibilities to non-school entities.

For example, when we drop 7th- and 8th-grade programs, when we turn to nonfaculty coaches for our school programs, when we resort to non-school funding for these programs, when we utilize non-school personnel to assign officials, and even when we sponsor cooperative programs between schools for sports teams, the lines between school and community get fuzzy. The fuzzier these lines get, the less the public will see need for sports as a part of schools; and the less sports are a part of schools, the less schools will have sports as a tool for reaching and motivating students in schools, as well as community interest and support for schools.

And now we have participation fees. Typically, one of the differences between school teams and communi-

ty teams is that ours is free, theirs is not. So again, with participation fees, we blur the line of what makes us special and unique.

We have to be on guard, if it's not too late already, that little changes don't accumulate into a big shift from school to community control of our programs.

The second issue that fundamentally threatens the place of sports in schools and the niche that school sports has in society is the movement toward national high school championships.

Certainly there are some events for schools from multiple states. There are also some non-school events for school age athletes from many states. But there is nothing close to a national high school championship. Some in the National Federation of State High School Associations want to change that.

None of what is currently occurring seriously affects high schools or students in Michigan. None of what is currently occurring threatens the nature of educational athletics in Michigan. What **does** threaten our programs is National Federation sponsorship of national high school championships, making national championships official and approved, making national schedules and travel usual and expected.

There are a host of practical prob-

lems, beyond the philosophical objections, to national high school championships. Cost. Loss of classroom instructional time. Overlap of seasons. Different seasons. Different ending dates to coinciding seasons. Different eligibility rules. Different contest maximums.

Increased specialization. Increased commercialization. Diminishing of state high school championships, and further diminishing of regular season local programs. And more.

In response to these two threats, as well as the LeBron

James circus during 2002-03, the MHSAA has launched a program that some would call a branding campaign but is merely an effort to define ourselves so others do not. It's an effort to say old things in a new way. It's an effort to distinguish ourselves from sports on all other levels by all other sponsors.

The NCAA and professional leagues speak of branding. Those groups brand themselves; we define ourselves. They spend countless dollars on branding strategies; we spend countless hours making a distinction between them and us.

Our mission is different: not entertainment, but education. Our message is different: team more than individual; character-building more than winning. They will market a game between the Lakers and the

"We need to be the purple cow. We need to be the remarkable program, the one different from all the others. That is our charm, that is our place, and that is our future."

Rockets as Shaq versus Yao Ming, while we will focus on the team and on the values of teamwork and hard work, promoting loyalty and school spirit, teaching leadership and sportsmanship.

Schools will try to give equal attention to star and substitute, varsity and subvarsity, revenue-producing and non-revenue-producing sport, boys and girls programs. We market the multiple-sport opportunity at the local level, not specialization and national competition.

We are the "purple cow" in a pasture full of black and white cows that are otherwise indistinguishable, one from another. We are the remarkably different athletic program, the noticeable one. If we try to compete with the glitz and glamour of college and professional sports, we fail miserably. If we try to be like every other community program that travels the

nation or globe but gets barely a blurb in our newspapers, we will lose our place altogether.

With cheerleaders, pep bands, yellow buses and motorcades, pep assemblies and comprehensive coverage on radio and television – and none of this found in non-school sports – we have the upper hand by far. Unlike every other sport program that seems to have another level after the state title, there is nowhere to go after the high school championship. It's the top, the end . . . the qualifier to nothing else . . . the pinnacle of what a high school team can do. **Why** would we give up all of this for a national high school tournament?

We need to be the purple cow. We need to be the remarkable program, the one different from all the others. That is our charm, that is our place, and that is our future. ■

STANDARD BEARERS

MAY 2005

One of the highlights of 2004-05 for me occurred as my wife and I and 10 or 12 Michigan athletic directors were standing in the aisles, waiting to exit an airplane in New Orleans last December.

I was visiting with a fellow whom I had just met, a fellow from Los Angeles, when he suggested that our teams come out to Los Angeles to play his teams in basketball.

Before I could say, "Thanks, but no thanks," several of the Michigan athletic directors beat me to the punch. They explained to my misguided new friend how we do things in Michigan and what we believe in Michigan high school sports.

What a great feeling to observe Michigan athletic directors espousing to a foreigner the solid philosophy of educational athletics we have in Michigan.

What a privilege it is to serve, and how much easier it is to serve, when we read from the same page and hum the same tune in the fundamental matters of school sports.

While it was enjoyable listening to these athletic directors explain our ways in Michigan, people sometimes use my words to help make a case to me or the Executive Committee that a rule should be waived. They remind me that I've talked about the benefits of participation and the objective of maximizing participation and making the program accessible to as many boys and girls as possible.

No question about it. I do promote the benefits of participation. I do believe in the goal of maximizing participation and do promote the goal of providing our programs to as many boys and girls as possible.

But what is being missed by those who are using my words is something more important: that the value of participation is related to the requirements for participation. That if we raise the standards, we tend to raise the value of participation. If we lower the standards, make exceptions, we tend to lower the value of participation.

It's not just the playing that matters. It's the conditions for playing. That's what makes better citizens out of student-athletes.

We need to focus on high standards for our programs – we need to emphasize high standards of eligibility and conduct – not because we want to exclude people, but because by being exclusive in this sense, we better the experience of all involved and improve the possibilities of doing good things for kids, schools and communities.

It's important to remember that no matter how much customer service means to us – we emphasize it in our daily dealings at the MHSAA – “customer service” in our world does not mean the customer is always right, does not mean giving the customer everything he or she wants, does not mean always saying “yes.” In our work, **real** customer service means saying “no” at least as much as we say “yes.”

For there's a **program** to protect, not just one school's interests or one student's interests, but a program. And there are standards to protect, standards that enhance the value of participation in interscholastic athletics. ■

“It's not just the playing that matters. It's the conditions for playing. That's what makes better citizens out of student-athletes.”

UNSAFE AT ANY SPEED

AUGUST / SEPTEMBER 2008

Back before ubiquitous superhighways with wide medians between traffic traveling in opposite directions, we were taught and we practiced the disciplines of how to pass a vehicle safely.

As we approached a slower moving vehicle, we had to check to see from signage and lane lines if we were in a passing zone. Then, if we found that there were no laws against our passing, we checked the road ahead of us to see if the road was straight and the way was clear of oncoming traffic for a sufficient distance that we could safely perform the passing maneuver. And then, just before pulling out into the passing lane, we would check our rearview mirror and side mirror to assure there was no traffic traveling faster from behind us and attempting to pass us even as we prepared to pass the car ahead of us.

Finally, if it was legal, if it was safe for as far ahead as we could see and nothing would jeopardize us from behind, we signaled our intentions and pulled out into the lane intended for oncoming traffic, accelerated to a higher but still legal and safe speed, and completed the passing maneuver.

As an organization considers passing by the slower moving entities it finds in its path of progress, it would do well to remember each of these steps.

- First and foremost, is what we are proposing to do permitted? If it is contrary to the laws and to the lines that demark what the organization can and cannot do. The desire to pass must be subordinated to the prohibitions.
- Then, even if it might be permitted, those driving the organization must look down the road and

“The silver lining of a bad maneuver by our national organization is the opportunity to do a double-check of our own operations.”

assess if there are hills and curves ahead that could cause too much uncertainty, or worse, if there were forces moving in our direction that would cause a collision that would endanger the welfare

of our organization and others with whom we share the road.

- Next, if it looks safe ahead, we should still take a look behind us to assure we are not entering into a stream of traffic that is out of our designated lane and occupied by faster moving entities which will overtake us and, in doing so, endanger us. We need to consider if it is our place to be there in that passing lane.

- Then we must inform people of our plans.
- And finally, even when we believe all is clear, we must not accelerate our rate of travel beyond the limits of authority.

In moving ahead on sponsorship of a series of national invitational basketball tournaments and now promoting more such events in other sports, the National Federation of State High School Associations has ignored the rules of the road and safe passing. It is not seeing far enough down the road. It is ignoring oncoming traffic which will harm the purity of its enterprise. It is not

respecting what is behind it. Even as the National Federation travels at unauthorized speeds, it will be run over from behind by promoters that travel at speeds that are even more reckless with the health and welfare of school sports than we have now become.

Again, the silver lining of a bad maneuver by our national organization is the opportunity to do a double-check of our own operations. Remembering the lessons of driver's education will keep us on track in Michigan school sports in spite of the dangerous example our national organization gives us. ■

FORGETTING HISTORY

OCTOBER / NOVEMBER 2008

“If we could first know where we are, and whither we are tending, we could better judge what to do, and how to do it.” With these words, Abraham Lincoln brought to a close the 1858 Republican State Convention in Springfield, Ill., 150 years ago. But isn't it good advice today, for politics, finance, education . . . and school sports.

People will argue about who was the greatest US President, but few historians would leave Abraham Lincoln out of the top three. They will argue about who among the US Presidents was the greatest orator; but few speakers would leave Lincoln out of the top three. And they will

argue about who among the US Presidents was the greatest writer; but few authors would leave Lincoln out of the top three. In truth, any person who would attempt to be a writer, attempt to be a public speaker, attempt to be a leader – political, military, business, association or school – should consider studying the letters, lectures and life of Abraham Lincoln.

His reference in the quote above was the US Supreme Court's 1857 Dredd Scott decision overruling itself on the issues of states' rights regarding slavery, and the US House of Representatives' vote to repeal the Missouri Compromise which prohib-

ited slavery in any new US states or territories, the immediate application being that Kansas and Nebraska might have the “right” to choose for themselves whether to allow slave ownership or not. Lincoln’s charge was that the outgoing US President, the US Supreme Court and the Federal Legislature were conspiring to overturn the US Constitution or, at best, they were forgetting their history and the clear intention of the country’s founders.

It is not nearly as serious as those issues or times, but conspiring against or at least forgetting history is in the roots of the discontent within the National Federation of State High School Associations, manifested in disharmony in the hallways of meetings and disunity behind the initiatives the national leadership continually advances. And while it is annoyance over the leadership’s lack of communication with and respect for dissenters that many complain about most frequently, it nevertheless will be the leadership’s obsession for a “national presence” by means of a spotlight on itself rather than through service to its member states that will be the organization’s ultimate undoing.

And as it was opposition to national-scope competition that brought the state high school associations together to form a National Federation, it will be the National

Federation’s support and sponsorship of national-scope high school athletic events that sends those associations asunder. The termites are already in the timbers.

National promotions are programming for profit, not principle, and cannot long inspire respect and loyalty. A mission based on money more than message – consistent message – loses its missionaries. And as members see more attention to the dreams and desires of the national office than to the needs of the state organizations, and as the state organizations have to do alone for themselves or in

“A mission based on money more than message – consistent message – loses its missionaries.”

small groups, the basic programming they hoped the national office would do for all states, the disrespect becomes disregard, and the national organization and its programs inch closer toward irrelevancy and unraveling.

In his book *From Beirut to Jerusalem*, Thomas Friedman states, “The real problem with the Lebanese today is that they have gotten too good at (what he calls) this adopting game – so good that their cure and their disease have become one and the same.”

One can characterize the National Federation of State High School Associations in the same way. Unable so far to prevail on a philosophical level on behalf of restrained educational athletics, it adapts on a practi-

cal level. It begins to create the very same things it was formed to combat – national competition.

Friedman calls this kind of behavior “moral double booking.” It is the action of an organization that, however it sees and likes to characterize itself, is reacting to events with salves rather than shaping events with solutions.

The National Federation’s quest for a “national presence” is connect-

ed to its own feelings of irrelevance, which will only increase as it loses sight of its historical role in protecting educational athletics from abuse and exploitation.

We don’t oppose change thoughtlessly; we oppose change that would alter our program’s principles and change our programs for the worse. For if something violates the spirit of the enterprise, it guarantees bad results. ■

AGAINST ALL ODDS

DECEMBER / JANUARY 2008-09

The theory of cognitive dissonance asserts that we all hold beliefs, and that when the beliefs we hold dear confront the realities we sometimes encounter, we are more likely to change our mindset than our behavior, because thoughts are easier to change than actions.

The classic case is smoking. The smoker hears repeatedly of the health risks, but decides that it is more important to smoke to reduce stress and/or avoid weight gain than to worry about heart disease and/or cancer. Or the smoker will frame smoking as an everyday risk, like the chance of being injured or killed in a car accident.

Such rationalizations allow people to keep their behaviors consistent with their beliefs, albeit revised beliefs, thus reducing “cognitive dissonance.”

There is great potential for cognitive dissonance in sports because of the depth of our loyalties and the height of our passions. Year after year “hope springs eternal” from professional, college and high school pre-season training camps. “Perhaps this is finally the year,” we mutter; in spite of all the odds. That sort of cognitive dissonance is fine; it’s fun (although less so for recent Chicago Cubs fans).

Not so endearing is the cognitive dissonance, in fact the blatant hypocrisy, when in spite of mounting evidence, positive character outcomes are ascribed to sports participation. Some studies reveal student-athletes are more likely to abuse alcohol than non-participating students. Other studies suggest student-athletes score lower on tests for moral reasoning and ethical judgment than

non-participating students.

