Investigating the Diverse Landscape of Championship and Playoff Site Selection Procedures across American High School Athletics

by Chad Seifried, Brian A. Turner, Keith Christy, Daniel F. Mahony, and Donna Pastore

Abstract

The purpose of this study was to reveal the remarkable differences and similarities various interscholastic athletic state governing bodies possess with regard to championship or playoff site selection procedures. Currently, secondary sources are the main source of information on the selection process of championship or playoff sites for interscholastic athletics. Twenty-six (51.0%) questionnaires were collected from interscholastic state association executive directors, but only 24 were analyzed due to non or incomplete responses. The survey instrument asked participants if (a) states provided a bid process for championship/playoff events, (b) what criteria was used to select playoff sites, and (c) if any championship contests found permanent homes. Over one-half (n=13) provided no official bid process and when they did no standard criteria appeared. Some sports accepted permanent homes for their contests and many state association-governing bodies mentioned the importance of the media, student-athlete, and financial concerns.

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A community attempting to prepare a bid to host the National Football League’s (NFL) Super Bowl knows exactly what they need to possess before making their formal 15-minute presentation to the NFL. First, they know it will cost them millions to showcase the event (Spanberg, 2003; Tucker, 2006). Their stadium must hold 70,000 seats and full-service hotel rooms must total at least 19,000 within an hour of peak traffic driving conditions for NFL related groups (Sharockman & Van Sickler, 2005). The National Basketball Association (NBA) requires NBA All-Star Game bidding cities to carry 5,000 hotel rooms within a close drive and for 90 percent of those rooms to achieve four-star quality status or better (Spanberg, 2003). Both groups also demand large amounts of convention center space for accompanying fan extravaganzas attached to their event (Spanberg, 2003). All National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Championship events also advertise similar demands to host cities before they begin bidding. Additionally, items such as media, safety/security measures, previous experience, etc. must also be addressed by bidding communities and organizations to secure a championship, playoff, or special event.

Professional or college organizations and host communities often claim tremendous success with their secured events primarily through an improved image and economic gains (Bramwell, 1997). For instance, Spanberg (2003) suggests that the NFL’s Super Bowl generates an economic and publicity value somewhere between $150 million to $400 million for its host community (Peterson, 2006). This success has not escaped the eyes of the high school scene as the Irving (TX) Chamber of Commerce noticed, “a high school playoff game generates more economic value … from hotel
occupancy and sales tax impact than does a Dallas Cowboy game,” (Event Partners Inc., n.d. p. 15). However, we should accept this information cautiously because economic impact studies appear, “highly subjective and subject to significant error or manipulation” (Matheson, 2002 p.2). Matheson (2002) suggests some mega-events like these likely only produce one-third of their claim. Still, one-third persists as a significant amount of money in these cases and prompts us to believe hosting mega-events is a highly desirable activity for numerous communities.

Mega or hallmark events also include major cultural festivals and sporting events (Hall, 1992). Kurtzman and Zauhar (1997) believe these events exist on regional, national, and international levels. Some might suggest interscholastic championships or playoffs do not qualify as a mega-event, but some high school events, especially those from “revenue” sports, survive as major regional competitions around the United States. Ahmed, Krohn, and Heller (1997) support this claim and believe mega-events serve to help communities surface as an attractive destination for regional, national, and/or international groups. Ashworth and Goodall (1988) also imply mega-events occur when communities enjoy great value (e.g., favorable image and economic returns) from their occurrence. Clearly, interscholastic championships and playoffs serve as a destination for thousands and as demonstrated above can produce significant economic outcomes to rival their media exposure when properly matched to a host community.

