

**The Elephant on the Field**  
**Interscholastic Athletics, Ethics, and Coaches**

By  
Todd M. Mealy, Ph.D.  
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*Currently there is discussion about separate district and state championships for public and private high schools. While discourse on this issue is warranted, I believe we are missing an important piece of the picture, that is student-transfers and the method by which others facilitate these transfers.*  
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In April 2017, the NCAA instated a rule that forbids college coaches from hiring people “close to recruits” as part of their support staff, which includes summer camps designed to teach fundamental skills to budding high school athletes. [Rob Cassidy](#), writer for Rivals.com, reported that the rule, officially known as NCAA Bylaw 11.4.4, is intended to prevent college coaches from hiring parents, uncles, legal guardians, trainers, or high school coaches connected to high school recruits to any non-coaching staff occupation or in a strength and conditioning position. In other words, the bylaw is designed to erase a conflict of interest wherein some colleges fill what [Richard Johnson](#) of *SBNation* calls “sham jobs” with individuals associated with high school athletes in an attempt to “gain an advantage in recruiting.” If violated, a punishment is levied on the student-athlete, not the college or individual involved in foul play. A [rules infraction](#) will result in the prospective student-athlete’s indefinite suspension from intercollegiate competition as determined by the NCAA. The new rule roused a great deal of emotions from high school and college coaches alike, as within a month voices of opposition released statements condemning the NCAA’s decision to implement this new restrictive policy against a decades old tradition in intercollegiate athletics: the prospect

camp. The bylaw's [detractors](#) argue that 11.4.4 prohibits high school coaches from advancing careers now that opportunities to work as a player development instructor at a prospect camp or as a film analyst are now forbidden by the NCAA. And yet I can't help but find a parallel between the motives for NCAA Bylaw 11.4.4 and the culture of recruiting that occurs behind a veil at skill development training sessions for high school football athletes during the off-season. As we near another football season, the question is thus worth asking whether it is ethical to allow paid and volunteer high school coaches to work with student-athletes from rival schools. While player-poaching is not the norm, we cannot ignore that it exists and is often the elephant on the field (See Mike Drago's *Reading Eagle* [article](#) about a high-profile transfer in 2016).

For more than a year, current and retired high school coaches, sportswriters, lawmakers, and members of the public have used the columns of local newspapers, social media platforms, PIAA board meetings, and the floor of the state legislature to engage in a dialogue about whether "non-boundary," or private, schools have an unfair advantage in interscholastic athletics. Two questions have prevailed over the last 18 months: "Should private schools have their own playoff system?" and, "What restrictions should be placed on student-athletes that transfer schools?"

Indeed, arguments that the existing state of affairs in Pennsylvania's interscholastic sports--primarily with football and basketball--is not level must be heard. However, my concern is merely the singling out of non-boundary schools when there is a considerable problem regarding player-poaching that hasn't been raised by anyone involved in this debate. Reform advocates should consider what transpired between college coaches and the NCAA over Bylaw 11.4.4 in order to examine the overlooked yet

existing culture of player-poaching in high school sports. As authorities scrutinize recruiting allegations made toward coaches at non-boundary schools, this seems like the right moment to assess the elephant on the field: the conflict of interests that exists when a high school coach is allowed to work as a private position coach, instructor at for-profit football training programs, or as a personal strength and speed trainer for high school athletes from rival schools.

Those close to me know there is no secret that I am an advocate for equity. Just as I push for equity in education, I support it in athletics. I have and always will support fairness and justice, even when the equity policy has no bearing on my life or that of my children. The debate over establishing a system of fair play as it applies to district and state championships between public and private schools is rooted in a historic stream of open transfers. But there is a nuanced part of this discussion that the media and reform advocates must wrestle with as interscholastic sports continue down the path of change. Plenty of stories have been whispered in coaching circles about the attempted recruitment of high school athletes at for-profit football showcases and by private football instructors who have “sport specialties.” Failure to take account of this ethical violation will continue to muddle clarity of thought on the subject of equity in interscholastic athletics. To remedy this initial difficulty, I aim to illuminate factors that sportswriters and reform advocates have yet to address. Private football coaches and showcase instructors that coach at local high schools are forces that can easily convince players and parents that the grass is greener at another school. Why is that so convincing? Because hearing that coaches from another school are interested in you is alluring. Meanwhile, the familiarity and redundancy of the native school grows stale by comparison.

