

MHSAA director throws Troy a curve

MAYBE WE EXPECTED too much. Really. We thought this new guy, Jack Roberts, would be as compassionate and open-minded as his credentials suggested.

After all, he was associated with the Fellowship of Christian Athletes. He seemed a perfect choice to succeed Vern Norris as the Michigan High School Athletic Association's executive director.

Norris often dodged blame. "I only carry out the rules," he'd say. Other times he just wouldn't talk about events that might tarnish the MHSAA's image.

Roberts seemed to be from a different mold. He'd listen. He'd care. Or so we thought.

PEOPLE ASSOCIATED with Troy football know differently. Roberts has done a number on them. He congratulated them for helping him enforce the rules. Then he turned those rules against them.

That's the emotional side of the issue. The factual side is just as foreboding. Roberts is attempting to hoist the MHSAA's rules above the law.

Can it be so? Can any man be arrogant enough to believe his law takes precedence, is actually mightier than those governed by our judicial system?

Apparently so. And caught smack in the middle of this mess is Troy's football team. Robert's MHSAA is attempting to transform the unbeat-



C.J. Risak

en Colts into sacrificial lambs.

Here's what happened: In August, Ryan O'Rourke went out for Troy's team. O'Rourke, a junior, had transferred from Birmingham Brother Rice. MHSAA rules stipulate that any transfer who changes schools without changing school districts must sit out a semester.

Troy principal Al Meloy told the O'Rourkes just that. They asked Meloy to petition the MHSAA for a waiver of the rule. Meloy refused. So they sued him, the Troy school district and the MHSAA.

OAKLAND COUNTY Circuit Court Judge Fred Mester listened to arguments from both sides on Sept. 3. He issued a temporary restraining order and scheduled a full evidentiary hearing a week later. In the meantime, Mester said O'Rourke would be considered eligible under the rule of the MHSAA for interscholastic competition.

That's what Meloy told Troy coach Jeff Keller. In Troy's opening game, a 29-6 rout of Clawson Sept. 5, Keller

emptied his bench. Everyone played — including O'Rourke.

The next week, Mester ruled in favor of the MHSAA. Troy High School and Meloy, O'Rourke was ineligible. "We never, ever, even considered this kid being eligible," said Meloy.

The MHSAA expressed its thanks to Meloy, who could have written the petition the O'Rourkes asked for and dumped the entire matter into the MHSAA's laps, in a letter.

Last week — five weeks after Mester's ruling — Meloy got another letter from the MHSAA, once again signed by Roberts. This one brought different tidings. Roberts ruled the opening game must be forfeited by Troy because O'Rourke played.

AT STAKE is a state playoff berth. Meloy was dumbfounded. Meetings were held and a hearing was scheduled before Mester last Wednesday. Mester, too, was dismayed by the MHSAA's callous handling of the matter. He called it "unconscionable and inequitable" and ruled no penalty can be enforced by the MHSAA against Troy.

At issue here is the MHSAA's Regulation No. 5. In essence, it states that any school that uses a player found to be ineligible — whether it was used under a court's restraining order or not — may forfeit that game.

Mester said he was never in-

formed such a penalty existed when he issued his restraining order. That was the basis for his overturning the MHSAA's ruling. An appeal is now pending.

Why did Keller play O'Rourke if a forfeit was possible? "We were told that if we didn't use him, we could be held in contempt of court," said Keller.

Meloy agrees. "What would the community and parents of this kid have said if all 47 other players had played and he didn't?" Not to mention how the courts might have viewed it.

THE DILEMMA was clear: What were Meloy and Keller to do, obey the law or the MHSAA? Fred Sible, assistant director for the MHSAA, doubted any such penalty would have been leveled against Troy's coaches if they hadn't used O'Rourke. Of course, Sible wasn't the one facing contempt charges.

So O'Rourke played. All of two quarters. And now a team that has overcome all sorts of obstacles — the loss of 12 starters to graduation, the shuffling of five quarterbacks in and out of the lineup, the insertion of new faces at each skill position — to compile an 8-0 record — is receiving recognition as a cheat.

"What really bothers me is, if we were 0-8, what kind of notoriety would this get?" Keller demanded.

"It comes out sounding like (O'Rourke) has made all the difference in our season and he's played two quarters of football. We don't need this kind of stuff."

THE ENTIRE episode borders on comedy. Meloy has asked himself time and again the same question since the entire mess started — Is common sense prevailing?

Not where the MHSAA is concerned. Remember, Troy and Meloy were its co-defendants when this started. Meloy was trying to follow the rules. He and Keller operated by the book.

They made just one mistake: They thought a court order should be obeyed. They believed court decisions superseded MHSAA law. Roberts and his cohorts are trying to make them pay for that error.

Good job, King Roberts. You're setting a fine example for the youth of our state. In one swoop, you've taken football off the playing field and made it a courtroom sport; you've shown that compassion and fairness can't interfere with rule enforcement; and you've taken to new heights the MHSAA's unwavering belief that any problem must be molded to fit the rules — no exceptions allowed.

And to think, you've only just begun.

Ocelots eye tourney

The preliminary stuff is over for Schoolcraft College's women's soccer team. Now comes preparation for the second season — the one the Lady Ocelots have been anticipating since August.

Even then, coach Ed Dudek knew that, with no other junior college squads to challenge SC regionally, the team was almost assured of a berth in the eight-team NJCAA tournament at Mercer CC in Trenton, N.J., Nov. 28-30. A successful regular season would clinch it.

The Lady Ocelots completed the first part of their plan by shutting out both Central Michigan and Purdue last weekend at SC. Against CMU Saturday, Sheri Wolfe drilled home two goals in a 4-0 victory; a

strong overall game enabled the Lady Ocelots to turn back Purdue 3-0 Sunday.

"Things are looking pretty good at the moment," said Dudek. "We're still having a little trouble scoring goals. But I'd be very shocked if we didn't get a bid."

OFFICIAL ANNOUNCEMENT of bids will be made next week. SC was ranked fifth in the NJCAA before its wins last weekend, a rating it at least should maintain.

Indeed, Dudek was hoping to move up a notch and get an automatic seeding for the tourney. The top four teams are seeded by committee; seeds five through eight are drawn.

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