

The Philadelphia Inquirer

high schools

◆◆ 20-D Sunday, Oct. 11, 1987

The playoff plan is not perfect, but it is progress

Beginning next fall, we almost certainly will be able to tell if Central Bucks West, or any other school in Southeastern Pennsylvania, is the best high school football team in the state.

Sound the sirens, raise the flags and wake the neighbors: State high school football playoffs apparently have arrived in Pennsylvania.

Hey, who said this state wasn't progressive? Before you know it, we'll have privately owned liquor stores.

Last weekend, the Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic Association's board of control approved by a 14-1 vote a proposal that would develop state football champions in each of the PIAA's four classes — AAAA, AAA, AA and A.

The proposal must be reviewed and fine-tuned in two more executive sessions, scheduled for December and January. But its chances for implementation for the 1988 football season appear to be excellent.

"There's no question about it," said a board member who did not want to be identified. "It's in."

This is how the system is to work: The state will be divided into four regions, Region I (Southeastern Pennsylvania) and Region II in the

By M. G. MISSANELLI



eastern part of the state and Region III and Region IV in the western part. Sixteen teams — four from each region, one from each class — will take part in the playoffs. They will be selected at the end of the regular season by a power-rating system, based on points accumulated via wins and ties and strength of schedule.

A team will get four points for a win and two for a tie. Schedule strength will take into consideration the class of the opposition team. Any game with a quad-A team will be worth four points, win or lose. A game with a triple-A team will be worth three points, a game with a double-A team two, and a game with a single-A team one.

For example, if a single-A team schedules a quad-A team, the single-

A team will be awarded four points just for playing the game. If the single-A team wins, it will get eight points. Conversely, a quad-A team will get only one point for scheduling a single-A team and five points for winning such a game.

Two postseason games will then decide the state championship.

Region I teams will play off with Region II teams, and Region III teams will play off with Region IV teams, leaving one survivor in each class from east and west to play in a state championship game sometime in early December.

Teams still will be allowed to schedule 11 regular-season games, plus a Thanksgiving Day game.

"The system is not perfect, and we have a few things yet to iron out, but we felt it was about time to get this thing in gear and get something on the board," said District I chairman Jim Gallagher, a member of the PIAA board of control.

For the last three years, Gallagher, the principal at Central Bucks East High, has chaired a task force that has studied the feasibility of state football playoffs. But the issue has been alive in Pennsylvania for more like 15 years.

In 1979, the state's football coaches association, headed by Central Bucks West coach Mike Pettine, filed a lawsuit against the PIAA to try to force the organization to provide football playoffs. The grounds: the lack of a state playoff system was discriminatory against players needing exposure to gain college athletic scholarships.

With a constitutional issue involved, the PIAA shrewdly elected to move the suit to federal court, where it was thrown out for lack of merit.

The cry of the opposition to a state playoff system has been that it would extend the season too long, thereby testing the winter weather and interfering with ensuing winter-season sports.

But surrounding circumstances would not let the issue die.

Pennsylvania is one of only six states not to have football playoffs. The fact that by this fall all districts in Pennsylvania except District I had instituted their own playoffs was a solid vote of confidence for postseason play.

"I think people's biggest fear against playoffs was that it would turn into a long-term thing," Gallagher said. "But once we pointed

out that we would only extend the season for two weeks, the opponents became convinced.

"Basically, the arguments about state football playoffs came down to: Why not? There really was no reason not to have them. After all, we have them for every other school sport. With playoffs in place, we can settle the age-old argument of who's best."

As Gallagher says, the current proposal is not without quirks.

For instance, would a single-A team schedule as many quad-A teams as it could and risk getting its brains beat in for the sake of points?

"Can you see how this would affect the quad-A teams that are weak?" mused Rich Stetler, head football coach at Jenkintown, a single-A school. "All the single-A teams would be begging them for a game."

Then there's the problem of the leagues like the DeVal and Central, which have teams in several classes. Point-wise, it would be less of an advantage for Chester, a quad-A team, to play Garnet Valley, a double-A team.

And how would this plan affect a league such as the Independence, in which two members, Chestnut Hill

Academy and the Academy of the New Church, are not even PIAA members and thus have no class designation?

And what about the state's parochial-school powers? Though they might be worthy of a state championship, no one will know.

Chief opposition to the current plan comes from Pittsburgh, which for years has been conducting its own sophisticated district playoff system. State playoffs would enlarge the schedules of most Pittsburgh-area teams to 16 games, according to board member Larry Hanley, principal at Gateway High. And that, says Hanley, is too many.

"We just feel that the price we'd have to pay is far greater than the benefit derived," Hanley said. "We think a long football season will have too much of a negative effect on other sports. The state did not grow up on state football playoffs, and to put it in now, we feel, would be too painful. Out here, we know we have good football programs, and we don't feel we have anything to prove."

"But if we're outvoted, we're outvoted. If they put them in, we'll just have to deal with it."