I must admit, however, that for-profit football programs have every right to exist in the free market. In fact, I find that it is now an entrenched part of high school football culture in the same way AAU is integral to the competitive development of high school basketball players. If parents want to pay someone to give their child extra work, and if someone with football knowledge wants to make a buck off kids and parents with dreams of going to a major college or to play professionally, then so be it. The problem, however, is when head and assistant coaches are given opportunities to work with athletes from other schools. Under the guise of private coach or camp instructor, corrupt and unethical actions, like recruiting often occur. Moments arise when it becomes easy to deceive a player: “Your coach won’t get you recruited into college” is a common pitch used to convince impressionable freshman and sophomore athletes. The parents also buy into the coaxing. Of course many of those young student-athletes and their parents can easily see college coaches visiting their current school during the months of December, April and May when upperclassmen teammates are recruited. But young athletes are often blind about what will happen in the future. Suddenly, the charm of the private coach from a rival school is an attractive proposition.

There is also the problem of what is being taught at for-profit football showcases and by private football coaches. The skills sharpened by private instructors seldom align with what the player’s high school coach will expect. I often think about the recent [attacks levied on AAU basketball coaches](#) from Kobe Bryant and Kevin Garnett. The future NBA Hall of Famers criticized AAU coaches for not teaching young basketball players fundamentals like boxing out and how to play defense. [Bryant](#), who grew up in Italy where he learned the basics of the game before arriving in the United

States, claimed in 2016 that pay-to-play competitive basketball teams “doesn’t teach our players how to play the right way.” He added, “I think coaches who are teaching the game want to be rewarded in one fashion or another. It’s just a showcase.” In 2017, Garnett bolstered Bryant’s remarks by disparaging AAU basketball for ruining the team concept of amateur basketball. Garnett spoke directly to entitlement created by the amateur organization that collects a hefty sum of money--between \$400 and \$4,000 a year--per athlete to play on a team. That fee does not include transportation to and from practices or games, hotel rooms, admission for family members not playing, and food. Since individuals pay so much for their child’s participation on an AAU team, Garnett suggests, the players and parents expect to receive visits and letters from top college recruiters. Moreover, rather than participate in multiple sports during four years of high school, he suggests, AAU culture has compelled teenagers to specialize in basketball.

On the contrary, the private football coaches that I know dedicate their sessions to the fundamentals of passing, receiving, and kicking. Admittedly, part of that is due to the violent nature of the gridiron sport. In the off-season, to avoid concussive and subconcussive hits, there’s not much else one can do but practice position fundamentals. And yet every high school football program has its own offensive and defensive systems that warrant nuanced coaching pointers for each football position. Therefore, especially for the quarterback position, only on rare occasions do the things a teenager learns from a personal coach transfer into the high school team’s system. Additionally, the urge to specialize in one sport and that same feeling of entitlement that Garnett and Bryant spoke about exists within football families. It is common that parents and players who spend hundreds of dollars on specialized off-season training expect college coaches to knock on

their door. When the likes of Penn State and Pittsburgh never show, the sales pitch about transferring becomes very tempting.

Though most make it a full time job, coaching a high school sport for a school district is contractually just part-time work. And it pays minimally. This leaves the quandary for those who would like to continue to impart their knowledge by being employed as personal strength and/or speed trainers or by coaching at a privately funded facility similar to Power Train, Parisi Speed School, McMillan's Training Systems, Fortius Fit, CrossFit, and Spooky Nook. It is possible that at a point in time, some of these non-football direct businesses can employ assistant football coaches from various high school programs. There are certainly good private coaches in Central Pennsylvania that give one-on-one instruction to athletes from every sport without acting unethically. What makes these personal instructors special cases is that they aren't paid or volunteer coaches at local high schools. They work as independent agents without invested interests in seeing any particular football program succeed.