Professional and college organizations consistently produce successful events for their hosts all year long. They achieve success through a formalized bid process, providing member institutions or communities a chance to demonstrate their event management ability. Typically, the bid process includes a pre-established standardized criterion to guarantee a proper match between the event and the community’s management capability. After examining the selection methods of the International Olympic Committee, Persson (2002) suggested securing a good “fit” between the site and event is necessary to produce the best outcome for all those involved (e.g., spectator, participant, community and governing organization). This standardized process also serves to eliminate subjectivity, which could potentially prevent maximizing the benefits for all participants (Bramwell, 1997). Interestingly, ensuring a proper match between high school mega-events and a host community does not always happen.

Selecting a location for high school playoffs and championships appears to be a very dissimilar process across the United States because different criteria, methods, and individuals involve themselves in various manners throughout the selection process. One only needs to examine several news articles or state association handbooks published from each region around the U.S. to see this phenomenon. For instance, during a simple search of high school athletics and playoff/championship locations, the authors found recent discussions on baseball, basketball, football, soccer, wrestling, and volleyball site selection methods described in California, Colorado, Georgia, Illinois, Louisiana, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and Texas newspapers. Topic areas addressed in these states include: financial proposal packages, special events attachment to playoff weekends, closeness to downtown and hotels, number of parking spaces, hotels, and restaurants, size of the facility and location within state, perks of playing, neutral site and rotational preferences, fan comforts, and field durability.

An abundant number of news articles address a variety of issues concerning site selection procedures from multiple perspectives but little scholarly literature concentrates on this topic from the high school viewpoint. Thus, this article seeks to review and discuss, in more organized detail, the specifics offered by the multiple news and limited scholarly publications about interscholastic site selection procedures and the assignment of championship hosts. Furthermore, this study attempts to formally quantify the different methods involved with championship/playoff site selection through surveying the nation’s 51 state high school athletic associations and their executive directors.

This investigation appears helpful to those in the sport management profession because it identifies the multiple methods and criteria, which exist among states with regards to championship/playoff site selection. This work should help those in site selection positions reevaluate their procedures and criteria to provide for a fairer bidding process to potential host communities. Additionally, this research appears to demonstrate the importance of engaging in a logical site selection process because it seems to improve the student-athlete and spectator experience. This work further appears helpful to those communities attempting to design a bid proposal for the hosting of a championship or playoff contest because it identifies the major criteria most states utilize during the decision-making process. Overall, this inquiry recommends interscholastic athletic governing bodies should perform more research and demand more information during the championship or playoff site selection process to assure a good match between the site and event.

Examples in the Literature

For those states accepting bid proposals, because not all of them do, much criticism and debate appears in various news articles about the selection process. In Illinois, the City of Peoria recently won the right to host the Boy’s Class A and AA basketball tournaments, despite a strong bid by longtime and former host Champaign-Urbana (Temkin, 2005). Marty Hickman, Executive Director of the Illinois High School Association (IHSA) stated Peoria won the bid primarily based on three reasons. First, their tournaments, despite a strong bid by longtime and former host Champaign-Urbana (Temkin, 2005). Marty Hickman, Executive Director of the Illinois High School Association (IHSA) stated Peoria won the bid primarily based on three reasons. First, their bid proposal included better financial returns to the IHSA. Second, a couple of downtown hotels exist a short stroll from the competition site (Peoria Civic Center). Third, the popularity of the contest since its move from Champaign-Urbana to Peoria remained strong and improved with the “interactive basketball extravaganza” and overwhelming great community support and interest (Temkin, 2005).

Some felt the Champaign-Urbana site appeared better for a variety of reasons. For instance, the University of Illinois men’s basketball coach Bruce Weber criticized the award because he felt it hurt the state’s flagship college basketball program by not showcasing the event in their venue. Additionally, Weber and others believed the Champaign-Urbana location surfaces as a more desirable facility because the arena holds more individuals and possesses a tremendous and successful history as a host of state playoff events (Temkin, 2005). Interestingly, the IHSA targets experience as an important criteria for the awarding of this championship and others. For example, Pohl (2001) addresses this
point effectively when discussing the need for the IHSA soccer championships to find one home with previous experience. This overshadows just finding a place with lights and a durable turf. The concept of “experience” is also supported by the academic literature as many mention the importance of demonstrating a successful track record before awarding a bid (Bramwell, 1997; Persson, 2002; Swart, 2005).

