The Farmington Observer

Sports

business, entertainment, travel inside

Chris McCosky, Brad Emons editor/591-2312

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C.J. Risak

Shrinking ball, better game?

WHO'S IN FAVOR of change?

Don't raise your hands. Not yet. I don't mean spare change, the kind of coin rattling around in your pocket. And I don't mean a change of clothing, change of character or change of mind, either.

The change I'm talking about is what a lot of people — people who should know — would call change for the good.

This change has to do with basketball — more directly, women's collegiate basketball. At the Women's Basketball Coaches Association (WBCA) national convention in March, it was voted to change what might reasonably be considered an important part of the game — the ball.

THE REGULATION BASKETBALL, it seems, has become too cumbersome for some women. It's too big, proponents of the rule change say.

So a few studies were conducted, the issue was presented to the WBCA, and a vote was taken. This season, women's college basketball teams will use a ball approximately one inch smaller in circumference and 2½ ounces lighter than the one the guys use.

Now for the question all conservatives ask when any kind of change is made:

Why?

"Some experimentation had been done with it," said Sue Kruszewski, coach of Oakland University's women's team. "It showed that it would be better for the girls in handling the ball."

A reduction in turnovers is what convinced a majority of the coaches to vote in favor of the switch. A smaller ball would be easier to dribble, easier to shoot, easier to pass.

HOW DO THEY KNOW? All the studies, of course. Talk to Ed Kavanaugh, whose Schoolcraft College team took part in those tests last year at a Michigan State summer camp.

"They went through some skill tests," Kavanaugh said. "It wasn't game competition. Dribbling, bouncing the ball off the wall and catching it, running mazes, that kind of thing."

South Dakota's high schools and the NCAA Division II Empire State Conference were the only game-condition testing grounds for the smaller ball last season. The now gone-and-forgotten Women's Professional Basketball League used a smaller ball, and the new women's pro league plans to use an undersized ball, too.

DOES THAT SOUND like conclusive proof? Consider some other blunders perpetrated by college coaches in regards to men's basketball over the past two seasons:

- The shot clock, which most conferences dropped after a one-year trial;
- The three-point field goal, which was adopted and dropped along with the shot clock;
- A ruling to award two free throws for every foul committed by the trailing team in the game's final two minutes, which lasted less than a month last season;
- Two timeouts per half, adopted last season and scrapped this season in favor of four per game.

Maybe the women's coaches felt left behind in the change cycle.

Both Kruszewski and Kavanaugh favor the switch to a smaller ball. But both were dubious of the tests conducted.

"It'll be better," Kruszewski said. "There will be less turnovers and better control of the game. But I don't think they've done enough experimentation with it."

KAVANAUGH AGREED: "I like it. I have a seven-year-old daughter who's learning to play basketball with (a smaller ball). But I think it might be a bit premature. It could have been tested better.

"There are so many radical changes being made, someone might think something is wrong with the game."

Indeed they might.

Improving play through better ballhandling wasn't the only reason for the change. Women's basketball lacked excitement, some believed. They pointed to the dinky crowds it attracts. And what's the most exciting play in basketball?

Just ask ESPN sports commentator Dick Vitale: the Dunk!

A smaller ball would be easier for women to dunk, a part of the game never experienced by females.

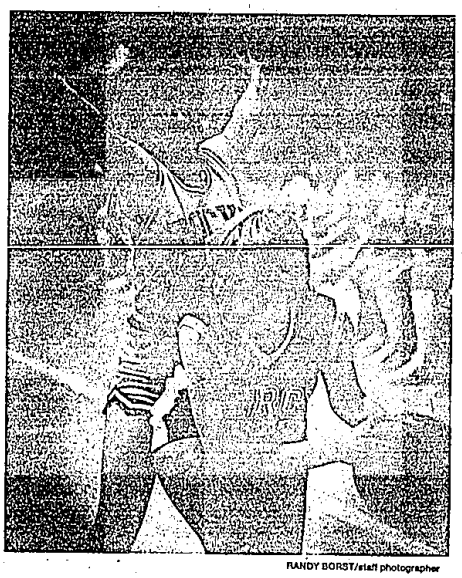
DUNKS ARE FINE, I suppose, but there are lots of men playing pick-up basketball today who can slam the ball. If it were such an integral part of the game, maybe they should count for more than just two points (just kidding).

