

AHSAA Competitive Balance Part III: Weighing the Pros and Cons

Note: this is all based on the opinion of Shoals Sports Report with the occasional information and data. None of this is being implemented in the next cycle

In part I, we looked at the background and introduced the idea of how Alabama currently does the playoff format for high school sports. If you missed part I, you can find it [here](#). In part II, we looked at what the data would have suggested for alignments over the last ten years across football, basketball, baseball, and softball. If you missed part II, you can find it [here](#). This is part three of a four-part series on what a competitive balance scale for public and private schools would look like.

There are pros and cons to everything, whether it is a good or bad change made. However, there are some glaring pros and cons that would need to be addressed immediately if this were implemented, as the playing field would become more unbalanced. The pros would be that you could/would see more deep playoff runs from schools we do not see right now. Games would become more competitive in region/area play. You could see more regional rivalries develop, be renewed, and so on. The last pro that comes to us is that you would potentially see programs meet that have equal funding in their programs. Funding means time and effort, not always monetarily. The immediate con would be roster imbalance and the number of kids per school to choose from. The lower classes may become overloaded. The areas/regions would be more confusing to the common person, and it would potentially become more spread out for areas/regions. We will now evaluate the pros/cons one by one.

Pro 1/Con 1

The first pro we mentioned was deep playoff runs. The Shoals area is fortunate to have some of the state's most respected/successful programs in some sports. You can say the school and people know that it is a basketball school, football school, etc., or they remember when that school was great at a sport back in the day. With a competitive balance system, you allow for more schools to have those playoff runs that can be remembered for years or put the school on the map. Most of the time, the Shoals' deep playoff runs are the same few schools: Muscle Shoals and Mars Hill football, Deshler and Lauderdale County girls basketball, Mars Hill and various boys basketball programs, Waterloo softball, and more. With a competitive balance in place, you would potentially see more runs from the schools in the county systems.

The first con we mentioned was roster imbalance and amount of kids per school to choose from. Florence plays in 7A currently and averages around 365 students per grade as the smallest 7A in the state. Auburn High School averages around 740 students per grade as the largest 7A in the state. Meaning the gap from the largest 7A to the smallest 7A is right around

double the size. You have more students to pick from at Auburn than you do at Florence. That same equation can be done across the board. Deshler was the third- largest 4A in the last cycle and averaged around 125 students per grade. Brooks was right behind Deshler. Hatton is the smallest 4A in the state and averages around 90 students per grade. That 35 student difference can be the difference in a whole starting unit on football (both sides of the ball) or two full teams trying out for basketball. Going to 3A it gets lower., Rogers and Lauderdale County were both in the top 10 of the largest 3A's in the last cycle and averaged around 90 students per grade. Staying in our coverage area, Sheffield was in the bottom 20 of 3A and averaged around 75 students per grade. Once again in 3A, fifteen students can be rotational pieces on a football team. However, the fewer students you have, the less you have to pick from for your sports teams. That then creates a tryout system where the ones that "try out" make the team because it's all you have. At Auburn or Florence, you can have a tryout where you can create your team from a tryout of 50+ students for basketball, or create multiple baseball/softball teams if you have 40+ students tryout.

The obvious issue with this con is roster size and with that also comes health. If you are a team in 7A you are going to have more bodies for football versus a 2A that may only have 35-50 players. Therefore, when injuries occur, you cannot go as deep in your roster as a 7A team could.

Pro 2/Con 2

The next pro we have is more competitive games in region/area play. This also goes back to the roster size argument. Using football, if both teams have an equal number of players, then in the 4th quarter, it is going to be the same guys. They cannot play one way as the bigger schools can.

In basketball, it could mean that you get teams of similar size. One local boys basketball team is full of guys that are listed 5'9 to 6'0 and they recently played a team in an area game that has guys listed at 6'2 to 6'5 and all in between. Now you have outliers on both teams, but think about the game of basketball as a spacing game. The taller guys usually have longer arms and can clog passing lanes more than the smaller guys.

Then we can use 3A and 4A girls' basketball as an example respectfully. Lauderdale County and Deshler girls are mainstays at regionals and state every season. Yet each year, there are good teams that do not make the playoffs because in those areas, teams are essentially playing for second all the time.

We can go through each sport and do this, but if it was balanced competitively, then you are likely to see teams play teams of equal competitive value.

The next con we mentioned was overloaded classes. The first couple of cycles of a competitive balance would seem overloaded or may always be overloaded, but eventually level out. We will address this more next week when we look at solutions.

Pro 3/Con 3

We all love rivalry games, whether it is the Iron Bowl or a fill-in-the-blank high school rivalry. This could generate some new rivalries or renew old rivalries. You can probably think of old rivalries or new ones that could be created.

The other con we mentioned was the amount of confusion it could cause with areas/regions/classes. Mars Hill is already a mix of 2A, 3A, and 4A. Creating different areas/regions for each sport. Now make that statewide. Deshler would be a 5A in basketball playing Russellville, Lawrence County, etc. but in softball, they may be a 3A playing Colbert Heights, Colbert County, etc. That can put a strain on the common person trying to follow the sports and knowing who is in what versus what we already have, and maybe a one or two school difference.

This also leads to travel, which is in part our last con. It could be rough for some schools depending on how they are placed in areas/regions. Most of the areas locally for basketball, baseball/softball are no more than an hour drive one way. If it became more spread out, you could possibly have a one-and-a-half to two-hour drive for an area game. Then, think about a school night with homework, meals, the nighttime routines get shifted because you are on the road for three to four hours.

Pro4/Con 4

Most all schools are level when it comes to basic academics. When it comes to sports, not so much. This can mean monetary or time investments. The bottomline is our last pro/con is resources. The larger schools will have more teachers who can coach, the smaller schools will have less teachers who can coach, which rolls into our first pro/con about the roster size. Some schools have one fund for athletics. Some schools have multiple funds for athletics.

We are not saying resources make or break a program. What we are saying is, why should the schools with all the resources play the schools with little resources? This can go back to roster size in part. Not always, but most of the time, you can tell what resources a school has based on their facilities, whether it takes care of its facilities or not. Thankfully, the Shoals area has some of the best facilities around. You would be hard pressed to go to a school around the Shoals and look at their athletic facilities and think they do not take care of this at all. That is a compliment on the coaches for the time investment they make in the programs.

However, let's use football if a matchup has a guy who is 6'4 and 250 pounds (pure muscle) vs a guy who is 5'10 and 180 pounds. Who would you say wins? Probably the 6'4 because he looks more athletic to you. That goes back to resources. He may be at a school with a great weight room, and that has protein shakes stocked for them to grab on the way to class. The 5'10 guy may not have that, but he works with what he has.

The resource idea is not a fair conversation for either side because it is part of the haves and have nots, but a competitive balance system levels it to where the haves play each other and

have nots play each other. Think about modern college football with NIL. Alabama, Auburn, and Georgia have more resources than Middle Tennessee State, Georgia Southern, etc.

Conclusion

There is never going to be a perfect world where all is equal, but the current system has issues, and a competitive balance system has issues. Everything has issues in this world, but there are always solutions to issues. Next week, in part four, we will dive into some solutions that we have, as well as some other voices in the media space in Alabama High School sports.

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Shoals Sports Report