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HIGH-SCHOOL

OHSAA could expand tournament divisions in several high school sports, including basketball

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The Ohio High School Athletic Association could be headed for expanding the number of divisions in its postseason boys and girls basketball tournaments.

The OHSAA Board of Directors might expand tournament divisions in several team sports other than football — which expanded a decade ago — OHSAA Executive Director Doug Ute announced Wednesday afternoon.

One argument in favor of expansion traces to this month's OHSAA football state finals in Canton.

The Division I game between St. Edward and Springfield drew a crowd of 5,159. The Division VII game between Marion Local and Dalton drew 6,331.

Division I is for schools in the largest enrollment division. Division VII is for schools in the smallest enrollment division.

Communities tied to Marion Local and Dalton were fired up about being in the state finals, as opposed to complaining of "watered down" playoffs.

There was no Division VII prior to an expansion of the football playoffs in 2013. The crowd at the 2023 game adds fuel to the more-the-merrier argument for other sports.

In basketball, which draws the second-most spectators among OHSAA sports behind football, there are four divisions.

Ute touched on his appetite for expansion during a speech at the Pro Football Hall of Fame Luncheon Club on Nov. 27, the Monday before state championship football weekend.

"It's all about opportunity for kids, and what they'll do with that opportunity," Ute said.

Ute rejects the criticism that seven divisions in football is too many. He alluded to playing football for Clear Fork High School in Richland County in the 1970s.

"My junior year, we lost one game by 3 points and didn't even get in," he said. "That's back when four teams in the entire state made the postseason in each division."

The football playoffs expanded from three divisions to five in 1981, from five divisions to six in 1994, and from six divisions to seven in 2013.

Ute endorses the seven football divisions and a more recent expansion multiplying the overall number of playoff qualifiers within each division.

This year, 448 teams made the football playoffs. Teams were seeded 1 through 16 in each of the numerous regions.

"We have a 12 seed (Mansfield) coming up here for the state finals a third year in a row," Ute said before the state finals. "Springfield went 5-5. Four years ago they don't even get to play in the tournament.

"This year we had three 15 seeds win the first week. We had a 1-8 team win the first week and they almost won week 2."

The finals battle that drew the most notice was in Division II, in which Massillon beat Hoban 7-2 as a Thursday night crowd of 14,846 watched in Tom Benson Hall of Fame Stadium.

This underscores another theme supporting expansion: Since championship games are well attended no matter how many divisions, adding divisions in basketball points to more revenue.

Ute pointed out to the Luncheon Club that most of the OHSAA's revenue comes from postseason tournaments.

The OHSAA release, though, states the current proposal does not add any additional tournament games and would be expected to be a revenue neutral expansion.

According to the OHSAA, expansions in other sports "could mirror the current football model." The OHSAA football postseason puts the top 10% of the state's largest schools based on enrollment in Division I. The rest of the state's OHSAA football programs are divided as evenly as possible.

One aspect sets football apart, Ute noted. That is, football is the only OHSAA sport in which every school is not eligible for postseason competition, despite expansions.

"Almost since Day 1 when I became executive director (2020), many administrators and coaches have expressed interest in expanding tournament divisions in several of our sports," Ute said in a statement Wednesday. "Why not give student-athletes, schools and their communities the same, or at least comparable, opportunities to compete for a state championship in some of our other sports?"

In the release the OHSAA sent to media Wednesday, it stated the Board has not recently been asked to act on formal proposals specifically on expansion. The Board has heard proposals addressing the enrollment disparity between the schools at the top to the bottom of Division I in both 2006 and 2019.

The OHSAA release reflects what sports are in line for postseason expansion:

"Currently in baseball, basketball, soccer, softball and girls volleyball, the enrollment difference from the top to the bottom of schools in Division I is an average of 939 students, with highs of 955 in boys soccer (an enrollment range of 346 to 1,301); 954 in boys basketball (346 to 1,300); 944 in baseball (356 to 1,300) and 940 in girls volleyball (319 to 1,249)."

Postseason expansion plans for those team sports could be on a fast track.

"We believe our member schools and their participants would support this," Ute said.

According to its release, the OHSAA will hold statewide meetings in January to present data and gather feedback on the topic, which seeks to address the wide enrollment differences from the top to bottom of the current divisional structure.

The Board of Directors could act on a proposal as soon as early 2024.

Currently, more than 200 schools enter the postseason tournament in some divisions to compete for a state championship in the sports being discussed.

The OHSAA has studied the number of tournament divisions and formats in other states and has found that several states, including many that have fewer schools, have more tournament divisions than Ohio.

Other than football, the OHSAA has not expanded divisions in team sports since the 1980s.

School administrators will be sent information on the statewide meetings in January. The OHSAA also will continue to collect input from the various state coaches associations.

Any proposed changes in the number of tournament divisions would need to be approved by the OHSAA Board of Directors, as those guidelines are part of the OHSAA General Sports Regulations, not the OHSAA Constitution or Bylaws. Any changes to the OHSAA Constitution or Bylaws would require a vote of the membership.