The disconnect between mission and outcome is nowhere more obvious, or more relevant to us who serve school sports, than in Division I intercollegiate basketball and football. There can be little dispute that money drives decision-making far more than the educational mission of the sponsoring institutions. There is no other possible explanation for when, where and how these programs are conducted, promoted and televised and for how the players are treated and the coaches are compensated. It is interstate commerce, big business, not intellectual development or character education. This is not to be critical; it's simply factual.

There are some people who would drive high school sports in this same direction. This includes athletic footwear companies, television sports analysts and agents. And more

dangerously, this sometimes includes high school coaches and some local, state and national high school athletic administrators who assert, in the face of contrary evidence from the intercollegiate level, that we can promote nationalism, commercialism and elitism in school sports without the mission of school sports creeping closer to our college counterparts who have little pretense about the educational mission for intercollegiate athletics.

These zealous school sports coaches and administrators will rationalize and develop arguments to support a new mindset – like “everybody’s doing it” or “if you can’t beat them, join them.”

This is today’s **trend** in school sports. It is not yet certain that it is the dismal **destiny** of education-based athletics. ■

PART VI

“ . . . NEARLY EVERYTHING WE HOPE FOR IN EDUCATIONAL ATHLETICS CAN BE ACCOMPLISHED THROUGH GOOD COACHING, AND NEARLY EVERYTHING THAT WE DON'T WANT IN SCHOOL SPORTS RESULTS FROM COACHES WITH IMPROPER PHILOSOPHY OR INADEQUATE PREPARATION.”

THE TEACHER

MARCH 2001

When we are young, we're too busy living to learn anything about life.

As we get older, and particularly as we watch our children mature, we learn more about life than we ever did by living it.

So it is with me.

When my son did his student teaching, he was challenged by and dearly loved the experience. And 99 percent of the reason he had a good experience was that

his supervising teacher was fantastic. She motivated her students, and she motivated her student teacher.

So here's what I learned by observing this milestone of my son's life:

We can throw money at schools; we can create charter schools; we can expand choice of schools; we can require proficiency tests for students and teachers alike; we can build new buildings; we can add technology. Nothing wrong with any of that, in moderation; but none of that, and not all of that combined, will come close to making the difference in

education that can be made by the single individual who is the teacher in the classroom.

Aside from the students' parents, it is the teacher who most determines if young people are motivated to learn.

“Aside from the students' parents, it is the teacher who most determines if young people are motivated to learn.”

Schools will improve and education will advance to the degree that we attract and retain the best and brightest people of our communities, who also have a passion for teaching

and create a hunger for learning. People who are both emotional and intellectual. People who view teaching as coaching.

Yes, **coaching**. What I call "passionate teaching." Where we work long hours with young students: telling them, showing them, testing them, critiquing them, and testing them again. Equipping them to call their own plays in a successful life that will also include some failures. Equipping them to deal with life's wins and losses with genuine grace.

Making an impact, not merely an impression. ■

COACHES ADVANCEMENT PROGRAM

AUGUST 2005

Here's the BIG IDEA for 2005-06.

It is that we must get America to judge school sports by different criteria than sports on all other levels and by all other sponsors.

If competitive athletics are to have – and **deserve** to have – a place in schools, and if school sports is to have a place in society, this BIG IDEA will have to be pursued with more focus and passion and achieved with fewer exceptions and excuses in 2005-06 and beyond.

In school sports, educational athletics, we must be judged by participation numbers more than win/loss percentages; by academic scholarship in school, not athletic scholarships to college; by sportsmanship rather than gamesmanship; by life lessons like hard work and teamwork, discipline and dedication, leadership and citizenship.

If not in every detail, at least in essential direction, here's how we must go about making these the characteristics of successful programs.

First, we must recognize that the delivery system of almost all that is good in school sports, and a lot of what can be bad, is the coach. We cannot possibly spend too much time or money on coaches education.

Second, we must avoid distractions. For example: (1) A mandate by the Michigan Legislature that

coaches be certified in sports safety training is nice in theory, but is not nearly enough training for coaches and would interfere with schools' efforts to recruit and properly train coaches. (2) Conventions by coaches associations that focus only on Xs and Os are fine in theory but miss the point that what gets coaches fired is rarely the technical and tactical but far more often is the intangible, like motivating young people and dealing with their parents.

No, the best bet for advancing the BIG IDEA is for every school district and coaches association to provide voluntarily to every coach every year the kind of training provided through the MHSAA's Coaches Advancement Program.

The general outline of the program, and the added values for completing it (CEUs, insurance, etc.), can be found elsewhere in this publication. The real value of course is that CAP tends to produce life coaches, and life coaches tend to redefine the meaning of success in school sports.

The BIG IDEA requires BIG EFFORT. The MHSAA is making this effort through redesign of its coaches education program to better meet the needs of coaches and especially the needs of the student-athletes they mentor. We invite every member school and each coaches association to utilize this service. ■

EDUCATED COACHES FOR EDUCATIONAL ATHLETICS

DECEMBER 2005 / JANUARY 2006

This is an excerpt from the opening message of MHSAA Executive Director John E. "Jack" Roberts at 2005 MHSAA Update Meetings across Michigan.

I begin with a question that I suspect many of you can answer: "Do you know why we have sports in schools; do you know why schools decided to sponsor and conduct competitive athletics?"

As many of you know, it's because the people in charge of schools 60, 80 and 100 years ago saw a benefit to students and a benefit to schools. Physical activity and competition are good for students, they believed; physical education programs, including competitive athletics, are good for schools, they thought.

Because of my job, people expect me to recite many of the good things that school sports can do for kids, schools and communities. For example, we know from many surveys that participants in high school sports generally have higher grade point averages, lower dropout rates, better daily attendance, and fewer discipline problems than do non-participating students; and we know that these benefits are more often found in three-sport athletes than students who only participate in two sports or one sport. We know that students who participate in interscholastic athletics feel better about school

than non-participating students. We know they do better on standardized tests than non-participating students. But most impressive, we know that participation in school sports is a better predictor of success in later life than either grade point average or results on standardized tests.

What we don't know is if this is cause and effect or if it is motivated and talented kids who choose to participate in our programs.

An answer is not all that important to most parents, who just want their kids involved and associating with a bright, motivated peer group. And the answer is not all that important to most educators either: they just know that the extracurricular life of a school can energize the educational mission of that school.

However, the good that can happen in school sports, the life lessons that can accrue from school sports, are not automatic. In fact, the program has as much potential to harm as to help kids, schools and communities.

For every positive statistic about participation, there may be a negative stat. For example, males outnumber females in school sports participation by a 3:2 ratio; yet males are 1.5 years behind females in reading and writing, less likely to go to college, follow less rigorous curricula, take fewer advance placement classes, are less involved in student govern-

ment, honor societies and the school newspaper, do less homework, do less extra credit work, read fewer books, perform lower in arts and music, and are less likely to study abroad.

Meanwhile, males are more frequently expelled than females, more frequently held back, more frequently drop out, and are more frequently involved in crime, drugs and alcohol abuse.

If participation is so good, and so many more boys than girls participate, why do boys behave and perform so badly compared to girls?

Obviously, there are several factors contributing to these statistics. But the deciding factor in whether an interscholastic athletic program is great for boys and girls, merely good for boys and girls, or bad for them is the coach. Whether the program teaches sportsmanship and leadership or merely gamesmanship, it's the coach. Whether the program teaches discipline and dedication or is a contributor to delinquency, it's up to the coach. Whether the program teaches hard work and teamwork or the No. 1 syndrome, it's largely in the hands of the coach.

To assure that classroom outcomes are positive and constantly improving, our educational system has established an elaborate program of continuing education requirements for classroom teachers. Meanwhile, in an arena where the potential to harm students is at least as great as the potential to help them, where we compete with great emotion in front of spectators with risk of injury, there are no laws or

policies requiring continuing education for coaches.

However, that there are no "requirements" doesn't mean there are no obligations or no standards or no expectations or no easy opportunities to meet the obligations, standards and expectations. The MHSAA Coaches Advancement Program meets the obligations, standards and expectations that do exist at least morally, ethically and educationally, and therefore, I think, also legally.

Nineteen years ago I said, and I still believe, that nearly everything we hope for in educational athletics can be accomplished through good coaching, and nearly everything that we don't want in school sports results from coaches with improper philosophy or inadequate preparation. If we want better sportsmanship, less specialization, fewer injuries in practice and competition, and healthier lifestyles after high school sports are over, the coach is the most effective person to deliver those messages and achieve those worthy goals.

Coaches can redeem even bad decisions by administrators and boards of education, and poor coaches can ruin the best decisions that were ever made.

Let's help coaches help us maximize the good and minimize the bad of school sports. Educational athletics requires educated coaches: continuing education for every coach, every year, starting right now. Improving the education of coaches is the best thing that we can do to improve educational athletics. ■

KEEPING EDUCATIONAL ATHLETICS EDUCATIONAL

AUGUST 2006

The following is an excerpt from the presentation by John E. (Jack) Roberts at the National Coaching Educators Conference June 17, 2006.

In every corner of Michigan, at almost every crossroads of this state, young people are participating in school sports and their parents, other relatives, friends and neighbors are gathering to watch. This 100-year-old tradition continues with record high participation for the third straight year, even in a world of increasing distractions. High school sports not only survives, it often thrives; and it will continue to thrive if and only if it retains its focus – education – and preserves its soul – pure, amateur, local programming.

Many of you know from your coaching days that success in most sports that involve a ball requires keeping an eye on that ball. Good contact in baseball, softball, golf and tennis requires concentration on the ball. We teach receivers in football to look the ball all the way into their hands in order to make the catch. Volleyball players can neither set nor

attack with consistent success unless they focus intently on the ball.

Success in school sports generally also requires that students keep their eye on another kind of ball – their school work – the academic ball. Screw up in class and you’ll sit down during contests. That’s how it usually is in school sports; and that’s how it should always be in educational athletics.

“Administrators must consider what we can do to assure that the interscholastic athletic program does not frustrate but actually helps facilitate education. That’s the ball on which we administrators must always focus . . .”

Success in school sports also requires that athletic administrators be mindful of the academic needs that students have. Administrators must consider what we can do to assure that the interscholastic athletic program does not frustrate but actually helps facilitate education. That’s the ball on which we administrators must always focus; and the question on which I wish to concentrate this morning in my comments to coaching educators is this: “How do we keep educational athletics educational?”

When we talk about “educational athletics,” what do we mean? We mean, first of all, athletics sponsored by educational institutions – schools.

Of course, education can occur in non-school sports; but my role in life is school sports, and my assigned focus for today is school sports; and by educational athletics in this context, we mean athletic programs that support the educational mission of schools. Programs that enhance the educational efforts of schools. Athletic programs that are a tool to help schools reach and motivate students to stay in school, like school and even do better in school than they otherwise might.

By educational athletics, we also mean athletic programs that might have some inherent value in and of themselves in addition to what they do to enhance the academic performance of students and the educational environment of schools. Some value of an educational nature that is not found as readily or at all in other parts of the school day. For example, you can learn very much in a weight training program about yourself and certain techniques, but you may not learn what it means to be made a second team offensive guard rather than a first team running back in order to help a team be successful. That's the kind of lesson – and there are many others – which is found in the interscholastic athletic program that isn't found as readily or sometimes at all in other parts of the school experience.

However, it is a legal fact in this state and most others across the nation that interscholastic athletics are not part of the school curriculum. They are neither required courses nor non-required courses;

neither core courses nor non-core courses; neither integral nor essential parts of the curriculum; not curricular, not even co-curricular, but extracurricular – outside the curriculum.

This is important to understand because it means students have no right to participate – it's a privilege. And that's important because it means we can make and enforce reasonable standards as a condition for students' participation. And that's important because it's in the standards we have for participation that we give value to participation.

Generally, the higher the standards for participation, the greater the benefits of participation for students, their schools and our society. If we lower standards, we tend to lower the value of participation. If we raise standards, we tend to raise the value of participation for the participants, their schools and our communities.

To the extent that interscholastic athletics are educational in and of themselves and support the educational mission of schools, it is mostly the result of the standards established and maintained.

So the key is standards. The defining difference for educational athletics may be in standards. So what kind of standards do we mean?

We know that we do not have the resources of college programs, professional sports, the Olympics and others to match their standards in some respects, for example, officials training where so much more can be done because those organizations

have so much more money and so many fewer officials to train. But, in other areas not so dependent on dollars, we must shine in school sports; we must have the very highest standards.

So in educational athletics, we mean standards like standards of **eligibility**, such as rules of enrollment, maximum age, maximum semesters, academic performance, amateur status, and the like. We mean standards for **competition**, from contest playing rules to day, week and season limitations. We mean standards of **conduct**, including requirements for citizenship in at least our school settings, and requirements of sportsmanship at least at our events. And the person who may have more effect on standards in school sports than any other person is the **coach**.

We believe coaches are the critical link in the educational process of educational athletics. No one higher up or lower down the organizational chart wields more influence. Good coaches can redeem the bad decisions that their administrators make; bad coaches can ruin the best decisions administrators ever make.