Temkin (2000) acknowledges a facility’s schedule of events also affects its selection as a host for its state championships in Illinois. For instance, in the aforementioned example, Peoria likely could not host girls’ basketball and wrestling in addition to the boys’ tournament because Bradley University’s men’s basketball team and the American Hockey League Rivermen also utilize the facility. Adding girls’ basketball and wrestling would control the Peoria Civic Center five straight weekends, which in the minds of Bradley University and the AHL’s Rivermen is not acceptable.

In Pennsylvania, the selection process also came under fire because of how the Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic Association (PIAA) selects championship locations. Specifically, the problem surfaces from the PIAA’s executive director retaining sole authority on site selection despite the existence of a board of directors (Bracken, 1998a; Robinson, 1998; Stader, 1998). Pennsylvania Senators Robert Jubelier (R- Bedford) and Robert Mellow (D-Lackawanna) believed this authority appeared unwarranted and described the selection process as unfair because it provides the PIAA the ability to complete a “sweetheart” deal between the governing body and the City of Hershey, only fifteen minutes away from the PIAA headquarters. Other news columnists also reported the process appears covert and secretive as PIAA’s own twenty-four point criteria are often misused in awarding hosts (Bracken, 1998b; Robinson, 1998). For example, based on location in the state, facility size and amenities, available parking, hotel space and multiple other categories on the twenty-four point criteria sheet, The Pennsylvania State University and State College, PA seem the logical choice for the major revenue-producing sporting events like baseball (once its new baseball stadium is completed in 2006), football, and wrestling. However, the PIAA denied Penn State and State College a chance to host these championships because it found a lack of hotel rooms (under 3,000) and restaurants exist to support these events. Only recently, May of 2006, did the PIAA award the girls and boy’s basketball championships to Penn State and State College to help satiate some of its critics (BJC to host state championships, 2006). It will be the town’s first basketball championships since 1937.

This decision appears as an interesting conclusion when one considers home football weekends often bring in over 100,000 people to the University and the town’s central location in the state would likely not encourage everyone to spend the night, especially those from Central Pennsylvania, a football and wrestling hotbed. Bracken (1998c) further describes this behavior by the PIAA as a “curious contradiction,” because he believes the PIAA fails to meet its mandate. The PIAA’s directive focuses on making “sure every playing field is level, that all athletes compete on even terms,” and that money or cost considerations do not overwhelm the consideration for those athletes and their families (p.1B).

In Georgia, debate exists between whether it is best to use revolving championship sites or to select a permanent home for its high school football championships (Maxie, 2005a, 2005b). Currently, the Georgia Dome serves as host to state semi-final contests, thus the second biggest playoff games occur in the state’s best facility (Maxie, 2005b). Some support the choice of the Georgia Dome as the permanent site for the high school football championships because it serves as the state’s most highly celebrated football venue (Maxie, 2005a, 2005b). Nevertheless, others prefer the home field advantage system in place during the playoffs where the higher seeded team hosts the lower seeded opponent at their facility. Many prefer the home field advantage system because they fought all season for this reward and believe giving it up to a neutral site might unfairly reward their opponents for less superior efforts.

The Georgia Dome probably cannot sellout its 71,228 seats for any state title game and likely more than half of the facility would be empty. This consequently takes away from the title game’s atmosphere and indirectly aids the lower seeded team. As Thomas County Central football coach Ed Pitcher suggests, the atmosphere is an important aspect of the event for the student-athlete and community to experience (Maxie, 2005a). Additionally, Pitcher feels the 1993 title game his school played with Thomasville, a school two miles away, would seem ridiculous if played in the Georgia Dome because the cities are so far away from Atlanta. Only a few people from each community would travel this distance. Finally, dispute over gate receipts is another important hurdle the Georgia Dome faces because many are not convinced a bigger or more significant gate would be generated by the facility (Maxie, 2005a, 2005b).

