HEROS AT 12?

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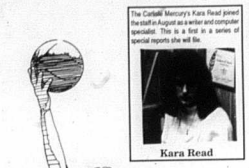
" The coaches' committee decision not to make the Kentucky law stricter was reasoned by the fact that Nicholas County is a small school and in certain sports, coaches wouldn't have enough students to make up a team if play was restricted to only high school age students."

Cebert Gilbert, Superintendent Nicholas County Schools

K.H.S.A.A. ruling clears the way beginning this school year

High school sports aren't for those high schoolers anymore; Now 12 year olds can play at the varsity level in Kentucky



The Carlisle Mercury's Kara Read joined the staff in August as a writer and computer specialist. This is a first in a series of special reports she will file.

Kara Read

By Kara Read
The Carlisle Mercury Staff
SPECIAL REPORT

High school sports aren't just for high schoolers in Kentucky.

A Kentucky law which went into effect March 30 allows seventh and eighth graders to play sports at the high school level.

In addition, the law allows students to play on more than one school-sponsored team in the same sport, at the same time.

The law replaces a recent state school board policy that would have kept students in grades five through eight from playing on high school teams in four contact sports - football, wrestling, soccer and baseball - or from playing on two teams in the same sport at once.

Thus, for at least seventh and eighth graders, the law restores the situation that existed before the board acted.

The difference is the state board and state athletic officials are now powerless to change what some say amounts to open season on youngsters who are at a vulnerable stage of their physical and mental development. The decision is left up to the schools and school districts.

Moreover, Kentucky puts no limit on the number of games or quarters a child may play in a season.

The law has met with much controversy from legislators, coaches, doctors and others involved in Kentucky high school sports.

Nicholas County is no exception.

In Nicholas County there are supporters and opponents to the law, just as there are statewide.

Cebert Gilbert, Nicholas County School Superintendent, said the county will abide by state law unless the school staff, including coaches, decides to limit the law in this county.

A committee made up of the head and assistant coaches of all Nicholas County School sports met August 15.

The recommendation from the coaches was to allow the Kentucky law to stand as it is, according to Greg Reid, Nicholas County High School Principal.

Reid said the administration will review the decision at a later date and can overrule the committee's recommendations at that time, should that decision be made.

He said the decision to play a younger child at a higher level will be based on parental consent and the coach's determination of the physical and mental maturity of the child.

He said the policy will probably stay in effect the entire school year because it would be unfair to allow sports beginning in the early part of the year, such as football, to use the younger children but not to allow sports in the later part of the year to do the same.

Gilbert said his opinion is if a child is ready to play and can play, the decision is left entirely to parents, school and coaches.

Nicholas County coaches don't seem to mind keeping the law intact.

Greg Letcher, Nicholas County Varsity Football Coach, said the decision depends on the individual.

"Physically, there are some eighth graders who are bigger and faster than some seniors. On the whole, that's not the case."

Ed Oakley, beginning his first year as Nicholas County's Varsity Basketball Coach, said, "If, physically, they are able, it's hard not to let them play."

He added, "It depends on the individual child."

The Nicholas County Lady Jackets Basketball has taken advantage of the law in the past, said Barbara Kenney.

Kenney, Lady Jackets Basketball Head Coach, said the law is "something that I have implemented ever since I've been allowed."

Kenney, Letcher and Oakley all said the law was more beneficial to smaller school systems.

Kenney said she has never had enough participants to make any cuts in her team, and smaller schools need the younger athletes to add to the number of players.

Letcher said he hopes to have enough to play (and field teams) at every level so the children don't have to play at a higher level.

He said if a seventh or eighth grader is able to play, he may bring them up to the varsity team to increase the size of the team.

However, he said, "I'm not going to put a seventh or eighth grader out there just for numbers."

Gerald Hammons, Nicholas County Elementary School Principal, said, "Personally, I am not in favor of it (the law)."

He said matching younger children against those who are more physically mature increases chances for injury and can possibly destroy the confidence of a younger child.

Dr. William Heffron, Adolescent Unit Service Director at Charter Ridge Hospital and Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Kentucky, said the law is a bad idea.

He said the law pits the naive against the near adult, and the pressure would be too great on the younger child.

According to Reid the current policy of allowing the younger children to play at higher levels will stay in place until the Board of Education decides otherwise.

