



# Feeding & Fertilizing

## School Athletics

**D**ecades ago, schools developed policies and procedures for competitive athletics that educators knew were best for both schools and students.

Educators believed competitive athletics should not start at too young an age and that the length of seasons and the number and scope of competitions should be limited until high school.

Educators believed a period of guided practices to prepare students for competition in every sport was important to minimize risks and maximize performance. Maximum numbers of competitions per day and per week ensured students had time for their studies.

Educators believed the playing season should have its limits, and caps were enforced on the total number of weeks and

*Meeting market demand so public education can hold off further encroachment of non-school-based programs*

BY JOHN E. ROBERTS

competitions.

Educators believed a short break between sports was beneficial for the bodies and minds of students, and that an extended break in the summer provided young athletes with opportunities to participate in other sports and to use the summer for employment, family time and travel.

### Non-School Sponsors

On every count, school leaders were correct. Unfortunately, over time, sports programs run by non-school organizations have moved into every age group and month, week, day or half-day that schools have not programmed for students. Most of these stress competition without adequate preparation (lots of games, few practices). And parents far too often have been too willing to pay any amount and drive any distance to facilitate their child's interest or force their child's play in a particular sport.

What do educators do when what their heads tell them is the best for young people no longer resonates in the hearts of so many students or parents that those educators' schools are supposed to be serving?

When I've been faced with the most difficult choices, as head of a

statewide scholastic athletic association overseeing competition among 1,500 middle and high schools in Michigan, I've tried reframing the issue this way: "If we were creating the state athletic association for the first time today, would we do this or would we do that?"

Many "either/or" questions about interscholastic athletics exist today, but none is as difficult or defining as this issue: Should school sports provide more opportunities for 7th and 8th graders and new opportunities for even younger students?

I haven't always felt this way, but if we were creating the organization I serve for the first time today, rather than 90-plus years ago, we would allow more contests and longer contests for 7th and 8th graders, and there would be competition policies and programs for younger middle schoolers too. A modest program of postseason tournaments would exist for middle schools.

This is the bare minimum of what a growing number of parents want for their children and what most students want for themselves. Within reason, the better we fulfill the desires of these students in their junior high/middle school years, the stronger high

school sports will become and the better these programs will support the educational missions of schools.

If we serve middle school students more comprehensively today, school districts improve their chances for retaining comprehensive programs for high school students tomorrow. Moreover, the reduced profile and pressure of lower-level programs, where participation and learning usually trump specialization and winning, may help preserve these higher ideals of educational athletics at the high school level.

The overarching question for educators is how? How do we maintain policies that encourage multiple sport experiences for students at the junior high/middle school level, while at the same time adjusting those policies to be more attractive to parents and to school districts that want additional competition opportunities in the school setting for students prior to high school?

### Competition Limits

Well-intentioned educators and governing board members over the years have placed limits on the length of playing seasons during the almost 10-month school year for junior highs and middle school athletes in the state where I serve. They have done so believing in a philosophy that encourages students to try multiple sports.

"Kids haven't fully matured yet," they say. "Kids haven't been exposed to some sports yet. They don't know what they might like or be good at. So let's have policies and programs that encourage new opportunities and experiences at this level."

At the same time, another educationally grounded and equally astute group of school administrators and coaches believes the current limits are too severe in comparison to non-school youth sports programs. For

**Jack Roberts (right) believes educators ought to find ways to encourage students to try multiple sports rather than specialize in one from an early age.**



PHOTO COURTESY OF MICHIGAN HIGH SCHOOL ATHLETIC ASSOCIATION

example, community/club basketball or soccer programs may schedule 15 or more games per season in contrast to the limit of 12 games at the junior high/middle school level imposed by the Michigan High School Athletic Association.

About 800 middle schools in Michigan have chosen not to join the state high school association, and many of them made this decision because of restrictions on competition. They contend these limitations create a disincentive for students to play school sports, choosing non-school alternatives instead. The Archdiocese of Detroit provides much more competition for the younger students of its schools, resulting in higher participation in school-based athletics at the younger grade levels and greater success by its high school teams.

### Expanded Tournaments

The trump card for those of us leading interscholastic athletics is the postseason tournament (a notion that admittedly makes some of my middle school colleagues shudder). Without a postseason event, and the requirement to abide by competition limits or forfeit tournament participation, anything goes. With tournaments comes the ability to force compliance with reasonable limitations on the lengths of seasons and the number of contests scheduled per day, week and season.

Tournaments should not be seen as an example of excess, but as a tool to force moderation where excess exists. Junior high/middle school tournaments ought to be capped at the regional level, saving statewide tournaments for high school students.