In this state, we believe in coaching education that is voluntary, at least on a school district by school district basis. If I were the superintendent of a school district, I would require every coach to have some kind of continuing education every year. But I know from talking to superintendents across the state that they do not want anybody mandating to them what the education

should be.

If coaching education were made mandatory for all coaches of MHSAA member schools, coaches education would get dumbed down. With the necessity of reaching all 25,000 or 30,000 coaches – with the diversity of their needs and the vastness of this state – we would be spread miles wide with a mere millimeter of depth.

Coaching education that keeps interscholastic athletics educational requires the hard work of designing and delivering – face to face and heart to heart – an interactive and inspiring curriculum. We want our coaches moved – emotionally changed – by coaches education. We want them inspired. We want them enthused. We want them to see young people differently when they finish one of our clinics. We want them to see themselves and their role as a coach differently.

A miles-wide, millimeter-deep program won't do it. Textbooks alone won't do it. The Internet alone won't do it. Standards alone won't do it. Certification alone won't do it. And sadly, where we are today with coaching education in Michigan, still won't do it. But we are not giving up. Heck, we've barely begun to fight.

Keeping educational athletics educational is a full-time fight for the hearts and minds of those involved, including our coaches – perhaps especially our coaches. It's countering the constant drumbeat of those who see school sports as the training

ground for college and professional athletic careers.

Who think about athletic scholarships to college more than academic scholarship in high school. Who think national tournaments and televised high school athletic events do not add to the problem, do not add to the public missing the truth that local programs of the junior high/middle school, ninth grade, JV and varsity levels is really where the education of educational athletics takes place. In fact, that it's in the day-after-day practices more than the games of these local programs that the real, genuine, life-changing education takes place.

It's not found in national tournaments. It's not found in television. It's not found in a lot of the recent trends that trouble a lot of people.

In early 2005, the National Association of State Boards of Education issued a report titled Athletics in an Era of Reform which stated: "The problems that have plagued college athletics – such as unscrupulous agents, mercenary coaches, questionable recruiting practices, and extravagant benefits bestowed on players – are now becoming more frequent at the high school level . . ."

Late last winter, a *Sports Illustrated* feature article was critical of national tournaments and televi-

sion in high school basketball. The article said it was time to rethink the direction in which high school basketball was heading. In Michigan, we rethought the direction years ago.

In Michigan – for years – we've had tough rules to prohibit national tournaments and television. And in Michigan – just last month – our Representative Council reaffirmed those policies.

Michigan schools will not be seduced and they will not succumb. We will keep the nation's one-of-a-kind out-of-state travel limits that

"Keeping educational athletics educational is a full-time fight for the hearts and minds of those involved, including our coaches – perhaps especially our coaches"

not only restrict MHSAA member schools to a maximum of 600 high-ways miles round-trip, but also prohibit MHSAA member schools from participating anywhere that schools from non-

contiguous states have traveled in excess of that limit. In other words, Michigan schools will not play in national-scope tournaments, whether they are near or far.

We will keep the nation's one-of-a-kind prohibition against live commercial television of regular season games in which MHSAA member schools are involved.

And we will keep the nation's one-of-a-kind coaches education program, the only one that is designed and delivered by a state high school association, face to face with coaches, anywhere and any time they gather,

with as much focus on perspective and philosophy as important topics such as pedagogy and physiology.

We will preach, teach, practice and promote proper perspective to administrators, coaches, students, their parents, politicians, promoters and the sports media. No one will doubt where we stand, or what we stand for.

If educational athletics loses its focus in this state, it will not be for a lack of effort or for a lack of fight from the MHSAA and its member schools. We will pursue excellence without the excesses that threaten educational athletics in America. Keeping educational athletics educational requires this focus and this fight.

And in the world of coaching education – our focus this weekend – it requires people of passion to design the programs and deliver them face to face anywhere they are requested, and who turn out coaches who don't say after completing one of our clinics, "Boy, was that heavy; I'm not sure I can cut it." But instead, turn out coaches who at the end of one of our clinics says, "Wow, was that inspiring; I can't wait to get back to the kids."

That's our goal in Michigan. And that's the key to keeping educational athletics educational: to turn on coaches, not only to the best possible practices of their sport, but also the purest philosophies of sports. ■

WHAT SHOULD OUR PROGRAMS LOOK LIKE AND WHO CAN MAKE THAT HAPPEN?

MAY 2007

Think for a moment about what you would like the sports program of your school to look like, feel like and represent. What words come to mind?

When these questions have been asked, in study after study and in all kinds of settings, there have been some common responses. See if they resonate with you. Here are the most popularly used words when people describe what they want their interscholastic athletic program to look and feel like.

One word is "safe." Moms most frequently use this word. They don't want their child harmed playing sports. They want it safe.

Another word is "competitive." That's what dads cite most frequently. They want their kid to be competitive, and they want their kid's teams to be competitive as well.

From school administrators, two words are cited with almost the exact same frequency. The words are "sportsmanlike" and "educational." School administrators want the

program to teach students, and they want those lessons to be the ones they can't learn or can't learn as readily in the academic classroom. Like teamwork and sacrifice. Like leadership, and most of all, sportsmanship – playing by the rules, respecting opponents and officials.

And students, what do they say? The number one reason they play, the number one result they want, is “**fun**.” They participate to have fun, to be with friends. And note this: while they recognize that winning is more fun than losing, kids always put fun before winning. They would rather play on a losing team than sit and watch on a winning team.

But there is another word that must be mentioned. It's not the most popularly cited word for any one constituent group, but it is the most popularly cited word for all of these groups combined. That word, that concept, is “**fair**.”

The students want a fair chance to make the team and to play in the contests. Parents want this for their children as well. And students, parents and administrators alike – and coaches – want a fair chance to win, a fair chance at success. They want a level playing field; what we call competitive equity or balance.

So what words do we have? **Safe, competitive, sportsmanlike and educational, fun and fair**. How would that feel?

That's what most people want their interscholastic athletic program to look and feel like; that's what they want the program to represent.

From three decades of work in athletic administration, and two of those decades here in Michigan; from reading the research from such sources as the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports at Michigan State University which has assessed the attitudes of athletes, parents, coaches and administrators; from student surveys in Iowa and Minnesota; from listening, to adults and especially to students; this is what I have heard and

learned. And it appears to be what we all want.

Championships would be nice, but they are a limited commodity available to few, no matter how hard we try. But these six characteristics are even better than championships, and they are not in limited supply; they are available to all who will work for them.

There is no silver bullet, no single solution to deliver these six features to an interscholastic athletic program; but I will step out on a limb and suggest the one variable with the best chance to do the most good in bringing these features to an interscholastic athletic program, no matter how large or small and regardless of its location.

I believe that the single most important link in the educational

“. . . the single most important link in the educational process of school sports is the coach.”

process of school sports is the coach. I believe that just as the teacher is most important to the learning process in the academic classroom, so is the coach the most important ingredient in the interscholastic athletic program.

I believe great teachers educate, great teachers inspire learning, regardless of the bells and whistles. If you put a great teacher in a barren, broken-down setting, great learning still occurs. Likewise for athletic coaches. Athletic coaches can redeem the bad decisions that are sometimes made, but bad coaches can ruin the best decisions that school boards, administrators and parents ever make.

I believe we need to invest in coaches: first, last and always. There is no higher priority, and there is no

greater potential for achieving that six-word vision for our interscholastic athletic programs.

We need to have higher expectations at hiring that candidates will aspire to that six-word vision. Sometimes the pool of candidates is shallow. For them, and for all coaches really, we need to provide training: initially and ongoing.

Why would we not do this? Classroom teachers are required to have continuing education. Why not also coaches? Why not especially coaches? They work with large numbers of boys and girls, in settings of high emotion, sometimes with risk of injury, in front of crowds. Their pupils take their exams in public; we'd better help them teach those pupils well. ■

PART VII

“ . . . WHAT SHOULD BE DONE TO KEEP YOUTH INTERESTED IN SCHOOL SPORTS AND SCHOOL SPORTS USEFUL TO SCHOOLS – DO WE ATTACK THAT CHALLENGE NOW, IMAGINATIVELY AND COMPREHENSIVELY, OR DO WE WAIT AND MERELY REARRANGE CHAIRS ON THE TITANIC?”

EDUCATION – FIRST, LAST AND ALWAYS

MARCH 2004

Last month I addressed the Lansing Regional Chamber of Commerce Economic Club Luncheon. Typically, the speakers are business owners, CEOs, media magnets, university presidents and the like.

As my wife said when she heard I was scheduled to speak at this business luncheon, "Why would **they** want to hear from **you?**"

It wasn't an easy task. In that setting, I was to talk about the **business** of school sports. But of course, the business of school sports is not business at all. It's education. It's providing young people laboratory courses in which we believe students can learn more efficiently than in regular classroom settings some of the important lessons that will make them healthier human beings as well as more successful and contributing members of society.

Not only that, we believe in most cases participation in extracurricular programs enhances performance in

the classroom. In any event, a well-designed interscholastic program is intended to enhance, not detract from, the academic mission of schools, the sponsoring organizations. And if the programs do not enhance education, schools cannot justify the time and money that are spent on them. It would simply be **bad business** for schools to do so.

So the **real business** of school sports is to be so obviously an educational tool of schools that school boards and administrators can easily justify the resources

devoted to these programs.

Notwithstanding the fact that attendance at MHSAA District, Regional and Final Tournaments in 2002-03 topped 1.6 million spectators - more than the Detroit Tigers drew to Comerica Park (1.4 million), more than the Detroit Pistons drew to The Palace of Auburn Hills (860,000), more than the Detroit Redwings drew to the Joe Louis

"But of course, the business of school sports is not business at all. It's education. It's providing young people laboratory courses in which we believe students can learn more efficiently than in regular classroom settings some of the important lessons that will make them healthier human beings as well as more successful and contributing members of society."

Arena (820,000), and more than the Detroit Lions drew to Ford Field (490,000) – the **real business** of high school sports is education.

Notwithstanding the fact that the three-day Semifinals and Finals of the MHSAA Boys Basketball Tournaments held in March at the Breslin Student Events Center will result in approximately \$10 million in direct spending in the East Lansing area and an overall impact of \$26 million on the local economy, the **real business** of high school sports is education.

I attacked the **bad business** of participation fees – that they reduce student participation, that they discriminate against certain students, and that they do more harm than good for school finances.

But most of all, I attacked the mindset when school sports are looked upon as a training ground for the next level of sports, rather than the next level of life. I attacked the obsession with college athletic scholarships, and I recited again that there are 30 times more dollars available for college scholarships based on academics than on athletics. Education is the purpose and theme of school sports.

Education is also the service to which the MHSAA is devoting an increasing proportion of its resources, both human and financial.

- The Women in Sports Leadership Conference and the Statewide Sportsmanship Summit – both highly successful annual events to encourage and equip both adults

and young people – are moving to every-other-year schedules, with the MHSAA providing mini-grants to encourage school districts and leagues and conferences to conduct similar local educational events which are more accessible to our constituents.

- Officials' education – which was greatly enhanced throughout the 1990s – will have even greater service and support from the MHSAA as we labor almost desperately to recruit and train and retain contest officials.
- Coaches' education – to which the MHSAA has been formally committed longer than any state high school association in the country – kicks into an even higher gear this year with a more flexible and multi-faceted coaching advancement plan.
- And for the first time ever beginning this year, the MHSAA will provide students access to "scholarships" to attend student leadership functions, and local entities will be able to apply for "mini-grants" to conduct student leadership events.

In our policies and in our programs we must never lose sight of our priority, our partnership with the academic mission of schools. We will oppose expansion of tournaments in ways that cause loss of classroom instructional time. We will oppose longer, more overlapping seasons that discourage multi-sport participation. We will oppose more distant

travel that burdens local budgets. We will nurture reasonable out-of-season practice and competition policies. We will promote the philosophy of pure, wholesome, amateur, local, educational sports.

Education – first, last and always – is our mission. What the MHSAA can do for educational athletics in

Michigan is to repeat this message and then repeat it again, so that this generation of leaders **gets** it and the next generation of leaders will **learn** it, so that sports can retain its important place in schools and school sports can retain its charming niche in the world of sports. **That** is our business. ■

NEVER MORE VALUABLE

SEPTEMBER / OCTOBER 2004

As school districts debate the terrible choices before them to make up for a host of broken promises from state government (e.g., lottery and sales tax revenue) and from the federal government (e.g., No Child Left Behind), consider the following.

After location (proximity to home or work), the extracurricular activities program (especially interscholastic athletics) is a school's most valuable tool for attracting and holding students which, under the current system, is a school's best hope for weathering the harsh and long financial storm that buffets us.

The fundamental approach to educational reform by those in power at the state and federal levels of government for the past decade

has been competition: school of choice, and vouchers to assist those choices.

At the same time that they are decreasing services and increasing class size, school districts are spending money on advertising campaigns

in order to compete in this new environment – brochures, billboards, commercials on radio and television.

The advantage that traditional public schools have in student recruitment and retention is a broad and

deep extracurricular program. Add participation fees to the privilege of participation, and families start looking around. Cut sports or levels of teams within a sport, and students start moving elsewhere.

