Sports Litigation Alert

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# From Two-a-Days and Dirt to Deion Sanders: The Teddy Bridgewater Act and the Legal Transformation of High School Athletics

**By Ivan Parron, Esq.**

Growing up in South Florida, high school athletics were more than just games. They were a pathway to opportunity, community identity, and, in many cases, a bridge to higher education and professional careers.

I attended Hialeah-Miami Lakes High School during one of the most remarkable eras in the school's athletic history. Our baseball program won a national championship during my sophomore year, and our basketball team captured a national championship during my senior year. I played football myself, although our team did not enjoy the same level of success.



**Ivan Parron**

In the 1980s, however, "grit" was an understatement when it came to high school football. We endured two-a-day summer practices in the scorching South Florida heat, often with little more than occasional breaks to drink from a water hose. If you got hurt during a play, the trainers' famous prescription was frequently, "rub some dirt on it." The concepts of concussion protocols, hydration monitoring, heat acclimatization, and sports medicine specialists were not nearly as prevalent as they are today.

Like many young athletes chasing a dream, I eventually walked on at Florida State University in 1987. At the time, Florida State was a national powerhouse loaded with elite talent, including a young Deion Sanders. My collegiate football career lasted exactly one practice. The first hit convinced me that perhaps my future would be better served in a classroom than on a football field.

What remained with me, however, was a firsthand understanding of the profound role coaches play in the lives of young athletes. Coaches are often mentors, counselors, disciplinarians, role models, and, in some cases, surrogate parental figures. That reality sits at the heart of Florida's recently enacted "Teddy Bridgewater Act," legislation that may prove to be one of the most significant developments in the legal regulation of high school athletics in recent years.

More importantly, the Act serves as a useful lens through which to examine the rapidly evolving legal issues confronting high school athletics throughout the United States.

**The Origin of the Teddy Bridgewater Act**

The legislation emerged following a highly publicized controversy involving former NFL quarterback Teddy Bridgewater.

After retiring from professional football, where he played quarterback for eight NFL franchises, including the Miami Dolphins, Teddy Bridgewater returned to his alma mater, Miami Northwestern Senior High School, as head football coach. During his tenure, Bridgewater publicly acknowledged that he had personally covered various expenses benefiting student-athletes, including meals, transportation, recovery treatments, and other forms of support.

Under existing Florida High School Athletic As-

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sociation ("FHSAA") rules, such assistance could potentially be characterized as an impermissible benefit provided to student-athletes. The resulting scrutiny led to disciplinary action and reignited a statewide debate regarding the appropriate role of coaches in supporting student-athletes, particularly those from economically disadvantaged backgrounds.

In response, Florida lawmakers enacted Senate Bill 178, commonly referred to as the Teddy Bridgewater Act.

The legislation amends Section 1006.20, Florida Statutes, and requires the FHSAA to adopt bylaws authorizing a head coach to use personal funds to support student-athlete welfare. The law permits head coaches of Florida middle school and high school athletic programs to spend up to $15,000 annually per athletic team from their own personal resources to assist student-athletes with expenses such as food, transportation, physical therapy, rehabilitation services, and similar support.

The Act also incorporates reporting requirements, parental consent provisions, transparency safeguards, and anti-recruiting protections designed to prevent abuse. Significantly, the legislation creates a rebuttable presumption that expenditures within the statutory cap are not impermissible benefits if made in compliance with the law and not for recruiting purposes.

Governor Ron DeSantis and legislative supporters emphasized that coaches frequently serve roles extending far beyond athletic instruction. Particularly in underserved communities, coaches often become trusted mentors who help bridge economic and social gaps confronting student-athletes and their families.

**A Legal Tension: Amateurism Versus Student Welfare**

At its core, the Teddy Bridgewater Act highlights a longstanding tension within scholastic athletics: the conflict between amateurism rules and student welfare.

Historically, state athletic associations have adopted strict eligibility and amateurism regulations designed to preserve competitive balance and deter recruiting abuses. Such rules generally prohibit athletes from receiving benefits that might influence school selection decisions or provide a competitive advantage.

The rationale behind these regulations is understandable. If schools or coaches are permitted to provide substantial benefits to athletes, the concern is that athletic competition becomes distorted by financial inducements rather than educational opportunities.

Yet the realities confronting many student-athletes often present a more complicated picture.

For some athletes, transportation to practice, access to nutritious meals, rehabilitation services, athletic equipment, or basic recovery resources are not luxuries. They are necessities. The same assistance that may be characterized as an impermissible benefit under a strict compliance framework may simultaneously be essential to a student's health, safety, and ability to participate in school athletics.

The Teddy Bridgewater controversy exposed how rigid regulatory structures can sometimes collide with well-intentioned mentorship. The new legislation represents Florida's attempt to strike a balance by permitting limited support while maintaining safeguards against recruiting misconduct.

Whether that balance can be maintained in practice remains an open question.

**Recruiting and Competitive Advantage Concerns**

One of the most significant legal concerns raised by the Act involves recruiting.

Although the legislation expressly prohibits expenditures made for recruiting purposes, distinguishing between legitimate welfare assistance and indirect recruiting inducements may prove challenging.

Consider two competing programs. One coach has the financial ability to contribute the full $15,000 permitted under the statute. Another coach lacks the personal resources to do so. Even if both coaches act in complete good faith, student-athletes and their families may naturally gravitate toward programs capable of providing greater support.

The issue becomes even more complicated in an era characterized by increasing athlete mobility. Florida, like many states, has experienced growing scrutiny regarding transfers, school choice programs, and athlete movement between districts and schools.

