

High school basketball needs a shot clock

Written by Mark Dukes

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Organize the bake sales. Schedule the car washes. Mobilize the donors.

Iowa high school basketball needs some dollars for shot clocks. Either that, or the advice of some expert shooting coaches.

With the girls and boys state tournaments completed the past two weeks, there has been some excellent basketball played in Des Moines. Saturday's Class 3A and 4A boys state title games matched some excellent teams and showcased some of the best individuals Iowa has to offer.

But too many times, high school games are painful to watch. Some of it may be state tournament nerves, or the move to a 94-foot floor or matching up against some truly good defenses. But the game needs help, or at least some tweaking.

In last week's 16 first-round boys state tournament games, 14 of the 32 teams failed to exceed 50 points. Marion and Cedar Rapids Jefferson shot 20 and 24.4 percent from the field in opening-round losses to eventual state finalists Waverly-Shell Rock and Des Moines Hoover.

In the eight Class 4A substate finals, six of the teams scored fewer than 50.

The girls state tournament was even more anemic. Of the 28 games played, 36 of the 56 teams couldn't score more than 50 points. The state championship game final scores: 52-40, 50-39, 46-35 and 40-23.

Before I become too critical of the prep game or its shooters, I'm reminded of the horrific Big Ten tournament game this week when Penn State beat Wisconsin by the unbelievable score of 36-33. Those types of games develop at even the highest level.

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Are shot clocks the answer for Iowa high schools? Well, they would certainly help speed up the game. Cost is always a concern, of course.

Shot clock systems range from \$1,500 to over \$3,000 and that's a tidy expense for any school district. But split the cost between the boys and girls programs, hold some fundraisers, and it could happen.

Another deterrent is the National Federation of State High School Associations, which consistently has disapproved of shot clocks. Any state that uses a shot clock is not allowed to have a national Federation representative.

Even so, eight states have shot clocks for high school basketball – California, Maryland, Massachusetts, New York, North Dakota, South Dakota, Rhode Island and Washington. Each of them uses a 35-second clock for boys, 30-second for girls.

Maybe the game is just too short (four 8-minute quarters) to expect better scoring. Simple math tells us a team must score a basket a minute to exceed 60 points in a game. That doesn't happen all too often when the opponent holds the ball for any length of time or teams trade empty possessions.

Look, I'm as appreciative as anyone of good defense. It ought to be applauded because tough defense requires discipline, hustle and perseverance. But a 43-39 game just doesn't do a lot for me unless I have someone I know involved in the contest.

Everyone likes offense, and too often there's not enough of it in high school basketball.