

Should public schools have to play private schools?

“Instant Replay”

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That once-in-a-lifetime finally comes along.

Nurtured and grown through junior high and biddy play. The kids have been together for years and have played together on playgrounds during recess.

The team has been 10 years in the making and comes along that one year – a coach’s dream season. All the years of practicing, winning and losing finally fall into place.

This is the year. Or is it?

A dream team that has been several years in developing can be, and often is, wiped out and defeated by a team that may take one year to assemble—a private school.

Dick Kortokrax, boys basketball coach at Kalida High School, saw that one-in-a-lifetime dream of reaching the finals of the Ohio High School State Tournament come true in 1983, but was defeated by eventual state champion Delphos St. John. It happened again in 1988 when the Wildcats lost to Columbus Wehrle in the finals 71-54. Both teams were private schools.

Since 1970, 23 out of 61 (nearly 40 percent) state basketball champions have been private institutions and 27 (44 percent) have been runners-up.

Is that a fair statistic to the school that are not able to recruit talent?

I have no gripe with lifers,” said Kortokrax, referring to those students who attend private institutions. “I’m 100 percent in favor of that. I just don’t think it’s fair to expect everyone to play by the same rules. If one team can recruit, then let the others.

“We in public schools have boundaries that we are limited to. Private institutions have no such boundaries. They can go anywhere they want and get the talent they want. I just think that every team in the tournament should be on the same level.”

Should there be a separate tournament for public and private institutions?

Even if you say yes, it’s a waste of time.

The Ohio High School Athletic Association has no plans, despite several petitions and complaints, to make a special tournament just for private schools. All high schools fall under the same category and receive fair treatment.

“We’re all member schools,” said Hank Zaborniak, coordinator of officials and publication for the Ohio High School Athletic Association. “A good comparison to this situation would be a vocational school getting a football team. They could have a whale of a football team. But there is nothing in the making for separate tournaments.”

Kortokrax said that he has been fighting the cause for 33 years.

“I think that those students who attend private schools are exceptional people,” he said. “For one, they are dedicated athletes. They know what they want and go after it. I like that. But the unlimited boundaries are unbelievable.

“The hardest thing I had to do one year was watch a great athlete, who lived in my community, drive right through to attend a private school. I should have had that talent. It’s not fair to take that away from the school.”

Though the dominance of private schools in basketball is high, it is even higher in some other areas.

Soccer is a private school’s dream.

“That’s a sad situation,” added Kortokrax. “Where and when do kids in public schools ever feel that they will win a state championship in soccer? Those once-in-a-lifetime teams today don’t stand a chance.”

Kortokrax is just one of many coaches that have watched dream teams succumb to high school all-star squads.

Kalida won the state in 1981, defeating Gahanna Columbus Academy 58-44. They were state runners-up in 1987-88 to Columbus Wehrle and regional semifinalists in 1988-89 to Lima Central Catholic. In 1981-82, Kalida lost to Delphos St. John, and then again lost to St. John the following year in the district.

“No matter how good your team is, it’s always tough to knock off a Catholic team,” said Kortokrax. “Playing teams that can recruit is not fair. If you can call playing under unfair circumstances fair, then that is un-American.”

I don’t particularly agree with the present situation. I agree with Kortokrax concerning the fairness. I also know that two separate tournaments would be just plain difficult to accomplish.

But something has to be done.

If a private school doesn’t reach the state final four, then something is wrong with that coach. He has a wide variety of talent to choose from and mold.

Is there any sense of winning when a so-called all-star defeats a team made from scratch?

Public schools play and win with what they are dealt. They don’t have the luxury of getting the top players. If they happen to get a great player, then they are fortunate. That doesn’t happen very often.

Yet I can see why an athlete would attend a private school.

If the school has a reputation for winning and that athlete wants to further his or her athletic career in college, then I can empathize with them. Sometimes they have a better chance of going somewhere if they are from a larger and more reputable school.

But that doesn’t make it right.

I agree with Kortokrax in the sense that he has no problem with lifers. If the student has attended that school for a long time, then it's permissible. But if the athlete enrolls solely to play ball for one or two years, then it's wrong. That's not what high school sports is all about.

There are exceptions – however as there are to every side. But recruiting players just to win a title is dead wrong. Not every private school does that and I don't want to stereotype. But to those who do recruit – you're ruining the cause of high school sports.