

Presentation by Dr. Larry Nassar at the Senate Education Committee Regarding Agenda SR 145 (Casperson) A resolution to urge the Michigan High School Athletic Association to adopt a policy that allows an age eligibility waiver for students with disabilities.

Location Senate Hearing Room, Ground Floor, Boji Tower, 124 W. Allegan Street, Lansing, MI 48933

Date Wednesday, 5/2/2012

Time 12:00 pm

Thank you Senators for your interest in this situation and for allowing me time to speak at this hearing.

My purpose in making my statement at this Committee Hearing is to share my opinion on the medical, safety and overall health issues surrounding the MHSAA age limitation rule. As we are aware this is a rule that was set about 100 years ago in a different era of culture and scientific understanding of adolescence in sports. Females and students with different ethnic backgrounds have been excluded from public school sports activity in the past but these wrongs have been corrected. Inclusion in the classroom of students with special needs did not occur in the past, but now it does. The MHSAA believes it is not discriminating against students with special needs since the age rule holds true for all students. Unfortunately, they miss the simple fact that students with special needs may be delayed more than one year prior to their full inclusion and proper progression through the public school grades. Thus, these students have been able to accomplish the goals of academics, they have been able to accomplish the goals of inclusion in the classroom, these students may have accomplished the goal of achieving athletic skills allowing them to participate with their classroom peers, yet the MHSAA prohibits them from participation in high school sports simply because they were not able to progress at the same rate as their chronological age. Times have changed, schools and sports have improved greatly over the past 100 years and yet the MHSAA stands proud, cheering that they have not changed their ancient age rule. And I ask, why is the MHSAA so proud at not adapting a rule for the betterment of their students?

I have read the 88 page document, "MHSAA Rules History and Rationale". In this document it has a section entitled "Why There are rules" and here it states

- a. "It is why a certain amount of controversy is unavoidable in state high school association work: if there is no argument, there is little effort to work on the things that need to be addressed." To the MHSAA, I have to say that we are presenting a strong argument and yet they have turned a deaf ear and little effort on their part has occurred to work on this issue that needs to be addressed.
- b. **In the MHSAA Rules History and Rationale it also states, "There would be no need for rules if we didn't care about the outcomes of our program; but in educational athletics, that is, in sports sponsored by schools, we care that the program contributes to the mission of schools, which is to help prepare young people for the benefit of society."** I can only ask the MHSAA, "Why do you stop caring once a student reaches a certain age?" Please, fulfill your mission as set forth in your own documents and amend your age rule and in addition, institute a waiver procedure.

According to the Michigan Interscholastic Athletic Association
Rules and Regulations - 1922-23

"Every student competing must be a bona fide student of the high school which he represents." This rule was the first rule established and is the reason why the MHSAA came into existence. To make sure that student athletes were actually students of the school they were representing on the field of athletic competition.

Yet, why is it that the MHSAA allows 7th and 8th graders, who are not bona fide students of the high school to move up to the high school to compete to protect the Age Limitation Rule? In a letter from John Roberts, MHSAA Executive Director to the Honorable Dan Benishek, Congress of the United States dated April 24, 2012, Mr. Roberts writes that an average of 40 students per year since 1987 have had to use this provision. That means that approximately 600 students since 1987 have had to leave their classroom peers and compete in a grade level 1-2 years ahead of the grade they are in. What about the countless others that have choose not to participate due to being forced to move out of their classroom peer group to participate in sports? We encourage our students to be active in sports for so many healthy reasons. Yet by having this strict, non-negotiable, age limitation rule the MHSAA creates needless limitations to make it more difficult for students to participate in sports. I say let em play, it is the healthy thing to do.

Does it not seem appropriate to allow a waiver for the age rule and allow these student athletes to continue to play with their classroom peers? Yes, it makes the jobs of the MHSAA administration easier not to deal with the waiver process. Yes, it is easier for these adult professionals to ignore the students that they are supposed to assist. But ease of one's job does not mean that they are performing a proper job. I request that a waiver system be enacted by the MHSAA to allow these students to continue to participate with their classroom peers through the 4 years of their high school education.

To the MHSAA I say doing the right thing may not be the easy thing to do, it may require work and effort, but it is good work, it is the right and just thing to do.

It is my understanding and it is so explained by the MHSAA in its policies, that there concern is that children will be held back in school for the sole purpose of allowing them to excel in sports. Why is it so hard to institute a waiver system in which they can analyze the students rational for participation in high school sports? I say to the MHSAA, do your job and provide the proper opportunities to those students that deserve the chance to participate in sports. Stop the nonsense of penalizing the many right and good students just to prevent the inappropriate student from participation.

In the MHSAA Rules History and Rationale it also states, "The age limitation has many purposes, among which are that it helps to create equal conditions by limiting competition to participants of approximately the same age, size and maturity. It also encourages students to progress at a normal pace through junior high/middle and senior high school."

If we were to follow the MHSAA thought process then why is it necessary for sports like wrestling to have weight classifications instead of just having age classifications? Afterall, a 16y.o. student is by their

definition approximately the same size and maturity as the next 16y.o. student so why the need for weight classifications in wrestling?