However, the hugely successful program conducted by the Illinois Elementary School Association, a governing body for sports, cheerleading and other competitive activities, demonstrates that even statewide tournaments are possible and popular for younger grades. Illinois began tournaments involving junior high schools in basketball in 1930, and today the association stages tournaments for middle schoolers in 20 dif-



ferent sports. More than 800 public and nonpublic schools are members.

To ensure schools do not sacrifice broad-based participation during the regular season to prepare teams for success in postseason, the Illinois association does not limit entries in its tournaments. Skill development for many students is still the goal of the regular season. As the number of participating schools has grown, the number of tournament venues has increased and the distance and cost of travel has declined — all in keeping with the organization's constant reminder that “this is junior high, not the Olympics!”

### Sixth-Grade Competition

Historically, the popular opinion among educators in my state and other places has held that 7th and 8th grades is early enough for schools to provide competitive athletics, early enough to put youth into the competitive sports arena and early enough to pit one school against another in sports.

Today, however, many educators and parents point out that such

protective philosophies and policies were adopted about the same time that occasional “play days” were considered to be the maximum exertion females should experience in school sports. Some administrators and coaches argue that both our restrictions on contest limits at the junior high/middle school level and our refusal to serve 6th graders are as out of date and inappropriate as play days for females.

In nearly four of five school districts in Michigan now, 6th graders go to school in the same building with 7th and 8th graders. But the state association rules don't allow 6th graders to participate with and against the older students in their schools. In fact, the state association constitution doesn't even acknowledge the existence of 6th graders. In many places, 6th graders have aged out of non-school, community sports programs, yet they are not allowed to play on their middle school teams.

During 2013-14, 40 school districts asked for waivers of this rule, and our state association's executive



committee approved 39 of 40 waivers, allowing 6th graders to compete on 7th- and 8th-grade teams. During 2012-13, 46 of 50 requests for waivers were approved, in all cases for small junior high/middle schools. Some of these schools desperately need 6th graders to fill out junior high/middle school teams.

In October, all 1,500 member schools in my association will have an opportunity to vote on a proposal to amend the organization's constitution to permit schools' membership to begin with the 6th grade.

Youngsters are starting sports much younger today than 100 years ago. If our state athletic association were created today, I'm certain it would not exclude 6th graders who are walking the same hallways with 7th and 8th graders and who have been playing competitive sports almost since the first day they starting walking at all.

### Market Share

The most important thing we can do to enhance high school sports is to grow sports programs in junior highs and middle schools. The earlier we disconnect young people from non-school sports and engage them in school-sponsored sports, the better our chances are of keeping high

school athletic programs healthy and the better our prospects are of keeping both participation rates and conduct standards high.

School sports compete for the hearts and minds of young people. Our competition includes movies, jobs, cars, video games, boyfriends and girlfriends and especially club sports. School sports needs to market themselves effectively, and part of that is to be available much sooner in the lives of youth. More contests at the junior high/middle school level and more opportunities for 6th graders should be principal components of our marketing strategies for educational athletics.

For at least 50 years, individuals outside of our member schools have predicted that the system of school-sponsored sports, which is almost unique to the United States, would give way to the system in most countries where youth sports are run by non-school groups and private athletic clubs. Some of these forecasters challenge school-sponsored sports on a program basis, claiming competitive athletics create a distraction to the core educational mission of schools. Others challenge school-sponsored sports on a financial basis, arguing that interscholastic athletics competes for limited resources within a com-

munity's school district.

Among our member schools are a small but growing percentage of administrators who have come to their leadership roles without involvement in school sports and who believe interscholastic sports ought to be transferred from the jurisdiction of schools to local communities. Some predict this outcome as public resources for schools continue to shrink.

The latter is more likely to happen or to happen sooner if we do not revisit our approach to junior high/middle school sports. If we continue to restrict 7th and 8th graders to so few contests of such limited length compared to what those students have in non-school sports and if we continue to offer nothing for younger students, we essentially force these students to non-school sports.

### A Distinctive Place

It is an often cited statistic that between 80 and 90 percent of all young people who ever begin playing competitive athletics stop playing before they reach the age of 13, meaning the vast majority of students are not involved in school athletics from middle school onward. It is no mystery why questions arise about the future of school-based sports. We're doing nothing to make programs available to them. We have no marketing strategies in place.

Whatever we do, we cannot become so much like the over-scheduled non-school programs we criticize that there is no easily discernable difference between school-based sports and non-school sports. So even as we might change our practices and our marketing strategies, we must remember it is our differences from sports on all other levels and by other sponsors that interscholastic athletics has earned its distinctive place both in public education generally and in the world of sports specifically. ■

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