In Colorado, a similar discussion materialized about selecting a predetermined site for its 5A, 4A, and 3A football championships. Ultimately, the Colorado High School Activities Association’s sixty-four-member board voted to accept playing these championship games at the Denver Broncos Invesco Field (Delander, 2005). Interestingly, these board members differed from their Georgia counterparts because they felt promoting football contests in the state’s premier facility would increase the popularity of the championships. They reached this conclusion based on the success of the Georgia Dome as the permanent site for high school football championships (Maxie, 2005b). The state wrestling championships obtained a significantly higher gate and overall better press coverage with the move.

In Texas, some believe rotating locations for the state football championships would produce one of the biggest events of the year for the state (Barron, 2000). Clearly, facilities and communities all over Texas possess the ability to host the event. For example, San Antonio (Alamo Dome), Irving/Dallas (Texas Stadium), Houston (Reliant Stadium), El Paso (Sun Bowl Stadium), Lubbock (Jones Stadium), and Austin (Darrell K. Royal Texas Memorial Stadium) could all emerge as possible playoff sites for the north, south, east, and west regions of the state. Despite this capability, Texas University Interscholastic League (TUIL) officials disapproved of one central site for all five of their football championships. Instead, championship opponents at all levels or classes must agree upon a neutral location to play their championship.
Interestingly, Barron (2000) suggested television coverage of the Texas football championships should be considered when picking sites in the future because Fox Sports Net (FSN) felt they could broadcast all five-class championship games easier at one site for roughly $100,000. Specifically, Barron (2000) states, a predetermined site would allow FSN time to “hire crews, make production arrangements, and sell sponsorships to offset production costs,” (p. 9). In contrast, FSN spent nearly $95,000 to broadcast two games because of the short notice on location (Barron, 2000). Clearly, this issue should be reexamined in Texas and deliberated upon in other states.

In Louisiana, discussions about bringing the 5A, 4A, 3A and 2A state baseball tournament to New Orleans’ Zephyr Field appeared again because citizens and the Louisiana High School Athletic Association (LHSAA) perceived it to be the state’s finest baseball facility (Iles, 2000). The facility could easily host three games a day, which would allow the semi-finals and finals to occur between Wednesday and Saturday. This arrangement could make the state high school baseball championships a major event in the State of Louisiana (Iles, 2000). Iles (2000) also suggests this set-up would ease the burden on high school pitching staffs as the Class 5A 2000 arrangement required finalists to play three games in two days. This appeared problematic for student-athletes because Louisiana has no rules on the number of inning pitched by an individual, so it appears conceivable a player could be harmed by overuse (Iles, 2000).

Within the State of Louisiana, 4A and 3A finals took place at the school’s home fields while the 2A finals occurred at Baton Rouge’s Episcopal High School (Iles, 2000). Iles (2000) believes this situation was adequate, but again the Zephyr Field location would likely produce more revenue for the LHSAA as 46 of the 67 Class 5A school exist less than one hour from the facility. Iles (2000) expects the revenues at Zephyr Field to significantly exceed those of the current arrangement and even that offered by the Conference USA and Sun Belt Conference tournaments also held at Zephyr Field. Finally, LHSAA officials, such as Commissioner Tommy Henry, think the move to the state’s best baseball facility also serves as a reward to the student-athletes for a great season, should increase revenue, and result in the increased popularity of the event, as was seen with football when it moved to the New Orleans Superdome (Iles, 2000). Appropriately, Zephyr Field holds the Class 5A playoffs today. While the damage done by Hurricane Katrina will certainly impact future site selections in Louisiana, the debate that took place a few years ago outlines many of the common issues addressed. It is likely these general issues will persist in the future.

