

Class 4A divisions not how they were sold

Written by Scott Unash

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Last week the Iowa High School Athletic Association released football district assignments for the next two years for classes 3A through Eight-Player. The districts are shifted every two years based on school enrollments. This year was a landmark year for the announcement of the district assignments for various reasons, the biggest being that Class 4A was going to be getting into the act.

It was highly publicized over the summer that the IHSAA was seriously considering placing all the 4A schools in the state into districts. That would have spelled the end of conference football.

The IHSAA had several viable reasons to look at 4A district football, the end of the somewhat complicated point system, and above all, the simplification of scheduling in western Iowa were chief among them.

In the end the administrators and athletic directors of the schools from the Mississippi Valley Conference and the Mississippi Athletic Conference convinced the IHSAA to allow them to keep their conference affiliations for at least the next two years. With this ruling, the eastern 24 schools in Class 4A would continue to schedule their games through their respective conferences and continue the current point system to determine their 16 playoff teams.

However, in the western half of the state it is a brave new world starting this fall. The 23 schools (24 in 2013 with the opening of Ankeny Centennial) have been placed in four "divisions," the name being used instead of "districts" for the large class. Conference alignments for the CIML and the Missouri River Conference are gone for football, and the IHSAA created the new divisions based on records over the last several seasons.

Let's take a closer look at how this process went in respect to what the IHSAA was looking to accomplish. As far as the scheduling nightmares that the schools in the Missouri River Conference have faced for years is concerned, that problem has been solved. The teams from Sioux City and Council Bluffs will have five games, for the most part, scheduled for them in district football, and they can then fill out the rest of their schedules with former conference foes and more than likely Sioux City Heelan which dropped to the 3A class several years ago. With

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that problem seemingly taken care of though, two others are still present.

District football was supposed to help solve the problem of long road trips for the far western schools, but that is certainly not the case. Let's take a look at Sioux City East as an example. Last season East traveled twice to meet non-conference foes, once to Waukee and also to Des Moines to play Lincoln. The two trips were approximately three hours each and covered around 400 miles round trip. The other road games played by the Black Raiders were to play Missouri River Conference foes. With the new district/division plan, Sioux City East will now be forced to take at least one more lengthy road trip every two years. In addition, with the new 4A district/division plan, teams will not be assured of playing former conference foes. If a former league member does not have an opening on their schedule, a team like East will be forced to find yet another team to play. And Sioux City East is not the only school in this situation, many others such as Mason City and Ottumwa will also be facing more long Friday nights in a bus under the new plan.

Another potential problem could be the dominance of the former teams from the CIML over the former Missouri River Conference teams. It's no mystery that the CIML teams in head to head matchups have dominated the teams in the far west. With the new division format that domination could be even greater. In fact, I would not be surprised that in most years we will not even see a team from along the banks of the Missouri in the postseason. Of course the IHSAA can't control poor play from those far western Iowa teams, but it has not helped the balance by going away from the 4A conference plan.

Finally, another drawback to 4A division football is the fact that only five games will determine your playoff standing for the year. And for next year, one division will have only four games that will count toward its playoff future. Meanwhile, all nine games played by the schools in the eastern half will have a bearing on which teams qualify for the playoffs. In my mind that's not a fair equation.

In the other classes another big change will be taking place as the number of teams in each district has dropped by one and so each team will have a "bye" week during their district season. These games will not count toward the district standings and the playoff process, but it will make things interesting on how some coaches will approach them. Do you rest some dinged up players knowing you have a big district game the next week? Or do you keep playing kids and risk an injury in a game that basically doesn't mean anything. Those are just some of the questions those teams will be looking at next fall.

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Next fall will be here before you know it, and many of these questions will be debated and eventually settled on Friday nights. I think after it is all said and done, we should be very thankful here in the eastern part of the state that the IHSAA listened to the pleas of the administrators, coaches and fans and allowed us to keep the conference football alignments intact. I believe it is the best way to select the field for the playoffs.

(Scott Unash is the sports and program director at KGYM-AM 1600 (FM 106.3). He is a six-time winner of the Iowa Broadcast News Association play-by-play Announcer of the Year Award. Scott and Mark Dukes co-host the Gym Class weekdays from 3-4 p.m. on KGYM-AM 1600 and FM-106.3)