

ISSUE SIX: PREFERENCE FOR CURRENT PLAYING SEASON STANDARDS

Identification of issue

Few areas have a greater impact on student-athletes than the regulations related to playing and practice seasons. Division III has made several amendments to these regulations in recent years, highlighted with a 2004 series of proposals that curtailed the playing season. Those changes have been widely accepted by the membership with the exception of the amount of competition permitted in the nontraditional segment (which is the playing segment that does not conclude with the NCAA championship).

Background

The passage of several playing season reform measures during the 2004 NCAA Convention marked a sea change in Division III. The legislation – a series of limitations on season length, competition dates, contest maximums and out-of-season athletic activities – was designed to establish a better balance between athletics and other key aspects of the Division III educational experience, and subsequent amendments to those regulations have continued to follow that rationale. The most significant changes in the playing season legislation from 2004 to the present include the following modifications:

- The total playing and practice season, which since the late 1980s had been comprised of 21 weeks for each sport, was reduced to 18 weeks for fall sports and 19 weeks for spring sports and the total number of contests in certain sports was reduced to accommodate that change;
- The “safety exception” to the out-of-season coaching contact restrictions was removed from all sports;
- Practice in the nontraditional segment was limited to 16 days within the five week segment for baseball, field hockey, lacrosse, soccer, softball and women’s volleyball.
- Competition in the nontraditional segment was limited to one date of competition in baseball, field hockey, lacrosse, soccer, softball and women’s volleyball, and required that the one date be counted against the limit of 16. Due to abuses (day-long competitions, 100-inning games), a later amendment added a maximum

eight-hour limit on all athletically related activity for all participants on the one date of competition, and established contest and time limits within each sport.

Division III Philosophical Principles

One of the utmost priorities in Division III is the overall quality of the educational experience. To achieve this goal, Division III colleges and universities commit to fostering an environment that develops well-rounded and academically successful student-athletes. At a Division III institution, athletics plays a significant part in student-athlete life, but is not the sole focus of the collegiate experience.

To that end, section (f) of the Division III philosophy statement provides that Division III institutions are to “[a]ssure that athletics participants are not treated differently from other members of the student body”. In addition, section (g) of the statement directs institutions to integrate their athletics programs “into the campus culture and educational mission.” Although when it originated this statement was drafted with an eye toward interdepartmental administrative policy, the concept of integration has become a bedrock foundation of the philosophy in its own right.

One philosophy that is often misinterpreted in the context of the playing season is the principle listed in section (d) of the philosophy statement, which says that Division III institutions shall “encourage participation by maximizing the number and variety of athletics opportunities for their students.” Several times in the history of playing season discussions or proposals, individuals have cited this principle in support of attempts to extend the playing season, arguing that it is a philosophic mandate to maximize the number of opportunities for participation within each sport. A closer review of the philosophy statement reveals that interpretation is incorrect. The purpose of section (d) is to encourage as many students as possible to participate in athletics by offering as many different sports as the institution is able – a principle not of the playing season, but rather, of sports sponsorship.

Translating how the Division III philosophy currently is applied to the playing season, results in two primary concepts:

- The prohibition of actual or de facto extensions of the playing season or its individual segments.

- Recognition of student-athletes' right to meaningful participation in non-athletic pursuits as part of the overall educational experience.

Summary of Membership Feedback

As part of the 2008 membership survey and the resulting town hall forums, the membership was polled to determine its preferences in regard to maximum playing season totals in four main categories: total weeks in the playing season; contests within the playing season; days of athletically related activity in the nontraditional season; and dates of competition in the nontraditional season.

The results of the survey showed that the membership is generally satisfied with the playing season standards that are currently in place. Overall,

- 81.0% of institutions prefer the current 18/19-week standard;
- 86.9% of institutions prefer the current number of contests permitted for each sport; and
- 64.9% of institutions prefer the current 16-day limit for practice opportunities in the sports of baseball, field hockey, lacrosse, soccer, softball and women's volleyball.

One area in which the membership expressed some dissatisfaction was with regard to the amount of competition that is permitted in the nontraditional segment; however, nearly half of the membership, 49%, preferred the current limit of one date of competition. Of those who disagreed, 17.4% desired no competition, while 32.9% desired an increase.

At the town hall forums, proponents of additional competition noted coaches' and student-athletes' desire for flexibility in the nontraditional segment; the value in compensating for lost traditional contests in weather-challenged areas; the benefits of a greater 'tryout' opportunity; and the positive academic outcomes resulting from greater contact between at-risk student-athletes and their coaches in the nontraditional segment. Opponents of additional competition cited the need to protect student-athletes' ability to engage in non-athletic activities during the academic year and noted that previous reductions were carefully considered and should be maintained.

Other themes that were repeated throughout the town hall forums include:

- Several institutions suggested that sport-specific analyses be conducted when proposing and considering legislation. An example cited was various institutions' requests for an additional date of competition in the sport of baseball.
- Members voiced concerns that permissive legislation can too easily erode playing season standards that were conceived in accordance with bedrock principles. Specifically, individuals in the membership expressed frustration with the amount of "back and forth" from one legislative cycle to the next, citing Convention proposals drafted in hopes of repealing part or all of legislation that has only just been passed.

Identification of Options

In light of the data and feedback collected from the membership, the following topics merit further consideration:

- Engage in a more thorough review of the appropriate amount of competition permitted in the nontraditional segment.
- Solidify the division's position on playing season length by amending the philosophy statement. This could include an amendment to section (d) of the philosophy statement to change the word "opportunities" to "offerings" to prevent future misinterpretation of this statement. Further, a commitment to student-athlete well-being issues could be better highlighted by having the philosophy statement enumerate a student-athletes' right to meaningful participation in non-athletic pursuits as a method of enriching the overall educational experience.
- Require a "supermajority" vote to amend key playing season legislation, such as extensions of the playing season.