Heck, if the women's coaches just wanted to add the dunk to their game, why didn't they vote to lower the basket half a foot or so? (Kidding again, coaches. Really.)

I don't advocate a lower basket any more than I think the women's game lacked excitement, or that the ball was too big for them to handle. In the last five years, women have made great strides in basketball while the men, with all their alterations, have remained basically the same.

"Sometimes people make changes just for the sake of making changes," Kavanaugh said, "whether they're necessary or not."

True enough. I'm not against change — when necessary. I'm just not convinced that this is a change that need be made.



RANDY BORST/staff photographer

Beverly White (with basketball) was a major contributor to the Farmington Hills Our Lady of Mercy basketball team last season. She will be a major contributor on Michigan's Metro team this summer in the AAU Junior Olympic games.

AAU cagers seek the gold

By Chris McCosky
staff writer

SAY WHAT YOU will about Ed Kavanaugh — and there are those who say some rather uncomplimentary things about him — but the man is tirelessly devoted to his game.

On one level, his game is girls basketball. On another level, his game is winning championships. On a deeper level, one closer to the heart of this man, his game is to make individual players perform at a level beyond their normal capabilities.

His critics say he is in the game for one reason — to promote himself. His critics say he wins championships because he recruits the best talent from the state.

Kavanaugh takes his criticism in stride. He lets the accomplishments of his teams, and those of his players, do the talking.

He took his Livonia Ladywood team to a state high school Class B championship and guided his Schoolcraft Community College team to an Eastern Conference championsip — both last season.

KAVANAUGH HAS grown so tired of the recruiting charge that he now makes jokes about it when asked to comment. "We don't recruit (the good players)," he said last year. "We attract (them)."

Attract them he does. Look at the team he has attracted to play for him in the AAU Junior Olympic Girls Basketball Tournament this summer. Twenty of the metropolitan Detroit area's best girls basketball players tried out for Kavanaugh's 18-and-under team — the 12 best survived.

Among the 12 are all-state (and All-Area) performers Sarah Basford from Farmington Hills Our Lady of Mercy, Emily Wagner and Char Govan from Ladywood, Allana Cummings from Troy Athens and all-stater Jolynn Schneider from Harper Woods Regina.

Also on the squad are area standouts Bev White from Mercy, Trish White from Ladywood, and Rhonda Lancaster and Alyse Fortune from Farmington. Rounding out the squad are Pam Baker from South Lyon, Margaret Flynn from Ferndale, and LaTrena Kimbrough from Detroit Finney.

Kavanagh's team will represent the metro area in the AAU Michigan State Qualifying tournament which will take place Friday through Sunday, June 1-3, at Schoolcraft Community College.

The winner of the Michigan tourney will advance to the National Junior Olympic Tournament in Clovis, N.M., July 13-20.

THIS IS THE second year in a row Kavanaugh is directing the state qualifier. Last year, the task was given to him late. Consequently, the tourney was less than successful. Kavanaugh expects things to improve this year.

"The tournament last year was really no big deal. We didn't have time to promote it properly. This year, we've gotten a good start on it," he said.

Kavanaugh has sent out 30 information packets to prospective teams across the state. The tournament is divided into four age divisions — 12 and under, 14 and under, 16 and under, and 18 and under. Kavanaugh expects between 20 and 25 teams to participate.

"Last year, we only had 15 or 16 teams total," he said.

A team from Flint ousted the metro team last year in the state championship. This year, well, Kavanaugh is looking to continue his string of championships.

"I'm very optimistic," he said. "We've got a good group of players. And we have a lot of quickness."

HIS TEAM also has size, strength and a host of good shooters. Let's take them one at a time.

- Speed: Lancaster and Kimbrough, both 5-foot-4, are flyers. Look for them to be key role players for Kavanaugh. Kavanaugh can use them to pick up the tempo of a game with their pressing defense and fast-break style of offense.
- Size: How's this for a front line? At center, 6-3 Cummings. At one forward, 6-1 Schneider, who will take her talents to the University of Iowa next fall. At the other forward, 6-10 Char Govan, who plays more like 6-0 with her jumping ability.
- Strength: There's the aforementioned Govan and Cummings, both extremely strong, physical players. There's Bev White, who is as tough as they come inside, and she is developing

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WHAT: Michigan AAU Junior Olympic Girls Basketball State Tournament.

