

Opinion: Too much high school football

By Joe Mathews

How many state champions does California need?

There's a new answer to this question: 13. That's how many state football champions California will crown this weekend during five state bowl games at Sacramento State's Hornet Stadium and eight other games around the state. That's a big increase from the five state champions we had in 2014—and 13 more than we had before the state bowl games were launched a decade ago.



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Even in the largest football-crazy state of this football-crazy country, that's an awful lot of football. Indeed, California's ever-expanding high school football season now starts the last week of August and extends into the winter holiday break. And some teams seeking state titles this weekend will be playing their 16th games—the same number the pros in the National Football League play each year.

You may be surprised to read this, especially if you've listened to recent news stories and medical studies about the need to protect young bodies and brains from concussions and other injuries. Last year, the California enacted a law that imposed new limits on physical contact for school football

teams; they can't have full-contact practices during the off-season, and can hold only two full contact, 90-minute practices a week during the season.

But those rules didn't cover games. And so California's high school football industry—with its coaches and players and even cable TV sports networks—continues to grow more rapidly than the state's pension obligations.

To be fair, it isn't merely the will to win driving this expansion. It's also about the well-intentioned desire to include everyone. This latest expansion was fueled by complaints that the state bowl games included only a fraction of the state's 50 sectional champions. So this year, the CIF voted to include all 50 champs in bowl games. Those state playoffs culminate this weekend with 13 games between the top teams from north and south in 13 different competitive levels.

For football fans, that may sound like an exciting weekend full of possibilities. But California high school football is highly predictable. Most of the same high schools dominate year after year, in part because thousands of students routinely use liberal transfer rules to move to the schools with the best sports programs.

In this way, high school football has been decoupled from local communities, with elite teams dominated by ringers from other places. Private schools often have a big advantage in this high school free agent market, and many of them are national powers that play games against teams from out of state. These days, it is big news when a public high school led by players from its own community ends up competing for a championship.

Tellingly, this weekend's signature game—the Open Division bowl game between the De La Salle High School Spartans, a Catholic school in Concord and the Centennial High Huskies of Corona—is a rematch of last year's title game. Indeed, De La

Salle may be America's greatest football factory, having won five of the last six Open Division championships.

This year's state playoff expansion comes at an interesting time. A new film on football concussions, starring Will Smith, whose son Trey was recently a star player at an elite football high school in Southern California, hits theaters on Christmas. The film dramatizes the story of doctor Bennet Omalu, who made discoveries about the impact of contact sports on the brain.

Omalu, now the chief medical examiner of San Joaquin County and a professor at UC Davis, recently questioned whether kids should play at all, given the evidence that football and other contact sports cause brain damage. In the *New York Times*, he also suggested that the law establish an age of consent for playing football: "We have a legal age for drinking alcohol, for joining the military, for voting, for smoking, for driving, and for consenting to have sex. We must have the same when it comes to protecting the organ that defines who we are as a human being."

In the context of that sober warning, 13 state championship bowl games sounds like an unlucky number. The 50 schools in the state playoffs are already champions, of their sections. Is it really necessary to expose them to more risk in the name of more championships?

Would California really be diminished if it had no state football champions? Yes, there are schedules in place to hold this huge round of state bowl games through 2017. But if Californians let these unnecessary games go on for even another year, we all ought to have our heads examined.

Joe Mathews is California and innovation editor for Zócalo Public Square, for which he writes the Connecting California column.