Always valuable for generating

“These hard times will be weathered best by those school districts that maintain extracurricular programs – both athletic and non-athletic – that are broad and deep and available without charge to their constituents.”

community support for schools, always valuable for reaching and motivating students to stay in school, like school and do well in school, always important for teaching life skills such as teamwork and hard work, discipline and dedication, sportsmanship and leadership, school sports have never been more valuable than they are today. They are the competitive edge in school marketing.

I will never say that sports are more important than classroom curriculum. However, in the current

environment where the number of students enrolled is the key to financial health, these valuable tools for assisting in the education of students are now also the most valuable tools for schools in the fight for students and the fiscal fitness of the school district.

These hard times will be weathered best by those school districts that maintain extracurricular programs – both athletic and non-athletic – that are broad and deep and available without charge to their constituents. ■

HIGH SCHOOL ATHLETICS IN AN ERA OF REFORM

FEBRUARY 2006

During 2004, the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) convened a commission "to assess the state of high school athletics and recommend policies for adoption by states, districts, and schools advocating that athletic programs support, rather than undermine, student academic achievement."

The Report of the NASBE Commission on High School Athletics in an Era of Reform was released in November and states the following: "There is an urgent need to address this issue as professional sports increasingly encroach upon academics. Indeed, the problems that have plagued college athletics – such as unscrupulous agents, mercenary coaches, questionable recruiting

practices, and extravagant benefits bestowed upon players – are now becoming more frequent at the high school level and, in some instances, the middle school level.

"These practices compromise the schools' educational mission . . ."

The Commission's report is especially critical of sports specialization and the spread of "pay-to-play" policies, and it advocates for the importance of adequately trained coaches.

When I finished reading the 44-page report, I couldn't help but think that the Michigan High School Athletic Association has some answers the Commission is looking for.

Through the MHSAA, Michigan's secondary schools have adopted and enforced policies and procedures

that avoid the excesses of other levels of sports and even of high school sports in other places. For example:

- Schools do not participate in national-scope tournaments and students do not compete in national high school championships. Schools do not allow live telecasts of regular-season contests.
- Coaches do not receive payments that exceed the Board of Education approved pay scale for all extracurricular activities, and all payments to coaches must be through the school, not from any outside sources.
- Student-athletes do not receive cash prizes and may not receive symbolic or merchandise awards with a value of more than \$25. Student-athletes do not keep school-provided uniforms, warm-

ups, shoes, etc., unless they reimburse the school appropriately.

- The MHSAA opposes sports specialization and "pay-for-play" fees; and the MHSAA administers a comprehensive continuing education program for coaches.

Occasionally, non-school promoters and people who do not share the perspective that athletics are secondary to the academic mission of schools will criticize MHSAA policies for being out of date. However, because of those policies, there will be far less need for the kind of reform in Michigan that is being advocated by the NASBE Commission nationwide. Because Michigan schools have wandered less from the purity of their mission in school sports, less adjustment in the trajectory of their programs will be required. ■

MESSAGE-DRIVEN SPORTS FOR MARKETPLACE SCHOOLS

DECEMBER 2005 / JANUARY 2006

Today's schools, both public and nonpublic, are competing in the marketplace for students, knowing that financial health depends on student enrollment.

Today's schools are marketing themselves with fabulous facilities, great faculties, and comprehensive and creative curricula.

And today's most successfully marketed schools will also attract customers through an extracurricular program that is broad and deep, free of charge and message-driven. A program of many sports and many levels of teams, without the obstacle of participation fees, doggedly pursuing a mission of participation percentage more than win/loss record, variety more than specialization, opportunity more than elitism.

“. . . today's most successfully marketed schools will also attract customers through an extracurricular program that is broad and deep, free of charge and message-driven.”

While this is slightly exaggerated to make a point, think of school sports as the loss leader that gets the customer in the door, as the extra features that make the sale (enroll the student), and the value added benefit of being educated through your school system.

This doesn't work if the program is ill-conceived and sends the wrong message. For this to work, for school sports to be a healthy and effective marketing tool, the extracurricular program must be evaluated differently than all other sports by school boards, administrators, coaches and citizens. It must be evaluated with more than lip service to the mission of learning at every opportunity rather than winning at any cost.

Keep message-driven sports as a tool of integrity in your marketplace schools. ■

THE RIGHT KIND OF SPIRIT

MARCH 2006

I speak often about the need to make the most of the ways school sports are different from non-school sports programs and attract the interest and involvement of students and communities. I've mentioned pep bands, pep assemblies, cheerleaders, letter jackets, homecomings and the like. Kept in proper perspective, all of these things and more can draw excitement and loyalty to school sports that non-school programs rarely experience.

Recently I learned of the way the **absence** of a pep assembly did more to promote the core beliefs of educational athletics than most pep assemblies have. It happened last fall.

On the Friday before a huge football game, a school stuck to its guns that school time is for school work and refused pressure to schedule a pep assembly. In defending its decision to the public, school representatives were able to remind constituents that school is a place of education. It was also noted that this

place of education was striving to avoid an environment where athletes are placed on pedestals and the athletic program is exalted over other school programs.

Seizing the teachable moment, the school's football coach reminded players that their game was Saturday, and Friday was opening night for the school play. "How would those in the play feel," he asked, "if there was a football pep rally on their opening night?" And he encouraged them all to attend the play that night and show support for the activities of their classmates.

How great is that? What a perfect perspective for the place of sports in schools.

I'm a great fan of pep assemblies – those that show support for all sports and all levels of teams and involve the entire extracurricular program. But the absence of a pep rally on a day last fall may have gotten the message across better than I ever have. ■

"How would those in the play feel," he asked, "if there was a football pep rally on their opening night?"

EYE ON THE BALL

APRIL 2006

Following is an excerpt from a presentation by MHSAA Executive Director John E "Jack" Roberts at the 2006 Annual Michigan Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association Conference, March 19, 2006.

Many of you know from your coaching days that success in most sports that involve a ball requires keeping an eye on that ball. Contact in baseball, softball, golf and tennis requires concentration on the ball. We teach receivers in football to look the ball all the way into their hands. Volleyball players can neither spike nor set with consistent success unless they focus on the ball.

Success in school sports generally also requires that students keep their eye on another kind of ball, their school work – the academic ball. And it also requires that administrators be mindful of the academic needs that students have. We must be aware of changes in education policy and procedure, and we must consider what we can do to assure that the interscholastic athletic program does not frustrate but actually helps facilitate changes that schools want to make or are being forced to make.

That's the ball on which we must always focus, and on which I wish to concentrate in the next few minutes: how do we in interscholastic athletics

help Michigan schools through the present day political, financial and educational mine fields?

As more of our public schools move to the required post Labor Day start to classes, those of us who are the trustees of school sports need to keep our eye on that ball: how we help, and not hinder, local educational programming. On this issue, the calendar for schools and school sports, we do so by five approaches:

- First, we must consider the philosophical concerns of conducting so much of school sports outside the school year, both in August and in June.
- Then we must consider the practical pros and cons of doing so.
- Third, we must watch what schools do and wait to see what consensus develops for academic calendars; and then see if we can make one coordinated change that best accommodates most schools, rather than making a series of changes back and forth while schools experiment.
- Fourth, we must consider the possibility that all this talk provides an opportunity to take a comprehensive look at all seasons, not just fall seasons, and to respond to many people who say, for example, that basketball and

wrestling seasons are just too long.

- Fifth, we must examine if it is starting dates of seasons or rather the earlier start of unofficial demands on kids and coaches that is the real problem to be dealt with.

In spite of the need to take a slow, circumspect approach, I think there are already some givens:

- First, proposals to start seasons earlier, especially in the fall, must be rejected. Any other course would pour gasoline on the fire of interests that succeeded in delaying the start of classes. It would appear as if we are thumbing our noses at those interests. For example, the Basketball Committee's proposal to start the girls basketball season earlier should be dead on arrival, for it would appear to be out of touch with what's happening, or arrogant.
- Second, proposals to add more tournament events in the spring must be rejected, at least for now. Any other course would be in conflict with the growing number of schools which intend to end later in June after starting classes later in the fall. Therefore, the Track & Field Committee proposal for a single-site, two-day Individual Final Meet and for a Team Track & Field Final in addition to the Individual Meet can't be approved at this time. Good ideas, perhaps; but bad timing.

If we keep our eye on the ball of helping and not hindering local academic programming, we have no choice but to come to such conclusions. They are givens for the political, economic and academic environment of our sponsors, of schools.

There are also some gray areas to consider. For example, we need to think twice about proposals to move Baseball and Softball Regionals from Saturday to the previous Thursday. There may be good reasons to do it; but with more schools going later in June with classes and examinations, we could cause new problems as we solve old problems.

But being opposed to season and tournament expansion, and being careful about placing more on weekdays in early June, is not all that these times demand of us; and without waiting to determine if or how we might delay or shorten seasons, we can be proactive now regarding the creeping out of season demands that contribute to so many complaints we confront: from parents and coaches looking for more family time, to business interests looking for more tourists and laborers, to students looking for more time for other sports and activities of their busy lives.

To curb the creep in out-of-season demands, several proposals have been developed.

One establishes a seven-day summer "dead period" when open gyms and conditioning programs cannot occur on school premises or at other places sponsored by a member

school, and coaches of MHSAA sports other than baseball and softball may not be involved with more than three students in competition settings.

The second proposal establishes a 14-day “down time” just prior to the season for every sport in every season (fall, winter and spring) when open gyms can’t occur involving that sport, and coaches cannot be involved with more than three players, including in the sports of football and boys soccer.

The third proposal intends to assure that schools do not transform curriculum courses into practice sessions for interscholastic teams, either in or out of season.

This third area – deescalating sports curriculum classes – not only responds to the need to depressurize out of season, it also responds to the certainty of new laws that will increase academic demands on students and leave them with little time to take courses like Football 101.

Generally, the MHSAA is not involved in curriculum matters. However, when it is seen that curriculum courses have the effect of circumventing out-of-season practice limits and tilting the competitive playing field, MHSAA involvement is requested, justified and required.

Moreover, this proposal again keeps our eye on the ball, on the aca-

demical needs of students and the academic plans of schools that will soon be undergoing significant change.

This is a time for school sports like no other we have seen, whether your career spans four years or 40. Money has been tight before for school sports, but never before have you been told to maintain or even increase athletic offerings at the same time that your budget is being cut. With “schools of choice,” districts are competing for students in an open marketplace. Broad, deep and free of charge extracurricular pro-

grams can give the edge to schools as they compete for students and the state funding that follows those students.

Think of education like the automobile industry,

and that’s not hard to do because both are in serious financial difficulty. You are the executive in charge of the sports car division, a kind of luxury that draws eyes, ears and comments like no other part of the enterprise. As such, you will be tempted toward excesses that you must avoid. You’ll be characterized as arrogant and out of touch with your gas-guzzling but high performing products, and you must consciously work against that negative perception.

Most of all, people will criticize your division’s disconnect to the overall enterprise, much as Division I college football and basketball are

“how do we in interscholastic athletics help Michigan schools through the present day political, financial and educational mine fields?”

viewed publicly as only remotely connected to education, if not a force that undermines education and threatens institutional integrity.

Like never before, we need linkage to schools' educational mission. Like never before, we need to keep our eye on that ball. No, school sports are not part of the curriculum.

Yes, school sports are extracurricular. But they are a tool to help schools connect with students and communities for the greater good of the institution and its educational goals.

We need to demonstrate this now by being on the side of education when it comes to calendar and curricular matters. ■

CHARACTERISTICS OF HIGH-PERFORMING PROGRAMS

SEPTEMBER / OCTOBER 2006

A study of 10 academically oriented after-school programs in New York City funded by the After-School Corporation may provide some unintended guidance for interscholastic athletic programs.

Prepared in November 2005 by Policy Studies Associates, Inc. for the After-School Corporation and Southwest Educational Development Laboratory with support from the U.S. Department of Education, the report "Shared Features of High-Performing After-School Programs" identifies the following characteristics of high performing after-school programs:

- 1. A broad array of enrichment opportunities.**
- 2. Opportunities for skill building and mastery.**
- 3. Intentional relationship building.**
- 4. A strong, experienced leader/manager supported by a trained**

and supervised staff.

- 5. The administrative, fiscal and professional development support of the sponsoring organization.**

While competitive junior high/middle school and high school sports were not the subject of this study, here's what I think these findings could mean for school sports:

- Interscholastic athletic programs should provide a wide variety of opportunities appealing to a diverse group of students.
- Interscholastic athletic programs should provide competitive opportunities for the highly skilled as well as learning opportunities for the less skilled so they too might progress to higher levels of competency, or just enjoy the fun, friends and fitness of school sports.
- Teamwork, sportsmanship and leadership should be outcomes as

intentional as development of skills of the sport and strategies of contests.

- A full-time athletic administrator is essential, and it is imperative this person have authority to train and supervise staff and hold them accountable for performance consistent with the best practices of educational athletics.

- School boards and their administrators must provide sound policies and procedures, adequate financial support and opportunities for continuing education for the athletic director and every coach.

All in all, a pretty good blueprint for school sports in Michigan. ■

ANOTHER LOOK AT THE MONEY PROBLEM

APRIL 2007

These are tough economic times for many folks, and especially tough financial times for Michigan schools.

