

## Parish officials praise decision to split football playoffs

Written by Russell Hedges

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With the backing of Bossier Parish principals, the LHSAA voted Friday to split the organization's schools into select and nonselect divisions for the football playoffs beginning this season. Principals approved the proposal by a vote of 206-119 at the LHSAA's annual convention in Baton Rouge.

The principals of all six Bossier Parish high schools voted in favor of the proposal.

There will now be seven state football champions crowned instead of the traditional five.

Select schools are defined as those with a selective admission process — private schools, charter schools, lab schools, full magnet schools and any dual-curriculum schools that draw 25 percent or more students from outside their designated attendance zones.

The select schools will be split into two divisions for the playoffs with 1A and 2A schools in one division and 3A-5A schools in the other.

Nonselect schools will be placed in the traditional five playoff brackets from 5A to 1A .

There is no effect on the regular season. Select and nonselect schools will still compete against each other for district championship honors.

All Bossier Parish schools are nonselect schools.

The public vs. private issue has long simmered within the LHSAA with many public school officials believing private (and recently magnet) schools have had an unfair advantage with the ability to draw students from outside their attendance zones.

Last season, the five football state championships were won by four private schools and one magnet school.

The domination of private schools John Curtis and Evangel, who have combined for 38 state titles, has also been a driving force behind the move to split into separate divisions.

Another problem has been the difficulty the LHSAA has had in enforcing recruiting rules.

"When it was all coming to a head there, we all looked at each other — the Bossier principals — and said, 'We've got to do it now,' " Bossier principal David Thrash said.

"Talking about it and listening to everybody, if it doesn't work, like the basketball tournament, we can change it back."

Thrash said he feels bad for schools like Byrd, a magnet school. But he thinks it's a good thing that a different set of teams with players from the surrounding neighborhoods will now have a legitimate shot at winning a state title on a level playing field.

Parkway head football coach David Feaster said he doesn't see a huge change for Class 5A. Traditional powers like West Monroe, Ouachita, Acadiana, Mandeville and Barbe will still be tough to beat.

But Feaster believes more schools in all classes now have a realistic chance at winning a state title.

"Most of us feel like they've been needing to do something for a long time," he said. "And now they finally have. It obviously doesn't solve all of our problems. We've got a long way to go in our association. But it's a step in the right direction.

"What's going to happen Monday in weight rooms across the state, when they get through working out, they're going to get together, they're going to put all the hands in, and they're going to say, 'Superdome on three; one, two three, Superdome!' Some of these 1A schools, 2A schools and 3A schools have not been able to do that in seven years. Now they have a chance, so it's definitely a positive development."

Feaster would like to see the split extended to all major team sports. A proposal to do that was

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tabled at the convention.

Benton head coach Caleb Guidry also approves of the move for football. But he's taking a wait-and-see approach on other sports.

Guidry said the LHSAA's problems enforcing recruiting rules played a big part in the decision.

"It's hard to enforce the rules on the books, and because of that there's always going to be somebody trying to get on the edge of that line and cross that line of those rules," he said.

"If there were an easy way for the principals and the LHSAA to enforce it, we wouldn't be in this situation. But we're in this situation so we have to try something. Whether it should extend to all sports or not I think that's a wait- and-see thing. If it works well in football, maybe we should try it in other sports, because contrary to popular belief, this is not a football- only issue."

In other convention news, the LHSAA voted to return to the traditional Top 28 format in boys and girls basketball.

Also, the second and quarterfinal rounds of the Class 5A baseball playoffs will be best-of-three series beginning in 2014.