

A proposal to save freshman sports

Things are tough on the education front. Michigan's dysfunctional state legislature has put school systems statewide in a situation where trying to formulate a budget is akin to herding bluegills with a horse and lariat.

Because of this, districts are trying to find any way possible to save a few bucks. One thing they are doing is cutting athletic programs for freshmen. The Cadillac Area Public Schools recently announced it would be doing this, but it is not the Lone Ranger in this. Districts across the state are in the same situation.

I'd like to propose a way to save freshman athletics — statewide. First, some assumptions have to be made.

One, you have to agree that having a freshman sports program is better than not having one. It's better for the development of individual athletes, better for the overall emotional well-being of the school, and better for a community to have students participating in sports than not participating.

Second, you have to agree that this is a situation that must be solved on a statewide basis rather than piecemeal on a local basis. No single school district can do this on its own.

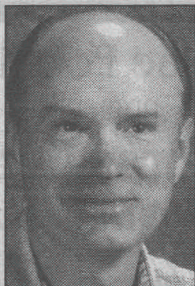
Finally, you have to agree

that if there's a way to achieve the goal of freshman athletics for all schools while not breaking the budgets of districts, then sacrifices throughout the current structure of high school sports will have to contain sacrifices for everyone involved.

If you agree to those assumptions, then here is my (somewhat radical) proposal to save freshman sports in Michigan.

Simply put, reduce the number of contests in each sport — play fewer games at every level. For example: play seven varsity and junior varsity football games instead of nine and play six freshman football games instead of nine. Reduce the number of basketball games from 20 to 15 for varsity and jayvees and from 20 to 10 for freshmen. Scale back all other sports to a commensurate number of contests.

This may seem radical at first glance, but remember the goal is to save athletic programs for freshman students statewide. With the money saved from reducing schedules at every level,



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enough would be saved so that freshman sports would remain in the program.

There are other benefits. Schools could begin fall seasons two weeks later, thus avoiding pre-Labor Day games. Spring sports could end sooner, thus avoiding holding playoffs after some schools have closed for the year. And what multi-sport athlete would not welcome a breather between sports seasons (which would now be shorter)?

I know, I know ... surgery like this is almost unthinkable in a perfect world. However, let me remind you that the world is far from perfect these days. If the real goal of high school athletics is to foster maximum participation and enhance the overall educational experience for all students, then perhaps an imperfect solution is in order rather than the complete loss of a valuable program.

On another note ... As long as we're talking sports, I found the comment by Christine Brennan in USA Today to be very interesting. "How many times in the past week

or so have you heard people refer to "the tournament," as if there's only one? Or their "bracket," again, as if the men are the only people playing basketball at the moment?

Women's basketball is ignored by almost everyone at this time of year due to the huge shadow cast by the men's tournament. It even seems to be getting worse year by year, not better..." Brennan's observation is particularly noteworthy because she writes a "Girls and Women in Sports" blog for the newspaper; she's an expert in this arena.

My position remains that this is all about money. Everything the NCAA does is about money. Therefore, playing the women's tournament the same time as the men's makes no economic sense. I'm on record dating back to 2005 (www.neffzone.com/cadillacnews/2005april30.htm) in stating that inevitably NCAA women's basketball will be moved to the fall and their tournament will be played between Thanksgiving and Christmas. Brennan's comments only reinforce my opinion.

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