



The NFHS Voice



State Championships, Emerging Sports Create Excitement in Nation's Schools

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November is one of the busiest and grandest times in the world of high school sports and performing arts. Beginning with the last couple of weeks of October and extending into mid-December, more than 1,000 schools will be crowned STATE CHAMPION in a number of sports and performing arts activities.

All NFHS member associations offer state championships in multiple classes in the fall sports of girls volleyball, 11-player football and boys and girls cross country. In those three sports alone, more than 1.8 million student-athletes will be involved in that once-in-a-lifetime opportunity of “going to state.”

As is the case each year because of earlier winter weather, Alaska kicked off the football championship season a couple of weeks ago. Colony High School

defeated Juneau in Division I, while Lathrop High School won its second straight Division II title and Homer High School won its first Division III title.

By the time the Texas University Interscholastic League football championships conclude December 17, not only will state champions be crowned in football, girls volleyball and boys and girls cross country, but a number of other fall sports and performing arts as well.

Fifteen NFHS member associations provide state championships in girls field hockey, while more than half of the states conduct girls and boys soccer championships in the fall. Several state championships in golf, swimming and tennis are held in the fall as well, and three states conduct girls gymnastics and boys volleyball championships in the fall.

Beyond these longstanding, tried-and-true sports, the recent NFHS Athletics Participation Survey indicated participation by high school students in 69 different sports, as well as 16 Adapted sports and 16 Unified sports. In the past 10 years, almost 30 new sports have appeared in the survey and the growth of several sports qualifies for “Emerging Sports” discussion – led by girls wrestling.

Ten years ago, there were 8,235 girls participating in girls wrestling – mostly on boys teams as only three states had separate state championships for girls (California, Hawaii and Texas). With states such as Florida, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Missouri, Mississippi, Nebraska, New Jersey, North Dakota and Utah adding a separate state event for girls in recent years, there are now 33 states offering girls wrestling championships, and participation has jumped to 31,654.

In an article in *High School Today* earlier this year, Brenan Jackson, assistant director of the Utah High School Activities Association, and Corey Sobers, assistant director of athletics for the Florida High School Athletic Association, discussed the recent addition of girls wrestling in their states.

“Wrestling is a very unique sport. It is one of the toughest – if not the toughest – emotionally, physically and mentally on a young man or young woman,” Jackson said. “There’s a core group of girls across the state who wanted to be challenged in those areas of life. They like the competition and physical exertion that wrestling provides. We were glad that we were able to offer these girls the opportunity to compete so that they could experience it, and even work toward earning college scholarships.”

“The coaches around the state of Florida believe that girls wrestling is ready to explode once the opportunity is provided for them to wrestle other girls,” Sobers said. “Not only is that beneficial to female wrestlers, but it also will generate more interest in wrestling overall and hopefully even increase our pool of officials, including female officials.”

Perhaps destined for greater participation numbers than wrestling is flag football – the latest emerging sport for girls. Thanks, in part, to Nike and National Football League teams offering financial support to state associations for starting programs, 10 states have some level of girls flag football sponsorship, with four states currently conducting state championships – Alabama, Florida, Georgia and Nevada.

Pilot programs are being conducted in Colorado, California, New York, Arizona, Alaska and Montana – with others in the works. The latest survey indicated a 40 percent increase in students since the 2018-19 survey – 11,209 to 15,716 participants.

Florida has been involved with flag football for 20 years and has the most participants of any state. In another article in *High School Today*, Jeremy Hernandez, FHSAA assistant director of officials and flag football administrator, discussed the program’s growth.

“The numbers really shot up kind of quickly (after adding a second state championship division) – it’s been one of our fastest growing sports,” Hernandez said. “I believe a lot of our female athletes are already entrenched in that football culture, and just being able to play it themselves and show that females can be successful in that sport is probably one of the biggest factors.”

Another success story in recent years is Unified Sports, a Special Olympics program which supports teams composed of students with and without intellectual disabilities. The most recent NFHS participation survey showed a dramatic rise in Unified participation. With only 5,541 combined participants from 10 states in 2018-19, this year’s survey indicated 47,909 combined participants in almost 20 states.

Other emerging sports to watch include girls beach volleyball (two states with championships and 6,489 participants) and bass fishing (seven states with championships and 10,626 participants), among others. In other activity programs offered by states, a total of 19 associations are providing state championships in esports – up from 10 states just three years ago.

While participating in a state championship – or coaching, officiating or attending – is a special opportunity, the most important outcomes are displays of great sportsmanship and respect for everyone involved in the contests. In support of our current [nationwide emphasis](#), let’s have fun and put bad behavior on the bench at all school activities this year.

Dr. Karissa L. Niehoff is in her fifth year as chief executive officer of the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) in Indianapolis, Indiana. She is the first female to head the national leadership organization for high school athletics and performing arts activities and the sixth full-time executive director of the NFHS. She previously was

executive director of the Connecticut Association of Schools-Connecticut Interscholastic Athletic Conference for seven years.