

Fans

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“The attendance was excellent, and I’m sure that had to do with the weather,” said Snell. “But another thing is that the schools we lost with the five classes tended to be schools closer to Augusta than they were to Bangor like Medomak Valley [of Waldoboro], Erskine Academy [of South China] and Oceanside [of Rockland-Thomaston, all of whom moved up to Class A North, which played its tournament at the Augusta Civic Center].

“And the schools that replaced them were mostly from Aroostook and Washington counties that always have supported their teams well here — not that those other schools didn’t,” he added.

A scheduling tightrope in Augusta

The five-class format changes served fans of several tournament-qualifying midcoast schools well, particularly followers of the Oceanside and Medomak Valley boys teams who hopped onto Route 17 for the shorter drive to Augusta, leading to a well-attended clash between the rivals in the Class A North final.

Doran Stout, athletic administrator at Erskine Academy and site director for the Class AA-A North and Class C-D South tournaments held at the Augusta Civic Center, did not have final attendance figures available but described the turnout there as “up”.

“When you tie the whole package up, I think things went just as well as I think they possibly could, to be honest,” he said. “Every day is not going to be a perfect day, but they were as close to perfect as they could get, I think.”

Stout said overall tourney attendance in Augusta was boosted by large crowds for last Saturday’s Class D state finals in the afternoon and the Class C state championship games at night — games

that like all other state finals were televised by the Maine Public Broadcasting Network.

The Class D games featured the Rangeley and Shead of Eastport girls and the Valley of Bingham and Easton boys. The Class C doubleheader involved the Narraguagus of Harrington and Boothbay girls and the George Stevens Academy of Blue Hill and Waynflete of Portland boys.

“I was blown away by the attendance at the Class C and D state finals,” said Stout. “It’s incredible to think of the size of those schools and the size of the towns they represent and the number of people who turned out. It far exceeded my expectations in a good way.

“It was louder Saturday than it had been all week long,” he said.

Officials in Augusta did walk a scheduling tightrope of sorts, with adoption of the five-class format adding a fourth class to their tournament schedule.

That meant several eight-game days early in the tournament, but thanks to generally good weather, only two Class D games were postponed from one day to the next.

“I’ve got to tell you we drew a really long straw, but we had just one overtime game, and it was the 52nd game of the week, the last game of the week, so things were able to run on time,” said Stout.

“I’ll be honest, and I don’t think I’m letting out any secrets, but we weren’t sure exactly how we were going to adjust if we had lost one of those eight-game days. I’m not sure what we would have done, but we did not have to worry about it, we got through,” he said.

One area where attendance results reportedly were less stellar was the inaugural Class AA North tourney in Augusta.

That event began with quarterfinal doubleheaders for girls and boys beginning at 5:30 p.m. on the Wednesday and Thursday before the traditional start of the tournament week — both school nights. Attendance was

modest both nights, with fewer than 400 tickets reportedly sold for the girls doubleheader.

While attendance improved as that event continued, the girls Class AA North final between Edward Little of Auburn and Oxford Hills of South Paris reportedly outdrew the boys regional final between Portland and Deering of Portland.

“I expected a much bigger turnout, especially for those quarterfinal games, and I don’t know what the reason is,” said Stout. “I was told they had a real good turnout for the AA finals down in Portland, which is in their backyard, but when I see literally 80 or 90 percent of the townspeople from Eastport and Easton and Rangeley and Narraguagus and Valley, etc., drive to the Augusta Civic Center, I find it hard to accept that Portland to Augusta is too much of a drive.”

The Portland scene

While attendance for the Class AA North boys and girls quarterfinals that kicked off the tournament on Feb. 10 and 11 in Augusta was less than anticipated, so, too, was turnout for the Class AA South quarterfinals held the same evenings at the Portland Exposition Building.

“I know they had bad [AA quarterfinal] crowds in Augusta, but we didn’t have the excuse of long travel in Portland, and we saw the same phenomenon,” said Gary Stevens, athletic administrator at Thornton Academy of Saco and a member of the Classes AA-A-B South tournament committee.

“I know people are saying it was because the games were at midweek, but I’ve hosted preliminary-round games in my gym on Tuesday or Wednesday for the right to play at the Expo, and we’ve had bigger crowds for those games than we saw at the Expo for a neutral-site, tournament quarterfinal. I’ve seen much bigger crowds at a prelim game,” he said.

The Class AA South girls quarterfinals matched Thornton Academy against

Bonny Eagle of Buxton and South Portland against Scarborough. The boys quarterfinals pitted South Portland against Sanford and Massabesic of Waterboro against Scarborough — though Stevens said Massabesic fans provided solid support for their team.