Northern California also asks schools to apply for the hosting of state playoff and championship games, but neutral site games do not occur (Stephens, 2004). The North Coast Section dropped neutral site games because as Commissioner Gil Lemmon suggests, finding adequate locations at the last second surfaced as problematic (Stephens, 2004). Fittingly, the North Coast Section holds their playoff contests at “the best designated site”, (Stephens, 2004 p. E7). Within the selection process, locations are judged on field conditions, gate potential, proximity to the highest seed, lights, and many other points.

**Methods**

**Questionnaire**

This research was part of a larger study dealing with current issues in high school athletics. We developed a three item questionnaire to examine the issues of championship site selection for the 51 state high school athletic associations. Respondents were asked the following questions: (a) whether their states enjoyed a bidding process to determine sites for state championships; (b) if so, what criteria were used; and (c) what sports, in their respective state, occupied a permanent championship site.

**Data Collection**

Questionnaires were sent to the 51 executive directors of state high school athletic associations, along with a cover letter explaining the purpose of this research. A follow-up postcard was sent to executive directors who did not return the questionnaire within two weeks. After one month, 20 questionnaires (39.2%) were returned. The authors made phone calls to those who had not returned the questionnaire. A total of 26 questionnaires (51.0%) were collected but only 24 were used in the analysis of data due to non or incomplete responses to our three main questions concerning site selection.

Respondents ranged in age from 44 to 67 ($M = 56.58; SD = 5.99$), with only 2 of the respondents being female (7.7%). The respondents were primarily Caucasian (92.3%) but one Asian-American and Hispanic-American also completed the survey. The level of education varied but most respondents identified their highest level of education achieved as graduate (Bachelors-8%, Masters-48%, Doctoral-44%). Respondents were also asked to identify what athletic and educational positions they held in the past. Athletically, the study’s respondents indicated they previously served as assistant coaches (88.5%), head coaches (84.6%), and athletic directors (73.1%). Furthermore, within an educational context, the study’s respondents indicated they held positions as teachers (96.2%), assistant principals (34.6%), principals (46.2%), district level administrators (11.5%), assistant superintendents (3.8%), and superintendents (11.5%).

**Statistical Analysis**

To help control for non-response error, methods proposed by Miller and Smith (1983) were used. According to Miller and Smith, late respondents are often similar to non-respondents; in other words, late respondents are assumed to be typical of non-respondents. For this study, late respondents ($n = 6$) were defined as those who returned their questionnaire after follow-up phone calls were made. On all variables of interest for this study, t-tests were used to determine whether there was a statistical difference between the means of early and late respondents. Results showed no significant difference between early and late respondents on all variables of interest. Thus, it was concluded the non-respondents were not different from the respondents.

**Results**

**Bidding Process for State Championships**

With regards to state championship site selection, 11 of 24 respondents (45.8%) stated they had a bidding process. The most often used criteria in this bidding process were stadium/arena
availability (50%), availability of hotels (45.8%), and stadium/arena size (41.7%). Other criteria used included amenities of city (37.5%), monetary guarantees (33.3%), availability of transportation (20.8%), rotational rules (i.e., site must rotate between cities; 12.5%), media coverage (8.3%), and size of the city (4.2%).

Permanent Championship Sites

All but four states (15.4%) reported they had at least one sport with a permanent championship site. The most common sports with permanent championship sites were boy’s basketball (57.7%), girl’s basketball (53.8%), boy’s and girl’s cross country (50% each), and football (50%). For a complete list of the number of states with a permanent championship site (by sport), see Table 1.

Discussion and Concluding Remarks

The news articles and responses to our questionnaire demonstrate a variety of issues concerning the selection of championship and playoff locations. Within this article, the authors attempted to report about the striking differences and shared practices between states in order to shed more light on the seemingly mysterious phenomenon of championship/playoff site selection procedures.