As a result, FHSAA administrators and school districts may face heightened enforcement responsibilities as they attempt to monitor compliance while preventing the appearance of recruiting-related conduct.

Future disputes may test where courts and regulators draw the line between mentorship and inducement.

**Equal Protection and Competitive Equity Concerns**

The Act also raises broader concerns regarding equity.

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Not all schools possess equal resources. Likewise, not all coaches possess equal financial means.

A coach in an affluent community may have greater personal resources or access to booster-supported networks capable of providing assistance to student-athletes. Coaches in lower-income districts may not have similar opportunities.

While the Act imposes annual spending limits, disparities in available resources may nonetheless create practical competitive advantages.

Although constitutional Equal Protection challenges appear unlikely, policymakers may continue to grapple with whether such disparities undermine the principles of competitive fairness that athletic associations traditionally seek to protect.

These concerns mirror broader debates already occurring within collegiate athletics regarding NIL opportunities, donor collectives, and resource disparities among institutions.

**Liability and Expanded Duties of Care**

Another important legal issue involves potential liability exposure.

When coaches begin directly funding transportation, rehabilitation services, recovery treatments, or other forms of athlete support, questions inevitably arise regarding responsibility if something goes wrong.

For example:

- What liability may arise if transportation arranged or funded by a coach results in an accident?
- What standards apply when coaches recommend rehabilitation providers or recovery programs?
- Could a coach's direct involvement in providing welfare support be cited as evidence of expanded duties of care?

The Act authorizes certain expenditures, but it does not immunize coaches or schools from traditional negligence claims.

Plaintiffs' attorneys may argue that a coach who voluntarily assumes responsibility for aspects of an athlete's welfare also assumes corresponding legal obligations. Whether courts ultimately adopt such arguments remains uncertain, but the possibility should not be overlooked.

School districts and insurers will likely monitor these developments closely.

**Concussion Liability and Athlete Safety**

The legal responsibilities of schools and coaches extend well beyond recruiting and eligibility concerns.

Over the past two decades, concussion-related litigation has fundamentally altered the legal landscape of amateur athletics. High-profile lawsuits involving professional leagues, collegiate athletic programs, and educational institutions have increased public awareness regarding athlete safety obligations.

Florida law already requires the FHSAA to maintain concussion management protocols, educational requirements, medical clearance procedures, and return-to-play standards.

The contrast between today's environment and the era of "rub some dirt on it" could not be more dramatic.

Modern coaches operate within a far more sophisticated regulatory framework governing athlete health and safety. The Teddy Bridgewater Act intersects with this reality because many of the expenditures authorized under the legislation involve rehabilitation, recovery services, and athlete welfare initiatives.

Although the Act does not create new causes of action, future litigation may explore whether coaches who become more directly involved in athlete support services assume heightened responsibilities regarding health and safety decisions.

**NIL, Social Media, and the Professionalization of High School Athletics**

The Teddy Bridgewater Act cannot be viewed in isolation.

It arrives during a period of unprecedented transformation in amateur sports.

The emergence of NIL rights, social media monetization, private training academies, transfer liberalization, year-round recruiting exposure, and youth sports commercialization has fundamentally altered the landscape facing student-athletes.

While NIL legislation initially focused on collegiate athletes, high school athletes in several jurisdictions have already begun securing endorsement opportunities and building substantial personal brands through social media platforms.

As a result, legal issues once associated primarily with colleges and professional sports increasingly appear at the high school level.

These issues include:

- Eligibility disputes;

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- Athlete transfers;
- Privacy rights;
- Intellectual property ownership;
- Social media conduct;
- Sponsorship relationships;
- Concussion management;
- Title IX compliance;
- Employment issues involving coaches; and
- Institutional risk management.

The distinctions between scholastic, collegiate, and professional athletics continue to narrow.

The modern high school athletic director increasingly resembles a compliance officer. The modern coach increasingly resembles a mentor, recruiter, risk manager, and public relations representative all at once.

**Title IX and Gender Equity Considerations**

Any discussion of high school athletics would be incomplete without acknowledging Title IX.

Although the Teddy Bridgewater Act is facially neutral and applies equally to boys' and girls' athletic programs, schools must remain mindful of federal gender equity obligations when implementing policies related to athlete support and resource allocation.

If financial assistance or welfare benefits are disproportionately concentrated within certain sports or demographic groups, questions may arise regarding whether comparable opportunities are being provided across athletic programs.

While Title IX analysis remains highly fact-specific, administrators should remain attentive to ensuring that implementation of the Act does not inadvertently create inequitable treatment among student-athletes.

**Looking Ahead**

As a former Florida high school athlete, I understand why so many coaches become deeply invested in the lives of their players.

Many young athletes depend on those relationships for guidance that extends far beyond the playing field. Coaches frequently become the adults who provide structure, accountability, encouragement, and opportunity during pivotal moments in a student's life.

The challenge for lawmakers, regulators, school administrators, and athletic associations is ensuring that compassion and mentorship can coexist with rules designed to preserve fairness, transparency, and competitive integrity.

The Teddy Bridgewater Act represents Florida's effort to navigate that balance.

Whether it ultimately becomes a model for other states or a source of future litigation remains to be seen. What is already clear, however, is that high school athletics have entered an era of increasing legal complexity. Questions involving athlete welfare, liability exposure, NIL rights, recruiting restrictions, Title IX compliance, and institutional governance will continue to shape the future of scholastic sports.

The days of drinking from a water hose between practices and rubbing dirt on injuries may be gone. In their place stands a far more sophisticated—and legally consequential—world of high school athletics.

The Teddy Bridgewater Act may simply be the latest chapter in that story.

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