As a physician I can accurately state that the MHSAA interpretation that the age limitation allows for students to participate at the size and maturity is not accurate. Chronological age does not determine each student's size and maturity. You allow the 6 foot 8 inch 250 pound 15 year old athlete to participate with their peers because they are the same age yet ban the 5 foot 8 inch 120 pound 19 y.o. student from participating with their class mates because it is unfair and unsafe. As a medical professional I say to the MHSAA that there thought process is simply....wrong. The maturation of children greatly varies as they go through adolescents but the vast majority of this maturation occurs before the age of 17y.o. Is it not obvious that a great deal of maturation occurs rather rapidly prior to the age of 17y.o. and that after the age of 17y.o. the amount of growth and maturation greatly slows and may be not even exist in the vast majority of our students? Do students suddenly advance in maturation and growth after the age of 17? The answer is no, no they do not. Is there not a greater variety in growth and maturation in the ages younger than 17 y.o.? Do I really have to show standard growth charts to validate this obvious point? What is magical about the age of 19 that suddenly makes a student such a threat to the safety and well being of other students?

Throughout this document the MHSAA states over and over again that they are setting rules that are in the best interest and health of the students and in the letter mentioned above John Roberts writes. "If either the rule or Constitution is revised, I can't imagine it will allow this age disparity, which in fact would be far out of step with best practices prescribed by sports medicine authorities"

THE PREVENTION OF SPORTS INJURIES IN CHILDREN

Clinics in Sports Medicine - Volume 19, Issue 4 (October 2000) - Copyright © 2000
W. B. Saunders Company - About This Journal Add Journals Issue Alert
DOI: 10.1016/S0278-5919%2805%2970239-8

PEDIATRIC AND ADOLESCENT SPORTS INJURIES

THE PREVENTION OF SPORTS INJURIES IN CHILDREN

Lyle J. Micheli¹ MD

FACTORS CONTRIBUTING TO SPORTS INJURIES

Sports injuries are not accidents. They are predictable incidents that are amenable to prevention.

⁽¹⁾ There are many reasons why sports injuries occur. Research has identified the following frequent factors ⁽²⁾ :

(These are the areas that the MHSAA should rightfully be working on to enhance the safety and well being of our children.)

Lack of coaching education
Inadequate preparticipation physical exams
Hazardous playing fields
Conditioning and training errors
Lack of, improper, poorly fitted, or inadequate safety equipment
Playing while injured or overtired
Declining fitness levels of children **(and childhood obesity)**
Poor nutrition
Weather conditions (that coaches and officials still allow athletes to practice and compete in)
Improper technique
Inadequate supervision
Rules and officials

Psychologic stress (this point makes me wonder why the MHSAA would force a 7th grader to participate with 9th graders just because of the students chronological age as oppose to keeping the child with their classroom peers? What type of psychological stress does this place upon the child?)

Grouping teams by age instead of size (yes it is stated here in the medical literature that by grouping team be by age instead of size increases risk of injury)

I can continue on and list many other published medical articles that have studied injuries in high school athletes and in my very thorough search and through my decades of medical experience I have not found a single documented researched article that has found that by placing an age limitation of 19y.o. prevents or in other manners protects the high school athlete from injury. That, Senators, is a solid fact.

I am one of 5 physicians that have been selected to the USOC Sports Medicine Advisory Committee. It is my responsibility to redesign and enhance how the sports medicine care of our countries Olympic Athletes is to be handled in the future. I am the only physician in the USA that the International Olympic Committee has asked to help prepare their new sports medicine textbook on the safety and medical care of gymnasts worldwide. I helped prepare the USA Gymnastics Coaches Safety Certification which has been recognized by National Governing Bodies of sports throughout the USA as a gold standard in coaches safety certification. I have been appointed by Governor Granholm and again by Governor Snieder to the Michigan Board of Athletic Trainers through the Department of Licensing and Regulatory Affairs to oversee the proper execution of athletic trainers in our great state to enhance the safety of our state's athletes. I have provided medical care for high school athletes since 1978 and have been the

team physician for Holt High School since 1996. I am board certified in family medicine and board certified in sports medicine. At the 2012 Olympic Games I will have the honor of attending my 4th Olympic Games as a physician assisting the health and well being of our countries top athletes. To the MHSAA I say to you that I am a competent sports medicine physician and I say to the MHSAA that the current age restriction that have kept sacred for the past 100 years does not create a safe environment for high school athletes. I say to the MHSAA perform your duties to the students of the State of Michigan and let em play.

In summary of my overall thought process of the issue that lies before us, we need to keep in mind that there are different learning styles and we need to try our best to address these styles for the greatest effect on all the students involved.

Are approach to this appeal for an age waiver is that of a value adding process.

This value adding process contains essential values. Compassion is a value that needs to exist and these students help us feel compassion. This is where love enters the process. The love of the work at hand and the love of life processes. Integrity needs to exist. If we think of wholeness we bring together compassion and integrity into our life.

To the MHSAA I say, there is no room for fear and intimidation, do not scare people by stating that an older student will cause harm to a younger student. Fear extracts from the process. We need to see the wholeness of the child, the wholeness of the work, and understand that this wholeness is a dynamic process ever changing to adapt to the situation as the student develops.

We all have special needs.

It is the fulfillment of these special needs that brings wholeness to all.

As a sports medicine professional and more importantly as a father of 3 children I say that students like Eric Dompierre with special needs are not a problem, but rather a potential to be realized. Let Em Play, Indeed, Let Em Play. Thank you Senators for your time and for your interest.