We predicted precisely today's financial mess for schools when Proposal A was debated and passed a decade ago and transferred school funding from relatively stable property taxes to less reliable sales taxes and from local investment in neighborhood schools to state control of public education.

So in these difficult times for public education, it will not surprise you to hear me say that money is a problem for school sports. But hear this also: in my opinion, lack of money is much less the problem than too much money when it comes to sports.

Yes I am concerned, very concerned, that the failure of state funding to adequately meet the needs of local schools has negative effects on school sports; and I'll address that concern now, before developing my

primary message that it is the overabundance of money in sports generally, not the underfunding of local school sports, that is the greater threat to the real essence of school sports.

My concern for school sports resulting from the underfunding of schools is that desperation will drive many schools to do long-term, if not permanent, damage to interscholastic athletics.

For example, some districts will turn junior high/middle school sports over to community groups. Those districts will find high school sportsmanship decline because the students and their parents' orientation into the philosophies and policies of educational athletics was delayed.

Some districts will turn to participation fees, to "pay for play." These districts will find this reduces participation, especially on the subvarsity levels, and in winter and spring

sports, and with the second, third and fourth children in a family. These are really **anti**-participation fees.

And ironically, these districts will learn that the imposition of **anti**-participation fees actually worsens school district finances. New families moving into communities will enroll their children where there are not fees. And with school of choice, many families will transfer their children to schools where there are not participation fees.

The loss of state aid for one student costs the district more than the participation fees for 100 athletes. It's a bad business plan.

No, in this day and age of competition between schools for students, extracurricular programs (speech, music, debate, drama and sports) are not luxuries. They are the features that attract and hold students. They are the bells and whistles of education that attract customers through the door. ■

FROM SMOKE AND MIRRORS TO MIRACLES

APRIL 2007

Schools are being told to deliver more demanding curriculum to students, but they are being told to do so with an old-fashioned, agriculture-based academic calendar, an almost third-world academic calendar.

Just after 75 percent of the schools in America had moved to a pre-Labor Day start to academic classes, Michigan moved to a post-Labor Day mandate for the start of classes. How can that inspire business investment and corporate confidence in this state?

Just as schools are being told that too many of their students graduate from high school without being college or job ready, the Legislature delays the start of the instructional year, and school districts are reducing the number of instructional days

during that year. How can that retool Michigan's economic future?

These contradictions can't continue. Even in a nearly bankrupt state, with many nearly bankrupt school districts, and a legislative process that appears bankrupt of good ideas, even here these contradictions simply can't continue. Students, parents, educators and business and civic leaders will see how senseless and harmful an abbreviated academic calendar is to students and schools in Michigan, and to business and industry in Michigan – how foolish this is for the future of our state.

Surveys of parents across the country and across the years have consistently and overwhelmingly favored longer school years. In Colorado, where there is statewide mandated school of choice, school

districts are starting classes earlier and earlier. Why? Because they know it's what their customers want; they know there's a marketplace advantage by opening school early.

And everybody seems to know - our local news says it over and over, our governor says it over and over, business and civic leaders say it over and over: jobs go not only to where taxes are low; jobs also go to where workforce education is high.

If Michigan is going to have a recovery, then Michigan schools must lead it; and they simply can't lead it with a late starting and shortened school year.

Michigan schools of the future, if we will have a future, must be in session later each day and longer each year than in 2006-07.

Michigan schools of the future, if we will have a future, must be reorganized through something like intermediate school districts, consolidating administrators, support services and technology; but not the identity of most schools and their extracurricular programs that are essential to motivating students and attracting parental involvement.

Michigan schools of the future, if we will have a future, must not only test well for reading, writing and arithmetic; they must teach well the need for lifetime learning, and lifetime learners.

The system is broken, or at least unsuited for our future needs; and the repair requires a different approach than what we've seen so far. Delaying the start of the academic year and reducing the number of instructional days in the year won't help. Buyouts for veteran employees are little more than delaying tactics to facing up to reality. School of

choice as well as charter school and magnet school alternatives to neighborhood schools weaken both the schools and neighborhoods that need the most support. In too many places authorities are simply renaming a

building and pretending to have reformed education.

But our children can't wait for the genuine, systemic reform that is needed. They need now individual classroom teachers - always the heart and soul of education - to break through in spite of the system and the smoke and mirror remedies relied on so far.

A good teacher can teach and inspire lifetime learning - the critical need for Michigan's economic future - and a great teacher does so even in a broken and barren classroom. For its teachers, a school district that "invests in the best and removes the rest" will rise above most of what's wrong with our economy and educational system.

"A good teacher can teach and inspire lifetime learning - the critical need for Michigan's economic future - and a great teacher does so even in a broken and barren classroom."

Michigan children have not been well served by much of what's been happening to fix our educational system, and they cannot wait for grander schemes and designs. They need more than anything – and they need it now – more of the daily miracles I and my children experienced because of passionate teachers who gave us more than instruction, who gave us also the inspiration to learn and do more than we thought we had in us.

Schools which will break through the mess in Michigan's educational and economic systems will focus on instruction, on the delivery system,

on the teacher. They will do so right now and not wait for help from Lansing, Washington or anyplace else. Outside help will be slow in coming, if at all. The right teacher can help today.

Michigan schools of the future, if we will have a future, must recruit the best and brightest of our college graduates to teach in our schools, reward them with good pay and benefits, and retain them with the kind of priceless emotional capital that comes from few vocations like it can from teaching that is inspired and is respected. ■

RAISING STANDARDS AND PARTICIPATION IN TIMES OF DECLINING RESOURCES

APRIL/MAY 2008

Recently I was challenged to put into one sentence what the goal of a state high school athletic association ought to be. I was given no time to think, and said the following: “To involve an increasingly higher number of students in a program of increasingly higher standards.”

Upon reflection, I have become increasingly pleased with that response: to involve an increasingly higher number of students in a program of increasingly higher standards. But if that is our goal, then it requires that we look at how we go about (1) increasing standards, and (2) increasing participation. And that requires we answer the tough ques-

tion of how we raise standards and participation at a time of declining resources.

I. Standards

Those of us who have devoted our lives to interscholastic athletics believe there is value in participation. But even more than that, we believe that much of the **value** of participation is dependent on the **standards for** participation. We have observed that as we raise standards of eligibility and conduct, we tend to raise the value of participation for students, their schools and our communities.

So where should we be looking next to raise expectations and stan-

dards, and how should we be going about it? Here are three ideas:

(A) We know we can continue to improve conduct at our events, but we also know we can't move too rapidly or radically. Remember the story (inaccurate) that a high school association in the west was going to ban booing? That would have been too much, too fast.

But if we are reasonable and practical with our expectations and requirements, and comprehensive in our efforts, we can improve sportsmanship. In fact, there may not be a limit to raising standards of conduct, however incrementally. The limit may not be on how high we go, but how fast. We must move cautiously.

(B) However, there may be limits to how much we raise other standards. For example, academic standards. While this is educational athletics and there may be a need to raise the minimum statewide academic standards for athletic eligibility, the requirements cannot be raised so much that they actually diminish the value of interscholastic athletics as a tool for schools to reach and hold students and to motivate them to stay in school, like school a little more, and perhaps do a little better than they otherwise would. Participation limited to gifted and

talented students limits the value of interscholastic athletics to our students, schools and communities.

The 2007 MHSAA Update Meeting survey indicated that 56.5 percent of 806 respondents favor an MHSAA requirement of a minimum grade point average for athletic eligibility, with 1.5 or 2.0 provided as examples. This included 29 of 60 superintendents, 125 of 201 principals, and 206 of 494 athletic directors participating in the survey. This

“We have observed that as we raise standards of eligibility and conduct, we tend to raise the value of participation for students, their schools and our communities.”

was the first time in two decades that any MHSAA survey has returned more than 50 percent support for higher academic standards statewide as a prerequisite for interscholastic athletic participation.

That same survey found a smaller percentage, 43.3 percent of respondents, favoring a change in the MHSAA minimum athletic eligibility standards from passing 20 to passing 25 credit hours (four to five courses under traditional semester scheduling) during the previous and current terms. This included 30 of 60 superintendents, 112 of 197 principals, and 185 of 493 athletic directors.

Media and public comment has generally supported a higher MHSAA-adopted statewide minimum academic standard for interscholastic athletic eligibility. However, it is unlikely that this

would be a radical increase, or any change at all that is without the support of the state associations of school boards, superintendents and principals.

Our membership is very diverse, and one rule may not fit all schools. In many schools, the student population is very diverse, and one rule will not fit all students. So if change is coming, it is coming cautiously and with consensus.

(C) We are acutely aware of the need to raise the level of preparation for coaches of interscholastic teams. Nowhere in the school setting do you find supervisory adults working with more students in more emotional settings with more risk of injury . . . and often, with less training.

But again, we cannot raise requirements so much so fast that the candidate pool is reduced and school teams are without coaches, and sports programs must be dropped. There is a limit to how much we can do and how fast we do it before a good thing becomes bad.

The 2007 MHSAA Update Meeting survey indicated almost 72 percent of 805 respondents favored a new requirement for the 2009-10 school year that head coaches complete a basic first aid and/or CPR and/or AED training before coaching an interscholastic scrimmage or

contest. Forty-four of 59 superintendents, 152 of 200 principals and 347 of 495 responding athletic directors indicated they favor this new requirement, effective with the 2009-10 school year. This is surprising support for a higher standard.

Historically, the MHSAA has joined with the Michigan Association of School Boards and the Michigan Association of Secondary School Principals in opposing bills in the Michigan Legislature which would

“We have discovered that some of the very same ways we go about increasing participation are the ways we go about increasing support and resources.”

make it a requirement for coaches to complete specified sports safety or CPR courses. The practical concerns of these organizations trumped their thoughts about what would be ideal for interscholastic

athletics and its participants.

However, the more moderate proposal surveyed at the MHSAA meetings last October may have sufficient support to become the rule of the not-too-distant future, because the new standard is more modest and flexible than proposed state laws, and it could be supported by a large majority of the MHSAA’s voluntary membership.

The MHSAA will continue to consider rising standards in these and other areas of interscholastic athletics, looking for the advice and consent of its membership. We recognize that not every good idea is practical or without serious negative

unintended consequences. We will seek to find the balance and to adopt those higher standards that increase the value of participation to Michigan's students, schools and communities, without increasing problems.

That, we think, is how we go about raising standards in times of declining resources: cautiously, cost-consciously and with clear consensus. Now let's look at how we might go about increasing participation.

II. Participation

Last May, we began a study under the title: "Planning for School Sports in Contemporary Society." This effort has intended to help us answer these questions: How in the face of our historical problems – for example, professionalism, commercialism, nationalism, elitism and specialization – and how in the face of our new problems – for example, the sagging economy and the sports seasons changes – do we increase the relevance of school sports to youth, and how do we increase the usefulness of school sports to schools?

We have discovered that some of the very same ways we go about increasing participation are the ways we go about increasing support and resources. In other words, new efforts to increase participation often equate to new sources of support for the enterprise.

At the conclusion of the 80-page document is a new business plan for the MHSAA, a business diversification plan really, one that relies on

tournament gate receipts for a lower percentage of the MHSAA's total revenue. And following that new business diversification plan is an 11-point action plan for 2008 which maps out our immediate plans, several of which are right on point for increasing involvement in times of decreasing resources.

Among the 11 points of the action plan are:

- continued emphasis on sportsmanship;
- continued expansion of the Coaches Advancement Program;
- continued development of leadership training for athletic administrators;
- expansion of the Team Captain Leadership Development Program;
- a third survey of 7th, 8th and 9th-graders regarding their interests in sports participation in the future, including those for which the MHSAA already sponsors tournaments and those for which the MHSAA does not;
- retention of commission-based expertise to expand sponsor and grant support of MHSAA programs;
- continued comprehensive review and overhaul of MHSAA tournament administration, with special emphasis on site selection, financial splits and accounting, scheduling, seeding and staging;
- strategies for uses of video technology at both the MHSAA and local levels;

- expanding use of the Internet for commercial transactions with the public and interactive communications with constituents;
- development of the Center for Excellence in Educational Athletics, which could include an arena that would turn facilities from a major expense item to a significant revenue center for the MHSAA;
- development of the “Reaching Higher” program, a package of strategies that attempts to regain some of the almost 80 percent of young people who drop out of organized sports before they reach the high school level, and to retain the interests and loyalties of the gifted and talented athlete longer – an elementary to college-bound initiative intending to have kids thinking of school sports earlier and longer than the current pattern.

All of this should demonstrate that the MHSAA is not giving up on increasing numbers and elevating standards even in these tough times. The objectives remain unchanged, but there are some new strategies and devices being added to our tool box. In the aftermath of Hurricane

Katrina, the media criticized President Bush and leaders of his administration for acting like the Emperor Nero. You may remember, Nero kept fiddling while Rome was burning.

That must not be said of us. For example, we must be attentive and promptly responsive to what’s happening with the seasons shifts. Perhaps history will judge us as having been too slow to reevaluate out-of-season coaching rules. Let it not be said that we were too slow in responding to the issues created by the seasons changes, allowing current patterns to become entrenched and problems institutionalized, and watching participation drop.

