

Football Early Start 2017 & 2018 – How we got to where we are today

Some have recently noticed that the football season will start on August 1, 2017, and July 31, 2018 with equipment issue on July 31, 2017, and July 30, 2018. The discussion that has come around since the dates were noticed have included solutions such as: 1) shorten the season to eight games, 2) remove a round of the playoffs thus reducing the field from 224 teams to 112 teams, and/or 3) bring back the district plan.

It's appropriate to review how we got here:

Football playoffs were proposed in 1971. The first playoff season was 1976 with four divisions. In 1980 the playoff field was expanded to five divisions and the schedule was compressed with three games in 10 days because the athletic directors did not want to give up the ninth game. Some schools started in the first week of August and many in the southeast portion of Wisconsin started in the second week of August. (Otte)

Interestingly, the basic reason for the demise of the original district plan offered by John Roberts in 1983 and the plan offered by the WIAA staff in 2009 was because of travel. Geography in the northern and northwestern parts of Wisconsin hasn't changed since 1983, 2009, or now.

In 1985, the Board of Control voted to eliminate three games in 10 days beginning in 1987, but the plan was scuttled when playoffs expanded in 1987. The Wisconsin State Legislature passed Wisconsin Act 16 in 2011 that requires school boards to start a school term after September 1st.

In the summer of 2009, the WIAA staff brought forward the football district plan. The plan essentially removed conference play in the sport of football and replaced conferences with 8-team districts. The district plan came forward as an idea to address three concerns: 1) inability of schools to schedule regular season games, 2) size differentials in existing conferences which affects playoff eligibility, and 3) concerns with three games in ten days from the last regular season game to Level Two of the playoffs. The plan was thoroughly discussed at WIAA Area Meetings. Notes were taken and reported back to the Board of Control.

The plan was essentially dead on arrival immediately after the Football Advisory Committee recommended the plan move forward in December of 2009. Reasons cited were travel, cost, traditional rivals, no all-conference teams, lower level games, and the details. The travel came to the forefront as the major obstacle with the impact as an economic hardship on our medium and small schools.

A tremendous amount of feedback was provided to WIAA staff. As a result of the volumes of letters of opposition from member schools, the few letters of support, and the removal of support from the Wisconsin Football Coaches Association, the staff recommended that the Board of Control not proceed with implementation of the plan.

However, an alternative for the three games in ten days was to be addressed with the growing discussion and concerns about concussions and the fact that Association season regulations stated that schools should only play one game per week. Solutions brought forward were: starting early (moving up 3 days), removing a game (8 regular season games), or playing the championships on Thanksgiving week (Friday and Saturday). A survey was conducted by the Executive Staff to determine how the membership wanted to address the schedule changes with one football game per week. There were 335 member schools that responded to the survey.

The results of the survey were:

1. Start the season on the Wednesday of Week 5 in August instead of Monday of Week 6. – 154
2. Eliminate Week Nine and play eight regular season games. – 103
3. Move the WIAA State Tournament one week later. – 47
4. Reduce the play-off field to 112 teams. – 31

At the 2010 Football Coaches Advisory Committee meeting, season dates were discussed. Discussion about the start date for freshmen was discussed, and ultimately the coaches believed that it was a local decision. The early start date in 2012 was discussed. If starting a week late with the championships after Thanksgiving wasn't an option, then an 8-game season with an optional ninth game for non-playoff qualifiers would be used.

The WFCA proposed an eight-plus-one solution that guaranteed a ninth game either in the playoffs or as a consolation game. The Board of Control in October of 2010 declined to guarantee a consolation game. Rather, the WIAA staff maintained a list for schools that wished to play an optional ninth game if they didn't qualify for the playoffs in 2012.

In addition, a solution to the scheduling problems and enrollment differences were: football only realignment, eliminating overall win/loss as qualifying criteria, and reduced (8) player football. It was a new area for the WIAA to step into the regular season with the district plan, as well as the manner of changing the playoff qualifying based on conference finish.

The Board of Control accepted a proposal to have the 2012 season limited to the eight games plus an optional ninth game. Therefore, a football Ad Hoc committee was created with members from the WFCA, WIAA Sports Advisory committee, WIAA Advisory Committee, WIAA staff, and WIAA Board of Control.

The Football Ad Hoc Committee met three times in 2011. In the first meeting on February 16, 2011, the committee recommended that an 8-player option be available to member schools with an enrollment of 200 or less and a jamboree be made available for the 8-player teams. In addition, the committee passed a motion that no games extend beyond the weekend before Thanksgiving and the 2013 & 2014 seasons are to be nine games. Discussion around the

Thanksgiving weekend centered on weather during the weekends surrounding Thanksgiving, the spectators or lack of spectators willing to adjust their holiday week events, deer hunting, and extending further into the winter seasons.

A solution to not starting in the partial first week of August, the Football Ad Hoc proposed nine games in 2011, eight games in 2012, and nine games in 2013 and 2014. On multiple occasions, the committee was reminded that in 2017 and 2018, equipment handout would be in July with a July 31 start date for practice in 2018. A proposal for a 10-game season with seven conference games and three district games came forward.

