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A Commentary by MHSAA Executive Director John E. “Jack” Roberts: How The MHSAA Operates

The Michigan High School Athletic Association is named in a suit that alleges the MHSAA is guilty of intentional discrimination against females. The plaintiffs object to what sports are offered by schools, when in the year, week and day schools schedule them, where they play them, and under what rules.

The main reason the suit was filed is that some of the sports seasons for girls (and also for boys) do not coincide with the time of year when colleges compete in those sports; and that the sore point here is really just that volleyball is played in the winter rather than the fall, when Michigan high schools conduct girls basketball.

A 1998 survey of MHSAA member schools shows that more than 82 percent of respondents favor the current schedule and do not want to change the seasons to coincide with colleges. The scheduling of volleyball and basketball has been surveyed with similar results five other times in the past.

The large majority of schools (by vote of superintendent, principal and athletic director), the Basketball Coaches Association of Michigan, and several associations of volleyball officials are adamantly opposed to switching those seasons and are loaded with arguments to support their position. But that's not the purpose of this editorial.

At the same time that the most recent seasons survey was being conducted and the lawsuit was being filed, the MHSAA was processing a proposal to expand the Football Playoffs. The MHSAA's handling of the football expansion proposal and sports seasons issue provide instruction into how the MHSAA operates.

In the case of the Football Playoffs, 73 percent of football schools said in March of 1998 that they wanted expansion. In May 1998, the Representative Council voted, in concept, to expand the post-season Playoffs to include more teams and directed the MHSAA staff to develop a plan. The staff gathered input, developed a plan, and communicated its details across the state and throughout its constituency. In November 1998, football schools were surveyed about the plan, and 92 percent favored it. In December 1998, the Representative Council adopted the plan. Then each school district decided for itself if its high school(s) would participate.

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If 92 percent or even 73 percent of member schools avored realignment of their sports seasons rather than opposed it, then the same process would be followed for changing MHSAA post-season tournaments as was used in expanding the MHSAA's Football Playoffs.

That is, the Representative Council would vote, in concept, to change its post-season tournaments to coincide with the preferred timing. Staff would be assigned the task to develop a plan of implementation. Schools would be informed about the plan and vote on it. And then the Representative Council would vote the plan in or out. Then schools would decide whether or not to participate in these tournaments.

Plaintiffs in the current litigation have said in the media, "It may be time for a new high school association in Michigan." There is nothing stopping that from happening, and we will be happy to compete with it for member schools on the basis of our services and our responsiveness to our constituency. Nothing requires any school to join the MHSAA.

If the MHSAA would have handled either Football Playoff expansion or post-season tournament scheduling differently than it has, we would agree that it is time for a new high school association in this state to compete with the one that is not listening or serving.

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