On the broader and larger topic – what should be done to keep youth interested in school sports and school sports useful to schools – do we attack that challenge now, imaginatively and comprehensively, or do we wait and merely rearrange chairs on the Titanic?

I think you know the approach that I would prefer; but more importantly, I think you know the approach that students deserve and that schools need, an approach that looks at what might be possible a lot more than what is not. ■

PART VIII

**“CHANGE IS RARELY FROM THE TOP DOWN, SELDOM OBVIOUS
WHEN IT STARTS, AND RARELY ACCOMPLISHED ALONE.”**

LEADING FROM THE GROUND UP

FEBRUARY 2007

I watched the confirmation hearings of the U.S. Supreme Court Chief Justice with unusual interest, my attention initially being attracted by the name we share and the role his court may have in the policies of school sports in the state I serve, and my respect being earned by his extensive, detailed but paperless recall of facts, issues and cases.

Some senators who interviewed the nominee and some who criticized his record questioned his positions articulated years earlier when he was employed in federal agencies or clerking for judges. His written record was staunchly conservative. His response was that he was writing then in the capacity of his employment and charged with advocating as well as possible the particular point of view of the agency or justice he was serving. Rather than being skeletons in his closet proving his bias, he argued, his written record should be viewed in the context that a particular point of view had been requested of him and it should be evaluated on the basis of how convincing that point of view could be made by the quality of his thought, research, argument and prose.

As one who has written for profession for nearly four decades, my own closet has articles, memos and letters that displease me now for the quality of writing and/or the point of view

presented. Included are documents written in my late know-it-all 20s when I was charged by my employer to draft plans for national high school championships. I argued forcefully for the feasibility of such events and their potential benefits, at least to my employer.

This period of advocacy for national high school championships was brief and ended with the realization, expressed to many, that "I don't believe in the work I'm doing," citing the planning of these events and the first edition of the National High School Record Book as my chief complaints. And I left the employment of the National Federation of State High School Associations.

Arriving in Michigan a half dozen years later, I listened to the state's educators – from subvarsity coaches to superintendents of schools – and found firmly established in this state a vision for school sports that had no practical place for all-star contests, postseason tournaments and distant travel, and a very modest view of the role of corporate sponsors.

It was also after arriving in Michigan in 1986 that I learned about the Michigan model for sports seasons, which is to place girls and boys in different seasons in the same sports when resources are limited, so both genders benefit from full uti-

lization of facilities and personnel. Almost everyone I heard from was in agreement this system was (and is) best, including the sports media which was trying to maximize coverage of both boys and girls events.

It has always been my understanding that the proper role of an association executive is not to create a vision himself or herself, but to listen to the membership and then lead with passion in the directions in which this membership points: to clarify their yearnings, draw more attention to them, increase enthusiasm for them, and lead - regardless of the obstacles - with goals, strategies

and tactics that are compelling and consistent with the vision which is in the hearts of the constituents.

So it is not surprising that this "newcomer" to Michigan has defended schools' sports seasons. And it is not surprising that the same person who long ago served a National Federation executive director by planning national high school championships - then seeing these events only from a top down perspective - now is one of the leading opponents to such events - now serving a clearly expressed Michigan mandate. It is how I lead, and it is what I believe. ■

THE IMPORTANCE OF PURPOSE

NOVEMBER 2007

On Tuesday, Sept. 11, 2001, the Cleveland Orchestra prepared for a concert on Thursday, rehearsing Mahler's Fifth Symphony. However, as the magnitude of the terrorist attacks became clear, orchestra members began to put away their instruments for the day.

The orchestra director and the conductor met the next day to determine what to do about Thursday's concert. Thinking they could cancel, as most other public events that week; or thinking they could go ahead with a concert, but play patriotic music.

The orchestra director and conductor finally concluded that, perhaps more than at any other time in

history, the people of Cleveland needed the orchestra to do the one thing it does supremely well, which is to play the most powerful orchestral music ever created by the human race. And they decided to go ahead with Mahler's Fifth - a piece inspired by the extreme emotions of death, love and life. Mahler's Fifth begins with a somber funeral march announced by a solo trumpet, then joined by cataclysmic onslaughts from the full orchestra, ending an hour later with a cathartic celebration of birth and renewal. It's almost as if Mahler had written the piece after 9/11, not a hundred years earlier, to console our nation.

On the evening of Sept. 13, the

concert hall filled to capacity. As people arrived, they received a slip of paper with this message: "Tonight's concert will begin with a moment of silence."

At the appointed time, the conductor strode onto the stage in his tux and tails, turned to the audience and began the moment of silence. However, it wasn't just a moment. The silence was carried long past a minute, almost to two minutes, right to the point where five seconds more would have been five seconds too long. Then the conductor looked up, he turned around to the orchestra as the audience was seated, raised his baton; and then with the flick of a wrist, shattered the silence with the opening trumpet salvo of Mahler's Fifth.

After the stunning, captivating performance, the orchestra director said this: "There is absolutely nothing we could have done to be of better service at that moment than to stick with what we do best, standing firm behind our core values of great music delivered with uncompromising artistic excellence."

Writes Jim Collins in *Good to Great and the Social Sectors*, "It didn't matter that some patrons might want a rousing sing-along, or that others felt the orchestra should not play at all. It didn't matter that some might choose not to donate in the coming year, or that the media might criticize. What mattered is that the orchestra remained true to its core values, . . . doing for the people of Cleveland only what it could do bet-

ter than any other organization in the world." Likewise, when facing difficulties in school sports, we must look into the soul of school sports, and then draw upon and lift up its core values. In every challenge we face, we lift up core values; we depend on them and defend them.

- Every time we're in litigation over a rule, it's not really the rule that's at issue but the core value of having schools make and enforce the rules of educational athletics.
- When years ago a governor tried to force non-enrolled students to be eligible in school sports, our defense was a core value, the enrollment rule. Rule No. 1 in the Handbook: being a student in the school you represent in sports is a core value of school sports.
- And the seasons litigation? The seasons decisions of schools were based on a core value, to maximize participation. Our defense of those decisions was based on a core value, to maximize participation. And our implementation of the court-ordered change will pursue a core value, to maximize participation, regardless of the difficulties ahead.

Is it a difficult time? Then look to the core value for the defense of what we're doing and the inspiration to keep doing it.

A steady purpose is a good comfort in tough times and a good compass in all times. ■

COACHING CHANGE

MARCH 2008

Too many people talking about “leadership” talk only in terms of change. They measure leadership by all they change.

However, sometimes leadership means, and the tougher task of leadership is, resisting change. For not all change is beneficial, and not all change is progress. Sometimes the needed leadership is saying “no.”

Sometimes the best leadership is saying “no.”

Great Britain’s former Prime Minister, Tony Blair, has said: “The art of leadership is not saying ‘yes,’ it’s saying ‘no.’”

Mahatma Gandhi once said: “A ‘no’ uttered from deepest conviction is better and greater than a ‘yes’ merely uttered to please, or worse, to avoid trouble.”

Knowing something about when change is needed, and when it’s not, is essential; and knowing how to effect change when it’s needed is important. Sports teams and their coaches can provide administrators a good tip.

When teams are in a bad losing streak, good coaches will often tell their kids to recall the fundamentals and teach them back to the basics.

On the other hand, when teams are going along just fine, don’t the really good coaches add some new wrinkles, some new plays, to keep their team sharp? They add some ingredients; stir the pot, to help keep

their team’s competitive edge.

The good leader, and necessary leadership, encourages and assures a “team” during tough times; but during tranquil times, that leader keeps stirring the pot to avoid complacency.

In high school athletic administration,

we need leadership in both times, and we need high school athletic directors to be the leaders and have the skills for both times. For the high school athletic director must stay in the whole game; there is no middle relief, setup man or closer in high school athletic administration. ■

“The good leader, and necessary leadership, encourages and assures a “team” during tough times; but during tranquil times, that leader keeps stirring the pot to avoid complacency.”

“LITTLE” CHANGES

APRIL / MAY 2008

In high school, when the male voices stretched their necks to reach a high note, our choir director would shout, “It’s in the tummy, dummy, not in the throat.” And he would put us through exercises to emphasize and strengthen the muscles in our diaphragms.

More recently, a personal trainer spoke to the MHSAA staff about strength and conditioning and ways to avoid aches and pains, especially in the back. She explained that it’s not the arms or legs that matter much, but the body’s core muscles that do the most to keep us fit and free of pain.

In each case, it’s less obvious points of leverage that make the difference; and so it is with leadership. Change is rarely from the top down, seldom obvious when it starts, and rarely accomplished alone.

Buckminster Fuller (1895-1983), one of our nation’s earliest environmentalists and author of more than 30 books who coined the term “spaceship earth” and legitimized the geodesic dome as an architectural design, has used a wonderful metaphor that describes non-obvious points of leverage that can be utilized to help facilitate change.

He uses the illustration of a ship trying to turn at sea. To turn it left, you don’t push the bow in that direction; you turn the rudder to the right

to get the ship to turn to the left.

And on very large ships, attached to the rudder is a trim tab which you turn left to get the rudder to turn to the right more easily, which in turn makes the ship turn left more easily. And all this occurs beneath the surface.

This is all about leverage and the subtleties of affecting change. Leadership is not always obvious, nor are the tools and techniques of leverage which can change the course of things. But the tools are usually there.

Frances Hesselbein, CEO of the Girls Scouts of the USA, wrote: “. . . you always have the power, if you just know where to find it. There is the power of inclusion, and the power of language, and the power of shared interests, and the power of coalition. Power is all around you to draw upon, but rarely raw, rarely visible.”

The key to change is often collaboration. Change, real change, usually doesn’t occur without it, regardless of the enterprise.

The problem, according to the former mayor of Lansing and former State Representative David Hollister, is this: “Collaboration is an unnatural act by unconsenting adults.”

The real leader makes working together more natural and consensual, and people barely notice. ■

THE WORKMAN'S APPROACH

AUGUST / SEPTEMBER 2008

On a long weekend, I observed a workman build stairs and a walkway from my neighbor's rebuilt cottage deck to the boardwalk below that we share toward the beach. The workman's approach to this project intrigued me and may provide a lesson in how to successfully undertake many other types of projects.

The first thing the workman did was affix a long 2"-by-12" board at a reasonable angle (not too steep) from the deck down toward the boardwalk. Then he turned from there to the point where his new walkway would meet the existing boardwalk to the beach. There he found the level of the existing boardwalk and built the last section of the new walkway where it would connect to the boardwalk.

Interesting. His first step was to connect to the deck and create an appropriate angle down from the existing deck. His second step was to find the correct level to connect to the existing boardwalk. Two lessons here:

1. A project won't be successful if you fail to take into account the givens of where other factors are with which you must connect.

2. Once you get a fix on where you must start a project and understand where you must end, the details in between pretty much take care of themselves.

And now two applications.

First, the MHSAA is in the process of its second major redesign of its website, **MHSAA.com**, to prepare it to be "all things high school sports in Michigan" for athletes, coaches, administrators, officials, parents and the public.

We acknowledge some "givens," for example, that it's not appropriate for us to cater to the crude and crass, which will cost us some customers; and that it's not possible to cover

our 1,500 schools and all their sports like the Big Ten Conference can cover its 11 schools or a single-sport organization can cover its one sport.

However, we know where we are today and we know where we need to end, which is an engaging, navigable, user-centered site which, for example, (1) is first with MHSAA tournament brackets and scores; (2) is the exclusive source for Internet broadcasts of all MHSAA tournaments; (3) is providing administrators the most ready and reliable

"Once you get a fix on where you must start a project and understand where you must end, the details in between pretty much take care of themselves."

information, forms and tools; (4) has an e-commerce store that offers the public merchandise and event tickets.

Second, and not unrelated to the first, the MHSAA is expanding the video presentation of MHSAA tournaments so that nearly all levels of all tournaments are covered. Here again, we acknowledge some givens, for example, that unlike college and professional levels, we will not short-change female sports; and we will not over-expose larger schools compared to smaller schools, which in both cases may reduce the commer-

cial value of our television package.

But again, we know our priorities and that we need to arrive at a point where our expanded video programming uplifts the educational values of school sports as a tool for schools to motivate students toward learning and encourage communities toward healthy support of the unique American tradition called interscholastic athletics.

With the proper end in mind, I'm confident the details will be worked out just fine. ■

THE WORK CONTINUES

DECEMBER 2008 / JANUARY 2009

Reflecting on his early experience in the national legislature, future president John Quincy Adams wrote to his father, former president, about his frustrations. "The great art of legislation at this place," he said, "is to **do** a thing by assuming the appearance of **preventing** it. To **prevent** a thing by assuming that of **doing** it."

This appears to be an apt description of today's legislatures which on all levels seem unable to effectively address so many issues that so seriously affect our planet and its people.

And I wonder if the same forces are at work as we address the serious issues of school sports, none of which is more difficult or more definitive of school sports than the degree to which schools may support and coaches may be involved out of sea-

son with their students in an athletic setting.

Have our past and current rules merely **appeared** to solve problems?

Do our proposals for change **pretend** to prevent out-of-season abuses by non-school coaches by allowing our own school coaches to perform those abuses?