Interestingly, not every state provides communities and/or schools the opportunity to host state high school championship or playoff contests. For instance, of the 24 state high school governing bodies responding to this questionnaire, over one-half (n=13) had no official bid process. In these instances, we found the executive director/commissioner and small athletic board members often selected playoff/championship locations. We see allowing a single individual to make site selection decisions as an especially dangerous arrangement because an individual can certainly be more easily influenced than a group of people. For example, Spanberg (2003) suggests despite the make-up of the community “successful bids are invariably backed by extensive coalition building among local hospitality, government, and business executives”, (p.15). Therefore, we believe a larger committee would be better equipped to manage all these groups to make such an important decision because some things can surely be overlooked influenced without the help or support of others.

When bids were accepted to host championship/playoff contests, we found some criteria emerged more frequently than others during the evaluation process. For example, the results reported in this article show facility and hotel availability, along with facility size, city amenities, and monetary guarantees surfaced as the greatest focus for bid evaluators. The media and size of the city had very little influence in most state’s bid evaluation process. Delpy (1998) and Bramwell (1997) suggest all selection processes should be comprehensive and require much detail from potential bidding communities because this would likely eliminate disappointments and generate fewer surprises. Some items mentioned by Bramwell (1997) reveal a standardized bid process should also include demographic information, perceived match of event to community/facility resources, anticipated local interest, and a comparison to competing communities with some of the items mentioned above.

We feel the lack of an official and comprehensive bid proposal process was especially peculiar because most states likely possess at least one revenue generating sport. Crockett (1997) and others feel competition between communities for mega-events would likely prompt a list of guarantees (e.g. sponsorship, television, and spectator revenue), which we believe could benefit the student-athletes and the state athletic association’s coffers (Bramwell, 1997; Spanberg, 2003). Delpy (1998) also suggests behaviors such as these again prevent the best match from occurring between host cities and events which would produce the best experience for all involved.

Another interesting finding of this study suggests some sports accepted permanent homes for their contests but many did not. In general, the typical revenue producing sports (football and boys/girls’ basketball), along with cross-country, were most likely to have a permanent home. Alabama’s Legion Field and Kentucky’s Rupp Arena exist as such structures for their state’s high school football and basketball championships, respectively. While other sports do not have a permanent home in most states, a large majority of states (84.6%) reported that at least one sport within their state found a permanent home for their championship contests.

Some state association-governing bodies also mentioned the importance of the media, student-athlete, and financial concerns, but these appeared disproportionately low compared to what we anticipated. The lack of focus on media attention when selecting sites appears to suggest that championships could be more valuable as a marketing, money, and effective source of revenue in the future for many states. Specifically, if more importance was placed on the opportunities for increased media coverage, state associations could increase financial gains that would benefit both the state association and the student-athletes. For instance, student-athletes could better secure health, travel, and overall experience benefits with greater media attention.

We also found the various state associations overwhelmingly reported they sought to produce the best experience for their student-athletes and spectators, but many demonstrated behaviors, which could be construed as counterproductive to this mission. For example, the lack of focus on monetary issues or a good match between community and event demonstrates this point. Some state athletic association may have the opportunity to improve the future of the championships and the overall experience with greater attention to revenue generating activities and matching other qualities. Overall, this means finding more appropriate and better revenue generating facilities or locations.

Interestingly, respondents did not recognize safety concerns and security issues as a major area of emphasis when determining host sites despite the fact we live in a more security conscious time. Fried (2002) suggests anyone considering a venue for events should, “take the time to carefully consider whether venue sites are taking the extra steps necessary to provide participants and guests with as safe environment as possible”, (p. 35). Perhaps this category could join others in standardized bidding guidelines. Clearly, this benefits state associations from potential legal problems, which could arise during what we might agree to be highly passionate contests. Finally, this topic appears appropriate because it prompts the monitoring of disturbances in the crowd. Matching a secure and safe facility with an event likely produces a more fan friendly environment, which could potentially encourage more spending and a greater image to the surrounding region. Again, a favorable image and economic returns are often mentioned as reasons.
communities seek mega-events like interscholastic championships and playoffs.

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Table 1
States with a Permanent Championship Site by Sport

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<th>Sport</th>
<th>Sample size</th>
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