




The NFHS Voice



Reinforcing the Educational Value of High School Sports, Other Activity Programs

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With all the changes that have occurred in college sports the past five to seven years, and the ripple effects that have surfaced at the high school level, there has never been a better time to reinforce the educational value of high school sports and other activity programs – as well as the important role of the 19,500 high schools and 51 NFHS member state associations that serve our nation's schools.

While a very small percentage of the almost eight million participants in high school sports will play at the college or professional levels, the majority will use the skills, knowledge, values and other intangibles learned through these education-based programs to land career-defining jobs and pave the way for their future.

Although policies on NIL and one-time athletic transfers have been making recent headlines, the focus must remain on the benefits that students receive from participating in sports and other activities. Those benefits include discipline, teamwork, social interaction with peers, improved academic performance, leadership and time management.

In addition, participation in high school sports and other activities boosts self-esteem and self-confidence and helps to produce a positive outlook on life. These activities also instill resilience and the ability to handle both success and failure. Athletes regularly face setbacks and have to persevere to learn from their mistakes.

Sports and other activities such as speech, debate, music and theatre support the academic mission of schools. Beyond the potential for athletic scholarships, participants in high school sports and other activities are viewed favorably by future employers. Many human resource leaders in major companies are drawn to former sports/activity participants because of these aforementioned traits.

Far too often, however, the focus of high school sports becomes the quest to earn an athletic scholarship and play sports at the college level – or beyond. While that opportunity exists, a dose of reality is worth considering.

About one percent of the 537,000 boys and 1.4 percent of the 373,000 girls who participate in high school basketball will play the sport at the NCAA Division I level. And of the one million-plus boys who play high school football, only three percent will play at the major college level.

And the chances of playing in the National Basketball Association (.03 percent) or the National Football League (.08 percent) are infinitesimal.

These statistics are not meant to deter hopes and dreams of playing at the next level, but they should reinforce the need for continued focus on the educational benefits. In fact, there are many surveys and reports indicating that participation in high school sports is a great predictor of career success in many fields other than sports.

Surveys have shown that more than 90 percent of CEOs of Fortune 500 companies played high school sports. Another recent survey by Ernst & Young of 821 high-level executives indicated that 90 percent of the women sampled played sports – and among those women in chief positions, the proportion rose to 96 percent.

The Drive Group, a national recruiting agency, says companies hire athletes because they achieve goals, are determined, put strategy into action, are team players, have never-give-up attitudes, perform under pressure, and are motivated and committed.

In high school, Meg Whitman, CEO of Hewlett-Packard, was the captain of the swimming team and also played lacrosse, tennis and basketball.

Lara Abrash, chair of Deloitte US who played softball growing up, said in an article on *Fortune.com*, “One lesson I still carry with me (on and off the field) is you don’t have to be the best, fastest or smartest person in the room to become a leader or to achieve success. Good leaders often find success in assembling the right team, developing a vision and strategy, aligning and empowering team members, and executing together to reach a shared goal. Sports have been invaluable in shaping my business philosophy.”

In the same article on *Fortune.com*, Artie Minson, CEO of LeafLink and former president of WeWork, said, “I was the co-captain of my high school cross country team where I learned the importance of running as a team and that the

amount of hard work and effort you put in on the practice runs when no one is watching is what determines the outcome at the race.”

Jon Cook, CEO of the world’s largest ad agency, VML, played three sports – football, basketball and baseball – in school. Cook noted that he “gravitated to team sports and there’s so much even today that I draw from those experiences. That high you get when you win alongside others—whether they’re your teammates or your colleagues—is truly out of this world.

“The way I see it, the importance of bringing a team together and being a unifier will never get old. Being an effective leader is about working together to achieve. Winning will always be fun, of course, but it’s about making sure everyone succeeds collectively, playing to their individual strengths while motivating and trusting each other implicitly.”

The real leaders in helping our nation’s schools provide these education-based opportunities through sports and other activity programs are the 51 NFHS member state high school associations. These associations, many of which have been in existence for more than 100 years, are the backbone of education-based activity programs and exist to serve, not to rule.

While these associations are tasked with eligibility and transfer rules, the rules are about protecting opportunities for all students, not limiting individual ambition. These leadership organizations ensure that every school – no matter its size or location – has a fair shot.

These education-based groups are focused on student well-being and safety. They also are involved in conducting many state championships; however, through the process of staging events, they are first and foremost building leaders, focusing on citizenship and sportsmanship, and strengthening communities.

Let's keep high school sports and other school activity programs focused on education, and let's continue to support the 19,800 high schools and 51 state associations so that every student has an opportunity to participate.

Dr. Karissa L. Niehoff is in her seventh 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.

About the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS)

The NFHS, based in Indianapolis, Indiana, is the national leadership organization for high school sports and performing arts activities. Since 1920, the NFHS has led the development of education-based interscholastic sports and performing arts activities that help students succeed in their lives. The NFHS sets direction for the future by building awareness and support, improving the participation experience, establishing consistent standards and rules for competition, and helping those who oversee high school sports and activities. The NFHS writes playing rules for 18 sports for boys and girls at the high school level. Through its 50 member state associations and the District of Columbia, the NFHS reaches more than 19,800 high schools and 12 million participants in high school activity programs, including more than 8 million in high school sports. As the recognized national authority on interscholastic activity programs, the NFHS conducts national meetings; sanctions interstate events; offers online publications and services for high school coaches and officials; sponsors professional organizations for high school coaches, officials, speech and debate coaches, and music adjudicators; serves as the national source for interscholastic coach training; and serves as a national information resource of interscholastic athletics and activities. For more information, visit the NFHS website at www.nfhs.org.

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