

Football playoffs starving for substance

You have been invited to a banquet. You have rented a tuxedo. You have shaved for the occasion.

You walk into a large ballroom. You see a huge dance floor and a band. You notice a table in a corner of the room.

You see heaping trays of tasty appetizers on the table. You love those little shrimp and those little tea sandwiches. You wish you had a machine that could stamp out those little cocktail wieners with the little crusts.

But then someone walks up to you and says: "Better fill up on that stuff before it disappears. *There is no main course.*"

The inaugural Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic Association state football playoffs were like that banquet.

After a dramatic buildup during the spring and summer and constant fanfare during the regular season, the first state football playoffs turned out to be about as satisfying as a banquet at which nothing but hors d'oeuvres is served.

Central Bucks West, the Class AAAA team that was ranked No. 1 in the state for most of the season and set a state record with a 53-game winning streak, was not there.

North Hills and Gateway, acknowledged to be the top Class AAAA teams from the mighty Western Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic League, were not there.

Upper St. Clair, the team that did win the WPIAL Class AAAA playoffs, was not there either. By its own decision.

Considering the schisms that exist between the regions of the state, it truly was a miracle the state playoffs came off at all.

One of Saturday's championship games was the long-awaited Class AAA showdown between two undefeated teams from communities with proud football heritages, Berwick and Aliquippa. But the first state playoffs — especially in Class AAAA, the large-school division — were scuffed shoes in need of polish, a rough draft in need of substantial rewrite.

Serviceable but insufficient.

"It was pushed through in a big rush,"

By DAVE CALDWELL



Neshaminy coach John Champ said of the playoff plan last month. "There was not a lot of forethought."

Cedar Cliff, a fine team from the Harrisburg area's formidable Mid-Penn Conference, earned a trip to the Class AAAA championship game. It was a tarnished accomplishment, however, for the Colts because Cedar Cliff had to play Neshaminy — not perennially powerful C. B. West — in the first round.

Because Neshaminy finished the regular season 11-0 and C. B. West was 10-1 and because District 1 does not have a football playoff, Neshaminy got the berth through a convoluted rating system devised by a former mathematics professor. No joke.

After they squashed the obviously out-classed Redskins, 24-0, the Colts then got to play mighty Pittsburgh Central Catholic, which toted an unstellar 9-3-2 record into the game, in the state final. At frozen State College. In mostly empty, isolated Beaver Stadium.

The WPIAL had decided that the winner of its district playoffs, not necessarily the team that had earned the highest number of ratings points, would represent District 7 in the state playoffs.

But WPIAL champion Upper St. Clair, which did not exactly establish itself as a football juggernaut as it posted a 10-3 record, voted before the season not to participate in the state football playoffs. So the runner-up, Pittsburgh Central Catholic, represented the region in the playoffs.

Pittsburgh Central Catholic beat District 8 champion Brashear in the first round of the state playoffs — before a meager crowd of 3,000 — to earn a match against Cedar Cliff.

Fans savored the thought of a C. B. West-North Hills showdown during most of the season, so a battle between Cedar Cliff and Pittsburgh Central Catholic was hardly the titanic struggle that had been anticipated ever since the state playoffs were approved by the PIAA Board of Control in January.

To paraphrase comedian Yakov Smirnoff: What a state!

"The WPIAL championship has been the biggest thing in Pennsylvania for a long time," Upper St. Clair coach Jim Render told reporters after his team's victory over Pittsburgh Central Catholic.

The PIAA cannot force any of its members to do anything. A classic example is the continuing controversy that has resulted from the Central League's continued refusal to admit four orphan schools from the Chest-Nort League.

What has happened to the simple concept of team play — especially by administrators who stress unselfishness to their coaches and players?

How hard would it be to start football playoffs for District 1, the last of the 12 districts not to have playoffs?

End the season one week earlier.

Schedule the semifinals for two weeks before Thanksgiving.

Schedule the championship games for the Saturday before Thanksgiving.

The winners go to the state playoffs the first week of December.

Every team then gets to play its traditional Thanksgiving game — even those squads that make the state playoffs.

Teams not participating in the district playoffs would have two open weekends between their final regular-season games and their Thanksgiving games. How hard would it be to give such teams an option to pick up a non-league game the first weekend of the district

playoffs?

Starting such a system would produce the District 1 representative in the state playoffs on the field, in a crowd-pleasing game that could be played at a large neutral site such as Villanova Stadium. PIAA could stash — mercifully — the formula that features as many tiebreakers as the NFL's complicated playoff system.

No team would play more than 14 games, but the Philadelphia-area champion and a battle-tested representative for the state playoffs would be determined.

"I've been on record," said C. B. West coach Mike Pettine, "as saying a district playoff without a state playoff is like saying Penn State is the best team in the East, and UCLA is the best team in the West, and never bringing the two together. People want to know the 'national' look."

How hard would it be to schedule four state championship playoff games at 20,000-seat HersheyPark Stadium over one weekend — rather than the four scattered sites at which the final games were played this year?

Such a centrally located site in a metropolitan area — Harrisburg — that absolutely loves high school football would guarantee capacity crowds for the title games. Imagine a State-Title Weekend, similar to that held by the PIAA in basketball at HersheyPark Arena.

Schedule the Class AAA title game for Friday night. The Class A title game for Saturday morning. The Class AA game for Saturday afternoon. The Class AAAA game for Saturday night. It would be a scholastic football fan's dream.

How hard would it be for the PIAA then to require that only district champions earn state playoff berths? The state could save itself the embarrassment of having a team in the large-school state finals with not one, not two, but five blemishes on its record.

It also would guarantee a true football tournament of champions.

That is precisely what the PIAA should be hoping to hold next year.