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## **An MHSAA Commentary By Communications Director John Johnson: Back To The W's**

The recent talk of school districts across Michigan implementing some type of fee for participation in sports ought to have us looking again at our purpose in educational athletics, and then packaging our programs accordingly. The financial challenges of the months ahead may bring all of us back to what we've known all along – that school sports are different than all other levels of organized athletics.

Getting back to that starting point, I'd like to utilize one of the rules taught to me in one of my very first journalism classes nearly 30 years ago to analyze our current situation in school sports and offer some thoughts about future approaches. That rule is made up of five Ws – Who, What, When, Where and Why.

### **Who**

Who are we? The answer is simple. We're educational athletics. We are a tool for schools to reach and motivate young people. We're not the "edutainment" that much of Division I college athletics have become and not the pure entertainment that professional sports teams have been from their inception. We're even different from all of the levels of youth and amateur sports that surround us.

### **What**

What are we? The builder of tomorrow's leaders is what we are. Because 99 percent of our participants aren't going to play organized athletics once their high school playing days are over, it is vital that we educate our children in the academic classroom and the athletic annex in the important things. That doesn't mean winning. That means having an educational base that will give them the skill sets to survive in an ever-changing world, and the character traits to survive against the scandal around us – even in the edutainment and non-school sports programs.

What we should be doing in school sports is everything to prepare our youngsters for the next level of life. What we should be doing is emphasizing learning through academics and athletics.

What we should not be doing is emulating those around us. People talk of the "Arms Race" in college sports. Folks, look around, it's already happening to us in high school sports.

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What is beginning to creep into our mindset is that we have to travel far and wide to find the best competition; that we have to have preseason practices in out of state and out of the way places; that we have to have a bazillion assistant coaches and technological tools for play calling and analysis; that our uniforms and playing fields emulate those we see in edutainment sports.

### **When**

When kids play organized sports now is non-stop. Movement from the school team into the non-school program is now almost immediate at season's end, flowing right up to the doorstep of the next year's school season. We don't give kids time to be kids.

I still don't buy the notion that all of this is of the kid's choosing either. There's a school coach, non-school coach, entourage member or parent behind it more often than not.

### **Where**

Where we play may be impacted the most. Some schools are already restricting their in-season competition travel, and for that they should be applauded. There are no reasons, except in our most remote areas, to look very far for competition.

The creation of some of the so-called mega conferences have been designed to assist schools with their scheduling and keeping school sports to what they should be - local. People offer all kinds of excuses for not wanting to play their neighbors. In these times, those excuses need to be put aside. If there's bad blood out there - fix it. If there's a mindset out there that the suburban school can't play the urban or rural school - eliminate it. One of the greatest lessons we can teach our children is that we can all get along, even in competition. We must move our attitudes away from the elitism that has already crept in to our programs. Sportsmanship and respect is what we should be teaching.

### **Why**

Why is it important for us to be different? Why do we need to do all of this? Why can't we follow the path of other sports organizations?

If we don't do it, then schools have no reason to offer sports programs. When participation fees threaten to turn the school sports teams into the elite travel programs we see which are primarily based on a family's financial means, we might as well get out of the educational sports business. When we eliminate opportunities for kids to enjoy the privilege of a lifetime – school sports – we don't deserve to exist. When we emphasize being the best, national competition and all the unsavory stuff over playing your best, we deserve to die.

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#### How

How sometimes makes it way into the lineup with the Ws. How do we accomplish all of this? How can we continue to offer these programs? How can we keep up with not just our neighboring school, but the school on the other side of the state whom we know we just can't beat if we don't travel like, dress like, have the technological toys like...how, how, how?

Like the basics of journalism, we get back to the basics:

**Who** - We're school sports, and we're there for every kid.

**What** - We're educational, teaching lifetime values.

**When** - An after-school activity, not a year-round endeavor.

**Where** - We're local, and we should stay local.

**Why** - Because if we aren't all that, we have no reason to exist.

We can pare back our schedules, our travel and do lots of other defensible and sensible things to tackle our budget problems. As we do this, it should be with keeping as many kids as possible in as many ways as possible at as many levels as possible involved in our programs.

The line out of the movie Apollo 13 when the administrators in flight control are discussing the reentry possibilities of the space capsule ends with the flight director countering the negative scenarios with, "I think this will be our finest hour."

This can be our finest hour. This can be the time we reaffirm our programs as educational, as local, and as ones offering abundant opportunities for kids.

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