At Nicholas County — and all across Kentucky

Physical limitations of some 12 - year - olds create some concern for educators, doctors

By Kara Read
The Carlisle Mercury Staff
SPECIAL REPORT

The physical limitations of a young athlete in the seventh or eighth grade versus those of an older athlete are a cause of concern for many people involved with Nicholas County Schools and their athletic programs.

Because of a recent Kentucky law allowing seventh and eighth graders to play school sports at the varsity level, much controversy has erupted statewide over the possible physical danger to the younger players.

Dr. Quin Bailey, chairman of the Kentucky Medical Association's sports medicine committee and team doctor for Danville High School, said muscle tears, tendon damage and metabolic changes can result from starting a rigorous sports schedule too early.

Opinions vary in Nicholas Co.

Nicholas County coaches and others involved with the school system are not exempt from the controversy.

Gerald Hammons, Nicholas County Elementary School Principal, said the chances of injury are high when matching younger bodies against those which are more physically mature.

Greg Letcher, Nicholas County Varsity Football Coach, said seventh and eighth graders have been on his varsity football team in the past but have been used sparingly.

Letcher said that most injuries are a result of an athlete doing something he or she is not adequately trained to do rather than as a result of size.

However, Letcher continued, "I can't see putting a smaller kid against a much bigger one."

John Nyland, Licensed Physical Therapist and Certified Athletic Trainer, said the bodies of seventh and eighth graders are not going to be as mature as those of older athletes.

"First and foremost, they're not going to have achieved skeletal maturity."

Nyland said players at this age are more prone to injury when playing against older athletes because their bodies haven't matured. Such injury could result in permanent bone damage, he added.

Nyland said another problem would arise from insufficient sexual maturity. He said because those young athletes may not have reached puberty, they are not able to train with weights as older players are.

"They are not going to be able to weight train and gain body mass, strength and power, to a large extent."

Dr. Bill Lester, staff physician with Sports Medicine at the University of Kentucky and Assistant Professor in Physical and Rehabilitation Medicine at the University of Kentucky, said weight training is not smart for younger athletes because it could possibly cause growth centers to close, increasing the chance of abnormal growth or stopping growth altogether.

Lester said the biggest problem he sees with the law is that it allows 12 and 13 year olds to play with 17 year olds.

"It's a good idea to split them out because they are at different levels of maturity."

Nyland said the maturity difference skeletally and sexually creates unequal competition.

According to Nyland, unequal competition allows much less room for error, making injuries a higher risk as a result.

He said as long as competition is equal, he sees no problem with younger students playing sports.

"Certainly there are some who could do it (play against older athletes). But for the vast numbers it would be a bad idea."

Lester agrees with Nyland.

He said the biggest problem is a difference in maturity when younger athletes play against older ones.

"A lot is just maturity in general. A 12 year old is not nearly as developed as a 16 year old."

He said muscles begin to develop when a person reaches puberty and most 12 and 13 year olds have not reached that stage.

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For 12 year olds

Other states have different rules

FRANKFORT (AP) — Here's a summary of the Kentucky law and the policies of bordering states on athletic-participation issues. Information on other states was obtained from their scholastic athletic and activity associations.

— *Kentucky: Unless local school authorities decide differently, seventh - and eighth - graders may play on high school teams in any sport and may play on more than one school-sponsored team — such as a junior high team and a high school team — in the same sport at the same time. Unless most other states surveyed, Kentucky has no limit on the games or quarters a child may play in a single season meaning a child could play a full schedule on two or more school teams at the same time.*

— Illinois: High school teams cannot have pre-high school students. High school playing eligibility is limited to four years. Playing time is capped at 90 quarters a season in basketball and eight quarters a day in football.

— Indiana: Students in grades nine through 12 may not play in games with or against students below grade nine. The rule has prevented Indiana teams from competing against some Kentucky teams that include pre-high school youngsters, according to Eugene Cato, commissioner of the Indiana High School Athletic Association.

— Missouri: Students below grade nine may not play on teams with students in grades 10 and above. High school students may play simultaneously on junior varsity and varsity teams. But they are subject to a limit on playing time.

— Ohio: With rare exceptions, youngsters below the ninth grade may not play on high school teams. Ohio high schools also are prohibited from competing against teams from other states that include pre-high school students — a rule that has prevented some members of Kentucky wrestling teams from competing there, according to Fred Dafler, associate commissioner of the Ohio High School Athletic Association. Ohio high school students may not play simultaneously on more than one school team in the same sport.

— Tennessee: Eighth-graders attending a school that extends through high school may play on varsity teams. Students may play on more than one team in the same sport. Total playing time is limited only in basketball.