“I think the Wednesday night-Thursday night quarterfinal games — and we had to do that particularly in Augusta because the rest of the schedule there was so tight — were not ideal while we were still in school,” said Durost.

Attendance at the Class A South quarterfinals over the first weekend was much stronger, Stevens said, as it was for subsequent rounds once the tournament moved to the Cross Insurance Arena for the regional semifinals.

The biggest crowds in Portland turned out for last Saturday’s Class A and Class AA state finals, which featured a Class A girls battle of the unbeatens between York and Lawrence of Fairfield and a Class AA boys matchup between Portland and South Portland.

“We’ve had the conversation since then that there was no way had we not split the AA crowds that we could have gotten both the AA girls crowd [Gorham and Edward Little of Auburn played at 6 p.m.] and the AA boys crowd [for a 9:30 p.m. start] into the facility at the same time,” said Durost.

“We’ve also had the conversation that if that boys game had been in Augusta, and recognizing that Portland and South Portland wouldn’t have brought as many fans to Augusta as they did to Portland, that crowd probably would not have fit into Augusta,” he said.

Discussion points

The tight tournament schedule in Augusta, combined with the low fan turnout for Class AA boys and girls quarterfinals in both

Augusta and Portland as well as for the Portland-Deering Class AA North boys final, may lead to renewed conversation about the organization of the state’s new class for its largest basketball-playing schools.

“The AA issue is something that’s going to be monitored and discussed,” said Durost. “We have one more year in this classification cycle, and I wouldn’t be surprised if the conversation is going to be held.

“That doesn’t mean anything is going to change, but the conversation will be held around whether having the two regions North and South for AA is what the schools long-term are going to want to do,” he said.

One option discussed before the current format was approved behind the idea of providing AA schools the same chance to win a regional title as is the case in the other classes would have placed all Class AA programs statewide in one 16-team division (17 for girls including McAuley of Portland).

That would have led to a single state tournament at one locale, most likely in Portland where the Cross Insurance Arena and Expo might provide more scheduling flexibility.

Such a move would ease the scheduling burden in Augusta, which in that case would return to hosting just three classes.

“We were able to get through this year with four classes in Augusta because Mother Nature didn’t hurt us badly,” said Durost. “But if we have a typical year where we lost a full day or even parts of two different days because of weather, we’d have a really difficult time packing everything into that tournament week in Augusta.

“Those two things might be connected in some ways. No. 1, what will the AA schools do looking to the future, and depending on what they want to do will that have an impact on whether there remains four classes in Augusta or not?” he said.

Speirs

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bogeys on the front nine. So I pressed on the back nine to try to make up for it, and I kept making bogeys,” said Speirs. “I was trying too hard. I learned a lesson.”

In both tournaments, he discovered the importance of “cleaning up rounds” and not letting them get away.

During the break, Speirs has worked with his swing coach, John Tattershall, and played in one Monday PGA qualifier but failed to earn a spot in last weekend’s Honda Classic in Palm Beach Gardens, Florida.

He said his goal for the upcoming tournaments is to be “as consistent as I can be” and is confident that better days are ahead.

Tackling

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May and submitted for final approval in June.

The league’s coaches agreed to the move in a vote last week, the New York Times reported earlier on Tuesday.

Research has increasingly linked the head injuries that are commonly experienced in football, hockey and other contact sports with chronic traumatic encephalopathy, a condition that causes lesions on the brain and can lead to aggression and dementia later in life.

One leader of the effort to limit college players’ concussion risks is Dartmouth College’s head football coach, Buddy Teevens, a former University of Maine head football coach, who last season introduced a robot tackling dummy developed by engineering students at the Hanover, New Hampshire, school.

The motorized dummy, called the “Mobile Virtual Player” is the approximate size and weight of a college football player, and allowed Dartmouth’s players to practice full-speed hits while limiting the risk of injury.

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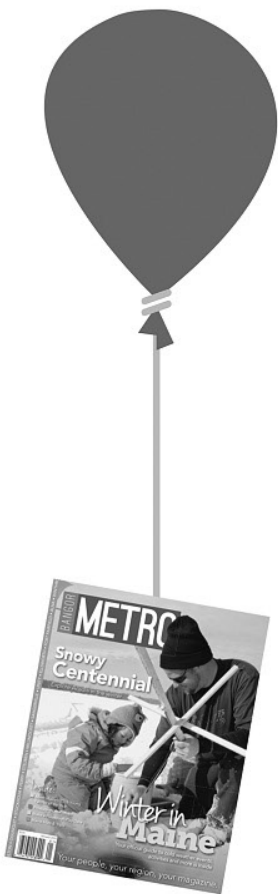
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