WHERE: Schoolcraft Community College in Livonia (Haggerty between Six Mile and Seven Mile).

WHEN: Friday-Sunday, June 1, 2 and 3. Friday games will begin after 2 p.m. Games will be played throughout the day Saturday and Sunday.

WHO: Between 20 and 25 teams throughout the state will compete in the following age divisions: 12 and under, 14 and under, 16 and under and 18 and under.

AT STAKE: An AAU national championship. Winners of the state tournament in the 12-and-under and 14-and-under divisions will advance to the national tournament in Clovis, New Mexico. The other two division winners will advance to the national tournament in Cape May, New Jersey.

OF LOCAL INTEREST: Livonia Ladywood and Schoolcraft women's basketball coach, Ed Kavanaugh is coaching the Metro team in the 18-and-under division. On his 12-member roster are Observer All-Conference standouts Emily Wagner (Ladywood), Char Govan (Ladywood), Trish White (Ladywood), Sarah Basford (Mercy), Beverly White (Mercy), Rhonda Lancaster (Farmington), Alyse Fortune (Farmington) and Allana Cummings (Troy Athens).

Expansion of grid playoffs proposed

By Chris McCosky
staff writer

The Detroit Free Press and a majority of prep football experts called Farmington Harrison the best Class A football team in the state last year. Yet the Hawks, two-time defending state champions and Western Lakes *Activities Association* champions, did not qualify for the state playoffs.

Rochester High School posted back-to-back 8-1 seasons in 1982 and 1983 and won league championships both years. Yet, Rochester did not get a post-season tournament bid in either year.

In 1980, Farmington Harrison and North Farmington were undefeated entering the final game of the season. Both were highly ranked in the state polls. Harrison won the showdown in final minutes of the tightly contested game. Harrison went to the state tourney, North's season was over.

Indeed, the Michigan High School Athletic Association (MHSAA) has drawn a great deal of criticism for its state high-school football-playoff format.

THE CURRENT format allows just eight teams in each enrollment classification — Class A, Class B, Class C and Class D — to compete in post-season play. Each class is divided into four geographic regions. Two teams per region, based on a computer point system, qualify for post-season play.

The Michigan High School Football Coaches Association, tired of the inequity of the present format, tired of the constant criticism, has set forth a proposal to the MHSAA that would change the football-playoff format in Michigan.

The plan, called the "Ahern Plan," was put together under the leadership of Ithaca High School (near Lansing) coach Jim Ahern. The plan would expand the number of teams in the playoffs from 32 to 128. It would also expand the playoff schedule by two games.

Here are some of the specifics of the plan:

- All league champs from leagues with six or more teams would automatically qualify for the playoffs. (Leagues with 12 or more teams could divide into two six-team divisions with both division champs qualifying.) The individual leagues would set tie-breaker policies. This would amount to approximately 80 teams.
- Teams that belong to a league with fewer than six teams, or those that do not compete within a league structure, would be considered "independents." Any independent team with a 7-1 or better record would automatically qualify for the playoffs.
- ONCE LEAGUE champs and independent qualifiers have been determined, the remainder of the 128 teams would be selected based on the following point system: 60 points for wins against schools of a larger class size, 50 points for wins against schools of the same class, 40 points for wins against smaller classed schools, 30 points for ties, two points for each game a team you've defeated wins, and one point for each game an opponent you've defeated ties. The team with the highest point total, regardless of class, would qualify.
- Once all 128 qualifiers have been determined, the teams would be broken down into four divisions of 32 teams based on enrollment. The 32 teams with the largest enrollment would be division I or Class A, the next 32 would be division II or Class B, etc.

The coaches have also agreed upon how they would schedule the two added playoff dates. Here's what they propose to do: What is now considered the conditioning week — the week before the official start of fall practice — will indeed become the first week of mandatory football practice. The first game will be played after the third week of practice — in other words, the week before Labor Day.

Then, the first playoff date (district play) will be the first Tuesday or Wednesday following the ninth and final regular season game. The second playoff date (regional play) will be the following Saturday. In other words, there will be three games played in a two-week span.

THE AHERN PLAN has been approved by the coaches association. It will go before the MHSAA's Representative Council Sunday, May 5. The council, comprised of school superintendents and principals, will hear Ahern's personal presentation and make a recommendation either for or against the plan. It will then be up to the high schools to accept or reject the council's recommendation.

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