Alabama Sports Reclassification: Thoughts From Award-Winning Knight Coaches

By Will McLain

Altamont has a historic and award-winning athletics program. From deep playoff runs in basketball, state runner-up finishes in soccer, and state champion track and cross-country squads, Altamont has no shortage of great teams. Some believe, however, that an athletics reclassification that takes effect next season could set Altamont back. In January of this year, the Alabama High School Athletics Association (AHSAA) voted 13-2 to reclassify private schools so public and private schools will no longer face each other in playoff match-ups. It also has reorganized the private-school "Areas," meaning Altamont now faces schools like Montgomery Academy and Bayside Academy. Non-area schools can still play each other during the regular season, but the change could still drastically change the competition Altamont faces overall.

Twelve-time state champion and award-winning Altamont cross country and track and field coach Jamie Rediker said, "The previous classification had already been changed from when I first started coaching 12 years ago. It was essentially straight-up based on size. Public and private were mixed in, [but] … about five or six years ago, they instituted a competitive-balance format for private schools, which started to change where you competed and what schools you competed against. Not strictly based on size, schools that were successful over a two-year span were bumped up into higher classifications."



But that system, in Rediker's opinion, wasn't perfect. "It was starting to get out of control a little bit for us," he said. "Competing in 4A in track and field as a 2A school is not easy, nor do I think it's fair, but there are other private schools that were in 6A that should have been in 3A across a myriad of sports."

He says he does not, however, believe that this latest reclassification is the answer to those problems: "In the genuine spirit of competition, schools of the same size should be competing against any other school of the same size, regardless of where they are in the state and what type of school they are: religious, private, or public. The championship format eliminates that. The state's argument, that you can still compete in the regular season against any school, on the surface seems fine, but when it comes down to championships and they remove that, the spirit of it is gone."

Rediker is also concerned with what the reclassification could mean for his track team and their goals in the coming seasons. Although he still says it's "too soon to say" in terms of the

reclassification's direct effect on competition, he added, "When a small school like ours competes against a large school, there is less chance we'll be competitive."

And when it comes to cross country, "When they reclassified and came out with how the sectional and state championship meets are going to work, there is no distinction between small and large private schools. So, they made two groups, but they aren't even using them for cross-country because there aren't enough private schools that compete in cross-country."

Fortunately, Rediker still believes that if the state "stick[s] with a small private [grouping], I think we are okay to continue to be competitive year after year after year," adding that team classifications should be kept separate depending on the sport: "Revenue-generating sports, which are essentially football and basketball, have a system in place and have a separate format from other sports, particularly where there are fewer schools competing."

Asked for final thoughts, Rediker said, "I do want to stress that, as somebody who is very competitive, I think that it's a very good thing when you look around the entire state at schools our size, regardless of who they are, and compete against them to see if you're better. And if you're not, they were just better than you that one day. That's being taken away, and as someone who competed in Alabama high school athletics myself and has been coaching for a little while, I hate to see that go away. I would really like the state to see schools and sports as not one universal thing or think that we all have to be under one umbrella, but to try and have a little bit more flexibility and think outside the box. There is no one solution that fits all, and that's currently what they have."

Taking a slightly more optimistic tone, Altamont girls varsity basketball coach JoVanka Ward – who has more than thirty years of coaching and a 6A state championship under her belt – said, "For girls basketball, it will be similar to what was experienced previously, with private schools that have an established successful program still being competitive." But she does think a system with "three private-school classifications as opposed to the two" would be preferable. Despite what some athletes and parents are worried about, Ward also said that the shift in classification won't affect private-schools athletes' ability to get scholarships: "I coached college for 11 years and don't recall watching a player play and thinking about them in regards to them only being able to compete on the private-school level versus public."

Speaking of public schools, she added, "[The new classifications] could have a bit more balance for the public schools [but some] will now have an opportunity to advance further than they probably have before."

The reclassification takes effect next fall and will be voted on again in two years.