And if, finally, we reach consensus for change, is it merely one where, as Israeli statesman Abba Eban said, "everyone agrees to say collectively what no one believes individually?"

Finance guru Warren Buffet has said that sometimes the toughest thing for an investor to do is to do nothing. We've got a lot of work to do on this issue, but it may be that our toughest decision will be to do little or nothing at all. ■

A COHERENT AND ENDURING PARTNERSHIP

DECEMBER 2008 / JANUARY 2009

The following is an excerpt from the opening of the presentation of MHSAA Executive Director John E. "Jack" Roberts at the Mid-Winter Conference of the Michigan Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association March 22, 2009, the 50th anniversary of the MIAAA.

There comes a time in most of our lives when we begin to learn from the next generation, and even the next.

If we're attuned to it, this can begin for parents as we observe our children at play, for example, as we watch them fight and forgive so quickly and unconditionally, time and time again.

Professionally, if we create opportunities for it, this learning from the younger generation can occur in our organizations, for example, as we interact with students on student advisory councils, and at sportsmanship summits, and at team captain's clinics, and at other student leadership opportunities that we provide at the MHSAA, league or local level.

Before the MHSAA had these meetings, I would sit with our scholar-athletes in private, no-other-people-present, give-and-take sessions, trying to hear unfiltered what these students believed about and wanted for their high school athletic experiences.

In recent years, I've become increasingly impressed with how engaged our students are with each other and our world, and by how instant and interactive they expect communications to be. This is shaping, for example, much of our planning and decision-making for MHSAA.com.

Some of you veterans will remember my son John who was in the fourth grade when I began this job. He's now 33. He got a great education at East Lansing High School and the University of Michigan and then was a teacher and coach in the Fowlerville system for three years. Then he went to Harvard for a Masters in Education, and then he became an administrator of a charter school in Lowell, Mass., where he continues to work one day a week. His main task now is to complete his Doctorate in Education Policy at Harvard where he also teaches some arcane subjects, and he also has six or eight consulting engagements across the United States each year.

And as hard as it is for this Dartmouth man to admit, I've been learning from this Harvard guy more about how high school associations might better serve their member schools and the constituents of those member schools. John has helped to research and write a book entitled *Inside Urban Charter Schools*, which

identifies a few core principles to which five high-performing schools and their nonprofit organizations demonstrate uncommon commitment.

John and his colleagues identify an obvious, highly emphasized “purposeful alignment” of the organizations’ culture, structures, systems and staff. These organizations are “special,” write the authors; special in their “singular focus and purpose,” special in their “coherent employment of practices,” and special in their “enduring and infectious culture.” Oh, to have our organizations described in those terms!

According to the authors, “The essential thread that runs through these organizations is the notion of coherence.” The organizations “operate in a purposeful and deliberate manner – a coherent manner . . . Mission statements are clear and powerful, systems and structures are designed judiciously to serve these missions,” and staff are hired to “fit” the culture and for their willingness to accept and implement the systems.

The authors state categorically:

Without this degree of coherence, these organizations would not qualify as high-performing nonprofit organizations. “They would be merely ordinary, not extraordinary.”

One of the school administrators states: “. . . what’s most important is the consistency of expectations and the attitude with which we approach the work. Everybody’s on the same page, we’re all working toward this goal, and we’re going to work really hard to get there.”

What I want more than anything is for both of our organizations, the Michigan High School Athletic Association and the Michigan Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association, to be described in precisely these terms and to be such high-performing organizations and to achieve such extraordinary status. And in the years to come – details to follow in the months ahead – you are going to see more and more of what we’re going to do together – coherently – to assure extraordinary performance as we begin the next 50 years of working together as organizations.■

PART IX

**“HOW WE DEAL WITH A SETBACK MAY BE OUR DEFINING EVENT,
OUR DEFINING MOMENT, AN OPPORTUNITY WE SHOULD NOT SEEK
TO AVOID OR TRY TO TRADE.”**

REBOUNDING

DECEMBER 2002 / JANUARY 2003

Somewhere along the way in my unremarkable basketball career, a coach yelled, "Rebounding is the key." And somewhere along the way in my life, I learned that rebounding is not merely the key to basketball.

Somewhere along the way, a basketball coach told me the key to rebounding was effort. Not the luck of the bounce, but effort.

Working to get into proper position; working to get to the ball. Over and over again. Relentlessly.

Along the way of my decidedly unspectacular athletic career, other coaches converted that message to other sports:

- After a strikeout or error – rebound.
- After a dropped pass or missed block or tackle – rebound.
- After a penalty – rebound.
- After a loss – rebound.
- After a winless season – rebound.

Anybody who plays, coaches or officiates sport knows that disappointments will occur. They are unavoidable. The key to success as a player, coach or official is to keep going. To rebound.

Through sport, somewhere along the way I got the message that the key to life is not a lucky bounce, but rebounding:

- After a failed exam – rebound.
- After a graduate school rejection – rebound.
- After an injury or illness – rebound.

Let's keep in mind that whatever setbacks we experienced in 2002 can be overcome. By working to get ourselves back into proper position, and then going for it. Over and over again.

Relentlessly. ■

DO IT AGAIN

DECEMBER 2003 / JANUARY 2004

This is a story the author has told many times. On Thanksgiving Day 2003, he placed it in writing for the first time and sent it to his high school choir director on the occasion of his 80th birthday.

Many years ago, a short, balding high school choir director taped the first rehearsal of a very difficult musical composition. The first effort through the piece brought terrible sounds and bewildered looks from students who had lost their way. Three times the director halted the group, pointed to where he was but few of them were, and he restarted them.

At the conclusion of this first run-through, the students groaned, shook their heads, wrinkled their noses. They did not like this selection. "It's too hard," they complained.

Undaunted, the choir director began the arduous task of teaching the composition, breaking it into small pieces, teaching and practicing each of the voice parts separately and then together.

Gradually, over several weeks, he put the voice parts and then the composition's pieces together.

Repeatedly, he asked the choir to do it again. The students would groan, but each time the director would demand a new perfection of

rhythm, pitch, volume, diction, emotion.

Finally, when he was nearly satisfied, the director had the choir sing the piece all the way through for an audience, and he taped it again.

The next day at school, the director's entire lesson plan was this. First, he played the tape of the very first rehearsal of several weeks earlier. He tried not to grimace and the students giggled with embarrassment. He made no comment.

Then, he played the tape of the previous night's public performance. He tried not to gloat; and the students, when the last note of their performance ended, broke into applause and cheers.

When they silenced, the director said just this: "Hard work matters. Practice pays off. Attention to detail makes a difference. Teamwork works. Together, people can transform chaos into beauty and discord into harmony."

And then he walked out of the room into his office and closed the door. There was absolute silence in the choir room.

Then a voice from the back of the choir said, "Let's do it again." And they did, all the way through, on their own. And it was even better than the night before.

This is happening in your schools. Make it happen again. And again. ■

NOW MORE THAN EVER

APRIL 2007

This is MHSAA Executive Director John E. "Jack" Roberts' edited address to the media and membership on April 2, 2007.

This morning I had the opportunity to speak about leadership to nearly 400 Macomb Area Conference student-athletes who are or who hope to be captains of teams at their respective high schools. This afternoon, I want to speak to you, and through you to the MSHAA constituents across the state, about a new challenge of leadership that has been given to Michigan's schools.

In the sports seasons litigation, the US Supreme Court has denied the petition to review the Opinion and Order of the Sixth Circuit Court of Appeals. The effect of the Supreme Court's refusal to give further review to this case is that the MHSAA will be conducting several tournaments according to a different schedule in 2007-08 than has been in place by the decisions of local boards of education for many decades.

- The Girls Volleyball Tournament will move from March to November;
- The Girls Basketball Tournament will move from December to March;
- The Lower Peninsula Boys Tennis and Lower Peninsula Girls Golf

Tournaments will move from spring to fall;

- The Lower Peninsula Girls Tennis and Lower Peninsula Boys Golf Tournaments will move from fall to spring;
- A separate Upper Peninsula Soccer Tournament will be offered for girls in the fall and boys in the spring.

These changes are outlined in the Contingency Plan that has been on the MHSAA Website for more than two years. Spared from MHSAA tournament schedule changes are boys and girls swimming & diving, Lower Peninsula boys and girls soccer, Upper Peninsula boys and girls tennis and Upper Peninsula boys and girls golf.

Those involved in the directly affected sports have provided many examples of the negative effects of these changes, but none of this persuaded the District Court whose unusual findings of fact could not be seriously challenged under our system of jurisprudence.

- The court-ordered change means thousands – many thousands – of boys and girls who had been planning on playing a certain combination of sports in high school will find that combination impossible. My heart aches most for those ninth, tenth and eleventh

graders who are caught in the transition and harmed most by the change.

- It means that no longer will college volleyball coaches and players be available to coach and officiate schools' girls volleyball teams. What great role models they were for our young women.
- It means many coaches who have chosen to coach both boys and girls basketball will have to choose one or the other. My gratitude goes out to these truly dedicated people who have given so much for so long to help so many student-athletes.
- It means our schools will battle the colleges for volleyball officials in the fall.
- It means girls high school basketball will join boys high school basketball in the fight with men's and women's college basketball for game officials in the winter.
- It means facilities won't be used as wisely and media attention to high school basketball will be spread more thinly.

It means that school districts must immediately get to the tasks of voiding contracts for some coaches and recruiting new coaches from a shal-

low pool of candidates; voiding contracts for officials and seeking replacements from an already inadequate supply; rescheduling contests and practices, and then reschedule the use by other school and community groups around the new realities. It is unfortunate at any time, much less at a time of severe financial stress for our state and its schools, that

“It is unfortunate at any time, much less at a time of severe financial stress for our state and its schools, that Michigan's most efficient, fair and proactive model for utilizing community resources must be changed.”

Michigan's most efficient, fair and proactive model for utilizing community resources must be changed.

Many people have observed that the MHSAA has maintained the strong support of the schools throughout this case; and it's true that at every step, there has been

almost unanimous support. In fact, briefs have been filed multiple times in these proceedings by the state school boards and athletic directors associations.

However, it is more accurate to observe that the MHSAA has been supporting the schools than to say the schools have been supporting the MHSAA. Schools made the sports seasons decisions, not the MHSAA. Schools set the seasons for their local regular-season play; and when enough schools sponsored the sport, then the MHSAA sponsored a tournament in that sport; and placed the tournament logically at the conclu-

sion of the season that had already been used for regular season competition sponsored by local schools.

In this case, the MHSAA has been defending schools' decisions, not MHSAA mandates. Every portion of our constituency has favored the current seasons: athletes, their parents, coaches, administrators, school boards, officials and the sports media.

Many times I have met with athletes, especially female athletes, and I have said to them: "If you tell me you believe the seasons should be switched, then to the limits of my authority, I will advocate for that change." The students did not ask; and therefore, I did not advocate what they did not want.

If **ever** our constituents had said we should not defend the current seasons because they are not beneficial to boys and girls, then the MHSAA would not have defended those seasons. Because our constituents believe their seasons structure is much better than what the District Court has ordered, the MHSAA gave its best effort to defend those seasons; and we did so without any expenditure of time or money by schools, and without any distraction from MHSAA services to those schools.

Ultimately, our efforts to preserve schools' seasons have been unsuccessful. We have to apologize to schools, not for making the efforts, but for not making **successful** efforts. We are disappointed with the results; but we could not have lived

with ourselves if we were also disappointed with the effort.

It is extremely important now that our schools remember who we are in Michigan. We are the schools which decided to maximize high school sports participation; and we are the schools which, more than in any other state, have accomplished that mission. We are eighth in the nation in high school age population but fourth in the nation in girls high school athletic participation, including third in the nation in girls high school volleyball and tennis participation. In every sport at issue in this case, our national rank in girls sports participation is sixth or better, not eighth or worse.

In a nearly bankrupt state, with many nearly bankrupt school districts, and declining enrollment in rural towns and urban centers, in spite of this, Michigan schools have amazed everybody and continued to maximize participation.

So the challenge now – and it's a huge one – is to do in Michigan what no other state has done: to avoid decreasing participation in the wake of seasons changes. Some states saw double-digit percentage drops in girls and boys basketball participation and girls volleyball participation following the change of seasons. We must do better.

Michigan schools must continue to avoid easy choices, including plans convenient for adults. We must continue to seek out and implement creative plans that will maximize participation for students.

The goal that has guided this association of schools like no other in America has been maximizing participation. It must be our continuing passion.

The job just got harder. But blaming and whining will not help. Imagination and energy are what we need, now more than ever, to turn this disappointing day into a brighter tomorrow than we believe is possible right now for our kids and coaches.

Michigan schools, and especially their young women, may have lost their special seasons. That's bad. But it will be worse if schools lose sight of their special mission that gave rise to those seasons decisions: maximizing participation.

We will keep working, and we believe our colleagues in Michigan schools will do the same, to continue to realize that goal.

There are two lessons of high school sports that are relevant here: guts and grace. In school sports you must have the guts – the courage and persistence – to play the full contest. When the going gets tough, coaches ask their athletes to make a "gut check." A good high school athlete doesn't quit before the contest is completed. And we did not quit either.