— Virginia: Students below the ninth grade may not play on high school varsity teams. All sports have playing-time restrictions.

— West Virginia: Students below the ninth grade may not play on high school teams.

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"There certainly could be a chance there would be a 12 year old able to play at the varsity level but I would not certify one – nor would I allow one of my children to play at that age."

Dr. Phillip Taylor, Riverside Hospital, Columbus, Ohio

Will the new law have adverse affects?

By Kara Read
The Carlisle Mercury Staff
SPECIAL REPORT

Will a Kentucky law regarding high school sports have an adverse effect on the quality and quantity of education a school athlete receives?

This question is part of the controversy surrounding the law which allows seventh and eighth graders to play sports at a high school level.

It also allows any student to play on more than one squad in any sport.

According to Brenda Anderson, Nicholas County Elementary School Counselor, the answer to this question is no.

Anderson said the law is a very positive thing and she does not expect any academic ramifications from it.

She said she expects academic achievement to be consistent from elementary age children who are competing with older children and who may be competing on several levels as well.

Dr. William Heffron, Adolescent Unit Service Director at Charter Ridge Hospital and Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Kentucky, does not agree.

Heffron said children playing on more than one team would have less time to concentrate on school.

He said the only way to justify the Kentucky law is to say sports are a greater need than education. He said it "is not a productive set of priorities."

Heffron said by allowing a student such athletic freedom, the law is asking them to sacrifice their education for a short period of athletic glory.

The Kentucky High School Athletic Association requires students to pass four fifths of their classes to be eligible to compete in school sponsored sports.

Greg Reid, Nicholas County High School Principal, said the academic records of students participating in sports are checked each week and before any games are played.

He said if a student has failed or is deficient in too many classes the student will not be allowed to participate in any sport.

Billy Anderson, Nicholas County High School Baseball Coach and Athletic Director, said most athletes tend to be good students because they know they have to keep up with their grades to be able to play.

Cebert Gilbert, Nicholas County School Superintendent, said an academic problem may arise from students spending too much time on athletics.

He said sometimes too much pressure is put on a student to perform athletically and academics may suffer as a result.

In this case, Gilbert said, it is up to the parents to monitor their child to ensure the child's attitude, grades and mental well being are in good shape.

He added that too much pressure should not be put on children to achieve athletically because they may push too hard and tire.

He said, "I don't want children to be fatigued coming to school."

He said he does not think Nicholas County needs stricter rules regarding the academic achievement of athletes because it could be a form of discrimination against children with a learning disability in one area.

He said it is the job of the school system to stress to children how important education is and "hope and pray" that parents watch their children close enough to know when they are over their limits.

Gilbert said any action depends on the parents' priorities and he hopes they are good ones.

Barbara Kenney, Nicholas County Lady Jackets Basketball Coach, said she has never had a problem with her players academically.

Kenney said last year better than 50 percent of her players were honor roll students.

She included Kim Denkins in this list, an eighth grader who started on the varsity squad last year. Denkins played on three teams until Christmas, Kenney said, when she began to play varsity only.

"It didn't see Kim fatigue."

Kenney added that Denkins was on the honor roll for most of the year.

Three varsity players from Kenney's team last year received honorable mention for Academic All-State.

Greg Letcher, Nicholas County Varsity Football Coach, said allowing students to play on more than one team in a given sport would not be damaging to academic achievement.

"I don't see it as a problem if groups are doing practice together."

Letcher said all five football teams hold practices at the same time.

Gerald Hammons, Nicholas County Elementary School Principal, said there aren't many problems with academics at the beginning of the season.

He said fatigue from too much play may come later.

"It does create a problem later in the season because the students are so tired."

He said playing on more than one team in some sports can extend a student's playing season from September through February and possibly affect studying time.

"It's a long, hard season and I've seen it wear students out."

Ed Oakley, Nicholas County's Basketball Coach, said athletics go along with academics.

He said sports give balance to students' schedules, but too much of anything can be bad.

He said there have been examples of younger children playing at higher levels although it is not usual in basketball.

Oakley said if a younger student did have the ability to play at a higher level he would not allow that child to play on more than one squad per season. He said it might take away time needed to study.

"Too much of anything needs a balance."

Gilbert said the coaches' committee decision not to make the Kentucky law stricter was reasoned by the fact that Nicholas County is a small school and in certain sports, coaches wouldn't have enough students to make up a team if play was restricted to only high school age students.