Two things need to be done to mitigate the problem of recruiting. First, the PIAA must address the elephant on the field and hold not only athletes but also coaches and trainers accountable for transfer violations. The PIAA should create--or if it already exists, reform--an ethics oversight committee that is tasked with monitoring for-profit athletic showcases and private position coaches along with public-to-private, private-to-public, and public-to-public recruiting allegations. Though some can argue that it exists as a deterrent, the current PIAA transfer rule--like NCAA Bylaw 11.4.4--levies harsh punishments on student-athletes, which include a 21-day sit-out period after a transfer as well as expulsion from playoff competition upon changing schools after the start of the

10th-grade year. What penalty is imposed on the coach or school that is actively engaged in recruiting? A new PIAA transfer policy should include a look at all those involved in the transfer: coaches, trainers, etc. A potential drawback to this argument is that the scope of my essay is vague in terms of empirical and firsthand evidence of impropriety. Take my word that the abstraction I have composed is due to the relationships I have with many coaches in the Lancaster-Lebanon, Berks, and Mid Penn leagues. Though many of my friends and coaching colleagues have worked as private football-specific position specialists and as coaches at showcase events, what I refuse to let anyone ignore is the fact that attempts to poach high school football players happens just as much, if not more often, at these events than by private, parochial, and charter school coaches. An ethics focused discussion by the PIAA is necessary to rectify this editorial shortcoming. This limitation is also a reason why there is a second solution to the broad discourse over high school coaches trying to recruit each other's players.

As the push to get state lawmakers involved in the public versus private playoff issue escalates, the PIAA should serve an active role in advising the Pennsylvania General Assembly's Athletic Oversight Committee on what to do about the playoff system. [Act 219](#), which is currently at the center of the public versus private controversy, was passed in 1972 to allow "private schools to participate with public schools in post-season athletic events." As long as that law exists, the PIAA is effectively handcuffed until the [state rewrites the law](#). Since Act 219 was passed almost 50 years ago, I have no problem if the design of district and state playoffs undergo debate. However, it is imperative that we address the elephant that looms ominously in the world of interscholastic sports.

Discourse over transfer policy and separating playoffs for boundary and non-boundary schools are so inextricably linked that one argument cannot exist without the other, and indeed differentiating between the two, particularly in the context of last summer's [Equity Summit](#) in State College, is a somewhat arbitrary activity. Players being coached by private instructors *have* left their original high schools to play for teams coached by their private instructors. And still it is private, parochial, and charter schools that receive the brunt of the criticism when it comes to transfers, while public schools do not have that same stigma. H. Scott Conklin (D-Centre County), Lynda Culver (R-Northumberland County), along with other state legislators proclaiming support for separate playoff systems should avoid working without the guidance of a PIAA playoff committee made up of a broad group of voices that can counsel lawmakers that possess only a modicum of knowledge about the nuances of interscholastic athletics. While football and basketball are the problematic sports--at least according to a few individuals that are vocal about creating a new playoff system--non-problematic sports like baseball, softball, field hockey, and, among others, tennis should be in on this conversation.

Every time I think about interscholastic sports and reflect deeply on the players that I coach, my first disappointment is usually the fact that I have coached for 20 years, but I have not done enough to participate in the discourse that might make high school football in Pennsylvania safer and more equitable. But all hope is not lost. Whereas we cannot change what has already happened, we can still start from where we are in 2019 and redirect the future processes and approaches to player development. I just ask that those in positions to make policy include a diverse range of perspectives so that all of the

problems in high school sports can be addressed.

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Todd M. Mealy, Ph.D.

\* Todd Mealy has coached football for 20 years in the Lancaster-Lebanon League, including tenures as an assistant coach at J.P. McCaskey High School and as the head coach Penn Manor High School. He is currently the head football coach at Lancaster Catholic High School.