On April 4, 2011, the goal of the Football Ad Hoc committee was to review each plan brought forward and to determine a plan to recommend to the WIAA membership. The recommendation was to practice in week six of the NFHS calendar, and to keep the current language to allow a 10 game season. Multiple other plans were reviewed. The Sport Medical Advisory Committee would reduce the number of required practices for a scrimmage to eight, but would not reduce the number of practices required for contests from 14. An advisory recommendation to eliminate week one games was proposed. The Ad Hoc committee reviewed several plans and eliminated moving forward with the Ad Hoc proposal of seven conference games plus three district games.

The Ad Hoc committee was going to meet in May, but the Executive Staff did not believe there were any items for the agenda. At the Area Meetings in the fall, the eight or nine game season would be discussed. In addition, the Ad Hoc plan with seven conference games plus three district games that was described as all-play would be discussed. While members of the Ad Hoc committee did not want to discuss specific aspects of the plan for fear of coaches viewing through the scope of competitiveness rather than objectiveness, the staff felt the details should be made available when discussing the plan.

When the question about the nine-game season were posed to the membership at the seven WIAA Area Meetings, the numbers would indicate through a show of hands that the majority would be for eight games. With respect to the football tournament, the majority would keep the current tournament plan. The 2012 season was to be an eight-game season, and schools should have the opportunity to experience a football season with eight games

The Football All-Play Discussion

2001 – the WFCFA rejected all-play and proposed a 7th division with the addition of nonpublic schools as members of the WIAA

2011 – the WIAA Football Ad Hoc Committee determined a 9game season, no all-play, no moving the season back, and an early start.

2012 – the WIAA Football Coaches Advisory committee – requested a nine game season to continue without moving back in 2017 and 2018.

2013 – the WIAA Football Coaches Advisory committee again voted against all-play, 7-0

2016 – at the WFCFA clinic a survey was announced which didn't want all-play and early start was discussed. No final solution was determined, but individuals brought up an 8-game season and reducing the field to 112.

only.

Football would be the only sport to lose games during a season. Other sports have increased the number of contests allowed during a season.

The Ad Hoc committee met on November 30, 2011. 8-player football was discussed in detail. A deadline to announce the switch was determined. In addition, schools must commit for two years and a 3-year average enrollment of 200 would be used to qualify for the jamboree conducted in week 11 of the football season. The committee moved into the discussion of 11-player football.

Coaches expressed that one game per week was better. The focus of the committee was eight or nine games. While the season had equipment issue on Tuesday and practice beginning on Wednesday, the committee discussed moving the days up to Monday and Tuesday as in the past. In 2012, everyone would experience the 8-game season with the opt-in option for a ninth game. Most committee members would favor starting early rather than lose a game.

The consensus was to keep 2013 and 2014 at nine games. Discussion then went to the 2017 and 2018 seasons. The committee was reminded several times that the start would be in July. Several members expressed that the season should be nine games.

A motion was made and seconded to maintain the current nine game season format in 2013 and beyond. Concern was expressed that coaches would look at the short term when the early start moved in. The motion passed unanimously.

The committee discussed tournament structure. Discussion about the proposed seven conference games plus three district games with all teams playing in week 8 (the first round of the tournament) was conducted. There were some concerns brought up, and the committees decided to either forward the plan or dismiss it. Again, the trade-off that the committee struggled within each plan was travel versus enrollment size match-ups.

At the Football Coaches Advisory Committee meeting on December 6, 2011, the discussion centered around the eight-game season and the sentiment was that the kids should not be denied a nine-game season and personal issues for the coaches should receive second consideration. The option for an eight-game season plus an additional game was presented. The coaches also brought forward the 8-player football recommendations of the Football Ad Hoc committee.

The 2012 season was scheduled to begin on August 1, but at the request of the Wisconsin Football Coaches Association and the Football Coaches Advisory Committee, the season was reduced to eight games and the start date was moved to August 7, 2012 with equipment handout on August 6, 2012.

On December 4, 2012, the Football Coaches Advisory Committee met again. Season dates were discussed with a motion to start practice on Tuesday and issue equipment on Monday every year to allow JV games on Thursday. It was noted that 2016 and the following years would be an issue. The coaches agreed that each season would have a nine-game schedule from 2013 forward.

As time passed, the coaches discussed the season start date, but identified seeding, hosting by the higher seeds in levels one, two, and three; an 8-player state championship; acclimatization; player-on-player contact; and individual contact limits as higher priorities.

At the December 2015 Football Advisory Committee, discussion on the early start in 2017 and 2018 was discussed as a reminder. Many possibilities came up to help relieve the early start issue as it comes up every five-to-six calendar cycles. The issue brought back discussion on the eight-game seasons, but the committee was reminded that the WIAA membership denounced the idea via the Football Ad Hoc committee. With no new solutions, no action was taken.

At the most recent Area Meetings in September of 2016, the WIAA Executive Staff addressed questions of concern regarding the early start with the member schools. In all but one meeting, there was little enthusiasm to go to an eight game season. The exception was the Antigo area meeting with 12 members wishing to reduce 8 games and 15 to reduce to 112 qualifiers or removing the first round of the playoffs.

Maintaining our current tournament structure is the right thing to do. If the wheel is not broken, we have nothing to fix with the tournament. If we wish to maintain nine games for all, then we need an early start.

What are our solutions? 1) Cancel summer contact camps in the years that the season starts early. 2) Don't bring in the freshmen until later in the month of August. 3) Hand out equipment on the first allowed day of practice. 4) Hold the first varsity game on Saturday and hand out equipment and begin practice on Thursday.