A second lesson of high school sports is that you must accept the

final outcome with grace. Sometimes you win when you deserve to lose, and sometimes you lose when you deserve to win. But in either case, accepting the result gracefully is what we expect of our athletes; and it is what we expect of ourselves now.

I know you have questions now, and the answers require candor, and that will not always sound positive. But it is my desire that we approach our future with optimism, with the hope and even the expectation that Michigan will continue to represent the best of what school sports has to

offer in America: pure, wholesome, local, amateur, educational athletics, the family brand of sports in a world where sports is too often out of perspective and out of control. No state has been in hotter pursuit of the highest ideals of school

sports than this great and wonderful state in which I serve, and that will continue.

My personal passion for this is not diminished; and if you had been with me as I addressed the team captains today or had the opportunity I did for private conversation a week ago with this year's MHSAA scholar-athletes, I think you would share my optimistic view of our future. These kids, who give their very best, deserve our very best attitudes and efforts, now more than ever. ■

“Michigan schools must continue to avoid easy choices, including plans convenient for adults. We must continue to seek out and implement creative plans that will maximize participation for students.”

THIS IS A TEST

APRIL / MAY 2008

The following is the closing message of the report of John E. "Jack" Roberts to the membership of the Michigan Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association, March 16, 2008.

Sometimes after I hear a song over and over, and I begin to really listen to the words, I might write those words down. Especially if it's a song by Springsteen or John Fogerty or Jackson Browne.

But after I do this, and I read the words on paper or even recite the words aloud, I'm always disappointed. The words, without the music, lose something. The lyrics are neither as moving nor as powerful without the melody.

On occasion I have been complimented for my words about educational athletics, but I've come to appreciate that without the music, my words don't work. And I've come to appreciate that you folks provide the music.

Sometimes I may be the words of school sports in Michigan, but all the time you are the music of school sports in Michigan. You make the words meaningful, you make the words memorable, you make the words powerful, you make the words really happen. I don't, and I get that.

The plans we have for 2008 make what we tried to accomplish in 1998 and 1988 seem shallow, timid and

unimaginative in comparison. Never have we had more ideas, never have we had larger ideas, for solving problems and improving our support and service for educational athletics in Michigan.

But never, at least since World War II, has the MHSAA been under more financial limitations than we are today.

In that respect, our situation is a lot like many schools – like superintendents and principals who are trying to improve their districts and school educational programs, and like athletic directors who are trying to improve their athletic departments and programs – never more ideas, but never more financial limitations.

Any day now, we will hear from the District Court regarding the fee petition of the plaintiffs' attorneys in the sports seasons litigation. Under federal law, when a plaintiff brings a lawsuit under the 14th Amendment, plaintiffs' attorneys are entitled to petition the court for reimbursement of reasonable fees and costs if they prevail in the case. Not the defendants, only the plaintiffs' attorneys may do this, and only if plaintiffs prevail. The theory is that this allows the little guy whose Constitutional rights are being denied to pursue a lawsuit without going bankrupt. Plaintiffs' attorneys line up for these cases,

claiming it's pro bono work, but seeking big fees if they win. It's intended to help David sue Goliath.

In this case, however, the plaintiffs were Goliath, with 21 timekeepers seeking reimbursement, plus the assistance of the U.S. Justice Department until it realized it was riding the wrong horse. All of this against the MHSAA, with three attorneys at the trial phase, and three attorneys at the appellate phase.

Here, Goliath sued David, won, and is now seeking millions from David.

And who decides what's fair reimbursement in this matter? Well, the same court which found for the plaintiffs on the

facts and on the law. So we can't be optimistic, and we don't have insurance – that was used to pay our own attorneys in this case, and amounts to less than 40 percent of what the plaintiffs' attorneys are petitioning the court for.

So how do I spin this sow's ear (or other part of its anatomy) into a silk purse? Well here's a try.

Entrepreneur Ron Dembo, the creator of the environmental firm Zerofootprint, has said this: "It's nice to have resources, but not having money makes you work harder and be more innovative." Indeed.

And one of the themes I have gleaned from the book *The New*

Radicals is that the most mission-driven enterprises most often operate in the most resource-constrained environments. It's almost necessary – to test our missionary zeal – that we operate without all of the resources that we think we need.

Any attorney fee payment in the seasons litigation makes us mad, of course. On the one hand, it's a kick in the stomach that will just make us sick. But on the other hand, it's a test of our missionary zeal.

Can we – will we – pursue our pure mission anyway? Do we have the resolve, the commitment, and the constancy of principle and purpose to pursue our pure mission of educational athletics in Michigan anyway? I'm betting that we do. In fact, I'm betting some of the best part of my professional life that we will.

Last year I gave my wife the book *Blessed Unrest* by Paul Hawkin. It's subtitled "How the Largest Movement in the World Came into Being and Why No One Saw it Coming." It describes how individuals and small organizations have taken on world problems on the local level, and when taken together, have formed the largest movement in the world's history to preserve the environment and protect human rights.

At one point, Mr. Hawkin makes these statements, so applicable to our

"Do we have the resolve, the commitment, and the constancy of principle and purpose to pursue our pure mission of educational athletics in Michigan anyway? I'm betting that we do."

work: “There are two kinds of games – games that end, and games that don’t. In the first game, the rules are fixed and rigid. In the second game, the rules change whenever necessary to keep the game going.”

Religious scholar James Carse called these, respectively, finite and infinite games. He said we play finite games to compete and win. They always have losers and are called business, banking, war, NBA, Wall Street, and politics.

He said we play infinite games to play; they have no losers because the object of the game is to keep playing. Infinite games pay it forward and fill future coffers, he said.

This role and responsibility that I have, and this role and responsibility that you have, they are in an infinite

game. Paying forward. Filling future coffers. What in the world could be better than this? What could be more stimulating and satisfying than this?

I see the possibilities that this state high school association, which has been among the nation’s most committed to the core values of educational athletics, is being tested and being refined. Both its leaders and its members.

Will we continue to pursue our pure mission with passion and with principle anyway? Will we work harder, be more innovative? Will we keep the game going? I sincerely believe that you will, that I will, and that together we will. And I believe that it will make the most powerful music school sports in Michigan has ever heard. ■

NEW DIRECTIONS – SAME MISSION

OCTOBER / NOVEMBER 2008

This is an excerpt from the closing comments by MHSAA Executive Director John E “Jack” Roberts at the 2008 MHSAA Update Meetings across Michigan.

In this high school athletic association to a degree not surpassed by any other like association in the United States – because we have no membership dues and no tournament entry fees – the flow of money is from the association to its member schools and not vice versa. And even

in this association’s difficult hour, which now certainly is, this is not changing. In fact, in this difficult hour the MHSAA is discovering new ways to keep tournament ticket prices down and to keep support of school sports up.

I had a goal, shared with the MHSAA Representative Council last Nov. 30, to decrease the percentage of MHSAA revenue from tournament ticket sales from almost 90 percent of all revenues now to 50 percent of all revenues by the year 2020.

We've adjusted that target to reach this goal in half the time, and I have two illustrations from outer space to help explain how this is happening.

In January of 2004, two Mars rovers, Spirit and Opportunity, arrived on Mars, and they've been exploring the Martian surface ever since. By the summer of 2007, one of the two rovers – slow-moving, cosmic dune buggies – had a broken rear wheel. So NASA administrators instructed the vehicle's camera to change the direction it was looking from forward to backward to see if

the scientists could discover the problem. They sent the signal up to move the camera, eventually it was received, and slowly the camera changed its direction. And what scientists discovered was

the most exciting part of the mission until that time. They found that the rear wheel had been dragging through the Martian surface and, in doing so, dug a kind of trench that was exposing materials and formations that almost conclusively prove that Mars had or perhaps still has water, which means Mars either did or perhaps still does support life.

By looking around in a different direction, scientists made their greatest discovery of the entire mission.

Well, in the summer of 2007, I speculated that this just might happen to us in Michigan school sports: forced to look in some new direc-

tions, we would make some new discoveries. We have done so and we will continue to do more. We're making new discoveries, especially in how to use electronic media to cut expenses and to promote educational athletics on two levels: how to support the essential messages and how to support the essential expenditures of school sports in Michigan. The MHSAA Network is just the start of what's ahead; and membership dues, tournament entry fees and special assessments of schools are nowhere in our plans.

“By looking around in a different direction, scientists made their greatest discovery of the entire mission.”

In January of 2006, the U.S. launched a mission to Pluto that won't arrive there until July of 2015. On Feb. 28, 2007, as this spacecraft New Horizons passed Jupiter, it received a “gravity assist” to increase its speed by 8,947 mph! Imagine that!

When I described a business diversification plan to the MHSAA Representative Council in November of 2007, I targeted the year 2020 when we would reach the point of having 50 percent of our total revenue from sources other than MHSAA tournament ticket sales. But on March 31, 2008, when the U.S. District Court hit us with the excessive fee payment in the sports seasons case, it acted like Jupiter's gravity field. It has catapulted us toward our goal at a much greater rate of speed.

So I no longer look at that court decision last March as such a terrible thing. I can now look at it as a “gravity assist” to get us faster where we need to be.

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In the book *In Love and War*, in alternating chapters, Admiral Jim Stockdale and his wife tell of his eight-year imprisonment in the “Hanoi Hilton” from 1965 to 1973. He was the highest ranking U.S. military officer imprisoned during the Vietnam War.

He writes that he was tortured more than 20 times and that he beat himself with a stool and cut himself with a razor, deliberately disfiguring himself to avoid being put on videotape as an example of a well-treated prisoner.

Stockdale took command of the prisoners, instituting rules to help others deal with torture and establishing an elaborate communications system to reduce the sense of isolationism that the prisoners would feel. And through his letters to his wife, he established an elaborate code that helped him get information to U.S. authorities.

Stockdale writes: “I never lost faith in the end of the story. I never doubted not only that I would get out, but also that I would prevail in the end and turn the experience into the defining event in my life, which in retrospect, I would not trade.”

In *Good to Great*, Jim Collins writes: “Life is unfair – sometimes to

our advantage, sometimes to our disadvantage. We will all experience disappointments and crushing events along the way, setbacks for which there is no reason, no one to blame. It might be disease; it might be injury; it might be an accident; it might be losing a loved one; it might be getting shot down over Vietnam and thrown into a POW camp for eight years. What separates people, Stockdale taught me, is not the presence or absence of difficulty, but how they deal with it.”

Collins asked Stockdale: “Who didn’t make it out?” Stockdale reported it was the optimists, and Collins asked why.

Stockdale said: “The optimists said we would get out by Christmas. Christmas would come and go and we’d still be there. Then they said we’d be out by Easter, but Easter would come and go and we’d still be there. Then the optimists said we’d be out by Thanksgiving, but Thanksgiving would come and go and we would still be there. And the optimists would be brokenhearted.

“Never confuse faith that you will prevail in the end, which you can never afford to lose, with the discipline to confront the brutal facts of your current reality. ‘We’re not getting out by Christmas,’ Stockdale told his fellow prisoners. ‘Deal with it.’ ”

Get a bad decision from the federal courts? You bet we did: kids and schools got a bad decision in April of 2007 when the sports seasons were changed; and the MHSAA got a bad

decision in March of 2008 with the assessment of costs. But we've got to deal with it and be made better by it.

Get a bad decision in an athletic contest? It happens all the time. You have to rise above it, deal with it and be made better by it.

Get passed over for a tournament officiating assignment that you think you deserved and really wanted? You've got to deal with it and be made better by it.

Have difficulty at home, difficulty at work? You've got to deal with it and be made better by it.

How we deal with a setback may be our defining event, our defining moment, an opportunity we should not seek to avoid or try to trade.

This school year, 2008-09, right now, may be the MHSAA's defining moment; and I believe it can be the association's best moment as well.

Every day I drive by one coffee shop and then by a second coffee shop to get to a third coffee place that I like better. I have come to prefer its environment, its people, its product; I've become loyal to its brand.

Every week of every year, people all across Michigan drive by one form of entertainment and past another form of entertainment to get to high school athletics. They drive by one form of sports and past another form of sports to get to high school sports. They've come to prefer the environment, the people and the product of high school sports. They've become

loyal to our family brand of sports.

If we allow these hard times – the hard times for schools and the hard times for the MHSAA – to alter our environment or our product or our brand, if we allow these hard times to change our mission, that would be far more serious than the change of seasons and the cost of that litigation.

Only a loss of mission kills school sports.

In our defining moment, which this could be, even as we do a lot of things differently, we will recommit to the purity of school sports and to the core values of educational athletics. ■

“Every week of every year, people all across Michigan drive by one form of entertainment and past another form of entertainment to get to high school athletics. They drive by one form of sports and past another form of sports to get to high school sports.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

JOHN E. (JACK) ROBERTS

The author participated in academics, athletics and activities at P.J. Jacobs High School in Stevens Point, Wisconsin and at Dartmouth College. After high school teaching and coaching, his professional career included eight years on the staff of the National Federation of State High School Associations and five years on the national staff of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. He was named executive director of the MHSAA in 1986. He resides with his wife Peggy, a social worker, in East Lansing. They have two grown sons.

