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December 11, 2002

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A Commentary From MHSAA Executive Director John E. “Jack” Roberts: TV Event Misses The Point Of School Sports

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There are promoters who consider this view out of date, who believe this is “an avalanche that’s moving down the mountain,” a revealing choice of metaphor given that avalanches destroy everything in their path.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

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