

Are the current PIAA playoffs watered down? A former high school coach thinks so

**By Joshua Funk
For PA Football News**

During an interview with former Mt. Carmel head football coach Joe “Jazz” Diminick, the topic of discussion took a brief detour.

The subject being discussed was the old Eastern Conference playoff system, the only playoff system in the eastern half of the state until 1982, when District 3 began a three-classification playoff format.

“That was *the* system,” Diminick recalled. “At that time, there were 55 schools in the conference. It was a unique point system based on how you’d win the championship. It was called the Saylor system, and it was based on wins and losses.”

The Eastern Conference was divided among schools from the north and the south. At the end of the season, a northern school and a southern school would meet in the championship game. It wasn’t uncommon for the title game to draw upwards of 10,000 fans, or more.

“That was *the* system,” Diminick said again. “Everyone wanted to win the EC title – I guess it was the pinnacle of success when you won it.”

But at the time, the Eastern Conference was being dominated by bigger schools like Berwick and Mt. Carmel. There were smaller schools mixed in that didn’t feel that they could compete with the larger schools and win a title.

So, in response to the smaller schools, the Eastern Conference shifted from one division to four different divisions – Diminick referred to the divisions as A, B, C, and D – the beginnings of a four-classification system that the Eastern Conference currently uses to this day.

“It gave the smaller schools a chance so they could win something,” Diminick said.

“But I’ll have to say that I liked the one division. There were 55 teams and all the games counted. When they started splitting it, it got watered down.”

Imagine then how the former Mt. Carmel coach feels about the current PIAA playoff system, which lasts for six weeks in the eastern half of the state, and seven weeks if you are a Class “A” team in District 6 or a team from the WPIAL.

And with playoff brackets that field upwards of 16 teams, there are bound to be some teams with losing records that are a part of the field, like a two-win Mt. Lebanon team or a winless Philadelphia Central team from the Public League.

It wasn't always this way. When the PIAA playoffs first began in 1988, four teams from each classification were invited – two from the East and two from the West. Eastern teams qualified for the state playoffs by a point system – and some notable teams were left out.

Take, for example, the 1993 Manheim Central Barons. Their 13-0 record was impressive, but, since the system was based on points, Allentown Central Catholic played Berwick in the Eastern Final. ACC had Central beaten by one point. A football in the Manheim trophy case has a maroon and grey football reading “1993: 13 and 0, and nowhere to go.”

Likewise, in District 1, Strath Haven also had a very good football team in 1993. But they didn't have enough points either to qualify for the PIAA playoffs.

The system expanded to allow District champions the chance to play for the PIAA title, so after 1993, there weren't any more “snubs”, if you will, of undefeated teams.

Eventually, though, the District playoff tournaments were expanded. Some playoff tournaments, like District 9's “AA” class, have a four team tournament. That's deceiving, however, because there are only five “AA” schools in the district.

And as the fields expanded, some from four to eight, and from eight to 16, more and more teams began to qualify for the playoffs. But that increased the chance that there might be teams in the field with a losing record. And in order to fill playoff brackets, some teams would qualify for the lowest seeds with very low win totals.

As one might expect, Diminick isn't really a fan of the current system.

“I think there's too many (teams) right now,” he said. “It's just a situation where the PIAA is trying to make money on it. It's the truth. One of my former assistants got in the playoffs, in District 3, with *one* victory. It's ridiculous.

“I would think (the system rewards mediocrity), yeah,” Diminick added.

A proposal is in the works to shorten the season from 16 weeks to 15. But the proposal might not get the necessary two-thirds majority it would need to pass. And if the proposal passes, it would take effect starting in 2010.

The change would also create six classifications, so while the season would shorten, even more teams would still qualify for the playoffs. Just imagine six overall state champions instead of four.

If the change goes through, get ready to roll up your pant legs. The water will just keep getting higher.