Physical limitations of some.....

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He compared the competition between pre-high school students and high school students to high school teams playing against college teams.

Nyland, who has been coming to Nicholas County High School Football games for three years in part with University of Kentucky Sports Medicine, said most problems stemming from immaturity would happen in contact sports, such as football. He said non contact sports would not be as dangerous.

He added, in football especially, the development of neck muscles is important because of the nature of the contact, noting that younger players do not have the ability to develop these muscles.

Lester, who began attending Nicholas County High School Football games as a University of Kentucky Sports Medicine representative last year, (who serves as a physician backup to Nyland) said that by permitting students to play on more than one team, as the new law allows, overuse injuries could result if appropriate rest periods are not taken.

Doctor - parent says he wouldn't

Dr. Phillip Taylor, a surgeon at Riverside Hospital in Columbus, Ohio said he would not certify a 12 year old to play varsity sports.

Taylor's group practice has in years past been responsible for medical consultation and surgery for the Cincinnati Bengals professional football team.

"There certainly could be a chance there would be a 12 year old able to play at the varsity level," Taylor said, "But I would not certify one — nor would I allow one of my children to play at that age."

Taylor has three children: two daughters and a son, who played high school football in Columbus, in the late 70s and early 80s.

Barbara Kenney, Nicholas County Girls Basketball Coach, said even though her younger players tire from a busy schedule, the experience they gain makes it worth it.

Last year Kenney's varsity team won several tournaments with the help of a few eighth graders, namely Kim Denkins, a starter.

Greg Reid, Nicholas County High School Principal, said a recent committee consisting of all Nicholas County head and assistant coaches decided to allow the younger students to play at the high school level. The decision to allow a younger student to play will be based on each coach's determination of the player's mental and physical maturity.

Cebert Gilbert, Nicholas County School Superintendent, said a student may have the physical ability to compete above their grade level but too much pressure is sometimes put on them to do that.

Gilbert said students' minds operate better if they are physically in good shape but if they wear their bodies out, they can't function as well mentally and physically.

Billy Anderson, Nicholas County High School Baseball Coach and Athletic Director, said "Size, strength and speed allow students to play varsity." He said because they are able to play well at the varsity level, younger students are necessarily going to be physically mature.

Psychological damage a large consideration

Brenda Anderson, Nicholas County High School Counselor, said it would be physically dangerous for a 14 year old to be competing against an 18 year old.

However, Anderson said the possibility of physical danger is the only drawback to the law. She said there is no problem with the psychological maturity of a seventh or eighth grader.

Some do not agree with this assessment.

Dr. William Heffron, Adolescent Unit Service Director at Charter Ridge Hospital and Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Kentucky, said he thinks there would be damaging psychological effects on younger students who compete athletically with students as much as seven years older.

Heffron said a senior would view a seventh or eighth grader as a pest and would not take very kindly to them. In addition, he said, the younger person would worry about teasing and making fun.

He said the younger player would feel pressure to act in a way they aren't capable of socially and possibly physically, making them feel out of place.

He added, for the older people, "It would be like having to put up with a younger brother, he wouldn't be a member."

Having one or two younger players on a varsity team would also make those players feel left out and damage their confidence, Heffron said.

Kenney does not agree. She said self confidence will be the same at any age and the better a player gets, the more confidence the player will have.

Brenda Anderson said sports are an important part of a high school student's social life, especially in a small town.

Because sports are so dominant socially, she said, students are more likely to stay interested in other school activities if they are involved in sports.

Ed Oakley agrees there may be problems with the psychological maturity levels of the different age groups but said, "(You) have to handle 12 year olds different than 18 year olds. Not everyone responds the same way."

Hammons said the students may be successful at a younger age but putting them at the higher level may destroy self confidence.

"I think it's more pressure than a junior high student needs."

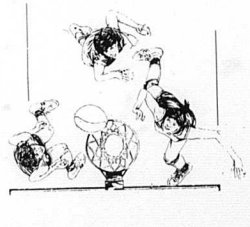
Hammons said too much emphasis is put on winning.

"Coaches are paid to win. Unfortunately, more pressure is put on winning than developing people, but you can't blame the coaches."

Gilbert said by playing students at higher levels earlier, the chances are greater that they will become "burned out."

He said some students start at a high school level in the seventh grade and lose interest after their sophomore year.

"They peak out early."

No matter what the approach to resolution, the 12 year old athlete is now eligible to play.

Should they or shouldn't they?
See the related editorial on page 2.