Scholastic sports out of control?

Author Buzz Bissinger thinks so and will address the topic Thursday at Parkland.

By Keith Groller Of The Morning Call

He has written about everyone from Don Imus to Tony La Russa and from Gov. Ed Rendell to a once promising running back named James "Boobie" Miles at Permian High in Odessa, Texas.

H.G. Buzz Bissinger made "Boobie" famous with his best-selling book "Friday Night Lights," which was later turned into a feature film and NBC television series.

"Lights" chronicled the passion and excesses of high school football in an economically depressed Texas town.

But Bissinger knows that Odessa is not the only place where youth and scholastic sports can spin out of control.

That's why the Pulitzer Prize-winning author is eager to address an audience at 7:30 p.m. Thursday in the Parkland High auditorium in an event sponsored by the Lehigh Valley Coalition on Sports Ethics (LVCOSE).

While Bissinger will talk about "Friday Night Lights," he'll also talk about the problems plaguing youth sports.

"It has become my primary passion," Bissinger said. "The over-emphasis of youth sports in this country is reaching epidemic proportions. We're heading down the wrong path."

Bissinger has followed the news reports and seen the TV footage of brawls at youth events. He has read about a coach paying money to a pitcher to intentionally throw at another kid and about a father pulling a gun on a coach.

Those are the extreme cases, the headline-makers that draw our attention -- at least for a news cycle -- to the problems of youth sports.

Bissinger noted more subtle examples of over-exposure that have "drained the pure fun" from youth sports.

He talked about high school basketball players hiring agents, national newspapers running high school Top 25 polls, local media outlets turning athletes into gods at age 17, the glut of AAU-styled national high school tournaments backed by corporations, Web sites dedicated to ranking high school prospects and heavy-handed recruiting pitches given to 7th- and 8th-graders just to
get them into certain high schools.

"When did the emphasis change?" he said. "It's hard to pinpoint. But it probably began to change when someone figured out that there's gold to made in high school sports."

Bissinger decries the often ill-conceived, misinformed chase for college scholarship dollars many of the parents take their kids on. 

Figures recently cited by the National Collegiate Scouting Association show just how much of a long shot the quest for a full ride can be.

The NCSA says, "Only 5 percent of all boys and girls who participate in interscholastic sports will go on to compete in college at some level -- Division I, II, III, NAIA or Junior College. Of that figure, only eight-tenths of 1 percent will receive fully-funded scholarships."

And yet, the chase for dollars remains as intense as the Kentucky Derby.

Too many end up like Boobie Miles, the budding football star who was never the same after an injury and whose dreams of a college scholarship and NFL career were dashed in an instant.

"Boobie does a lot of these appearances with me and he's a very effective speaker," Bissinger said. "His story emphasizes the importance of getting a good education."

Bissinger dislikes the "specialization" forced upon athletes and bemoans the loss of the high school kid who could play three sports and still have time to enjoy his youth.

He knows too many parents who live their lives vicariously through their children's sports careers and are convinced that their little "Johnnys are the next Nolan Ryans or Emmitt Smiths."

"The odds of any kid earning a living playing sports are infinitesimal," he said. "Yet, they continue to push with blinders on. It takes over their lives."

Bissinger, a native New Yorker who lives in a suburb of Philadelphia, realizes that no one is immune to the grip that youth sports can have on even the most intelligent and rational people.

"I was a little league coach myself and was despicable at times," he said. "I got into a horrible fight with another coach in front of the kids. I saw how wrapped up I got into it and got out."

While he prefers the European "sports academy" system, and believes sports plays too large a role in our schools, Bissinger doesn't underestimate the positives of athletics.

"Some of the most formidable people I know are those who have successfully combined athletics and academics," he said. "They know how to compete."

Bissinger's appearance will include a question-and-answer session and a panel discussion. For tickets, call 610-282-1100, ex. 1244.