

SPO

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Track finals get supportive home

It was a little over three years ago that the Michigan High School Athletic Association first introduced the concept of tournament cities.

It was a great idea at the time, and it just keeps getting better.

Battle Creek was the state's first tournament city, hosting the 1987-88 state wrestling tournament. All four classes were contested in the Cereal City, giving wrestling fans the chance to go from site to site to take in the action.

Since then, Lansing became the home of the state golf tournaments, Kalamazoo got volleyball, Battle Creek grabbed baseball and softball and Grand Rapids got track and field.

That means Saturday more than 20,000 fans and several thousand more athletes and coaches will be in West Michigan going for individual and team state titles.

The Class A meet is set for Houseman Field, Class B will be at Wyoming Park, Class C will be at Byron Center and Class D will be at Forest Hills Northern.

Field events and running preliminaries start at each site at 10 a.m., with finals beginning just after lunch.

One-site final wasn't feasible

"At one point, we were studying the possibility of having a two-day, one-site final, but eventually the idea was rejected," said John Johnson of the MHSAA. "The idea just wouldn't fly. We would have had to add a district level to the track qualifying, make some kids take time off from school, and ultimately, wind up with fewer athletes in the state meet.

"The state finals are the ultimate high school meet, something for as many athletes as possible to experience. So we kept the one-day schedule, and put each class at a separate site."

Grand Rapids is a natural for the track and field finals for two reasons. West Michigan has a long history of producing great athletes, and the Grand Rapids area has a solid reputation for supporting major sporting events.

"The community has a great reputation for investing itself in whatever comes to town," Johnson said. "That's why it is such an attractive area for us.

"We know the city will take to the finals. We had some of our most successful girls' basketball finals when it was hosted by Grand Valley State University, and this event involves many more schools."

The state finals will be in Grand Rapids for the next two springs.

"Allowing a city to host an event like this allows that city to focus on the event. But we are also taking care to make sure we don't let a city burn out on an event," Johnson said.

Setup allows breather for host cities

"Grand Rapids will host for at least three years, then for at least two years we'll run the event on the east side of the state. That evens out the travel requirement for the schools involved.

"Our intent is that this will go back and forth to the east and west sides of the state every two or three years, to give the local communities time to fine tune their championships, and then relax for a couple of years before they have to get back at it.

"We are excited about coming to Grand Rapids, because the city has always supported its high school programs."

Grand Rapids' summer starts with the River Bank Run in May, goes through the original (and largest) Gus Macker Tournament in July, and wraps up with the First of America Seniors Golf Tournament in September.

Playing host to the state's finest high school track and field athletes puts another major date on our summer sports calendar, and fills a void in June.

A lot of local track coaches and athletic administrators have worked very hard to put this weekend's events together, bringing thousands of visitors to town once again.

You don't have to have a student involved to enjoy good competition. The performances of the high school athletes is remarkable, and real fans appreciate good efforts, no matter what school colors the athletes are wearing.

It would be nice to see 20,000 local fans turn out to match the city's 20,000 visitors, to show the MHSAA what a real tournament city is.