

When They Grow Up They Want To Be What?

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It's not unusual at all to get a call in the MHSAA office from time to time from an education reporter at a media outlet. They find themselves in the position of covering something related to school sports that falls outside the lines of the playing field, and get referred to us by their own sports staff.

But the call I took right before the holidays absolutely flabbergasted me. The reporter wanted my reaction to a school district study of students as they progressed from the eighth grade to the twelfth grade about their career aspirations. In this particular school district, the study showed that the top occupation was not a teacher, not a public service position like a fire fighter, law enforcement agent or emergency medical technician, not a business leader – but a professional athlete.

What!? A professional athlete? Incredible!

Depending on your source, the odds of becoming a professional athlete are 1 in 25 thousand for a white male, 1 in 50 thousand for a black male and 1 in 330 thousand for a Hispanic male. For every 10 million white basketball players, 28 make the pros; and it's 65 of every 10 million for black basketball players. In football, those numbers are 16 out of a million white players, 21 out of a million black players, and 4 out of a million Hispanic players. In baseball, it's 12 in a million for whites, 3 in a million for blacks, and 2 in a million for Hispanics.

All of this for an average professional career that lasts five years. To give this some additional perspective, the average player's salary in major league baseball in 2007 was approaching 3 million dollars. Divide that by 162 games and for three days work, a baseball player makes about what the average public school teacher made for an entire year. Yet we think nothing of what that ball player makes, and complain that it's wrong for teachers to make what they get. So where do they get these ideas, the reporter asked. I opined that when we were little kids we all had ideas about what we'd do when we grew up – but we had no understanding of what we were talking about. By the 8th grade, however, and certainly by the 12th grade, kids ought to be able to somewhat comprehend the different career options out there, and the probability of getting there.

Which made the number one answer of becoming a professional athlete all the more ludicrous – or all the more disturbing.

I told the reporter I wasn't sure of how the seed got planted, but I knew how this weed could be rooted out. Parents really

need to become more aware of the realities in play here – but my generation of parents failed miserably in this respect, and the generation behind us is even worse.

If you need proof, an old coach I visited with recently told me he saw today's coaches running kids in and out of the lineup with no scheme, with no purpose, with no other reason than to keep parents off their backs. And we agreed that it probably was as true to a degree at the collegiate level as well.

But coaches don't get off scot free here. Every time they talk about a kid playing at the next so-called level, talk to them about specialization in a single sport, or fight with another coach in their own school about which sport that youngster will or won't play, they poison the waters themselves.

This is one of those things that makes you wonder if the perspective battle, the need to keep school sports an after-school activity chronologically in the school day and in the order of what's really important, isn't tipping in favor of the dark side – the win-at-

all-costs, play year-round, be like the colleges and the pros, get a college scholarship and become a pro athlete mentality.

If the scale is tipping that way, it doesn't bode well for the future of school sports because when we stop being educational,

we're not worthy of being sponsored by schools. There's plenty of non-school programs where kids can play sports and have their

perspectives twisted. When it happens in our own buildings – and it is happening in our own buildings – it's time to step back and

look at what we do, how we do it and why we do it.

— John Johnson

MHSAA Communications Director

NOTE: This commentary can be heard this week on the radio program MHSAA Perspective,