



The NFHS Voice



While Total 2019-20 Participation is Unavailable, High School Football Shows Promising Results

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Normally at this time of year, the NFHS releases the latest figures from its annual High School Athletics Participation Survey. One of the most important and successful endeavors in the organization's history, the NFHS has collected participation data through its 51 member state associations annually since 1971.

Before the 2018-19 school year, the number of participants in high school sports had increased for 29 consecutive years. Despite the first decline last year since 1988, we anticipated a quick turnaround in 2019-20 because of the continued strength of education-based high school athletics programs across the country.

There were encouraging reports last fall that football participation numbers were headed in a more positive direction. Interest in other fall sports continued to be at a high level, and winter sports were experiencing tremendous success. Then came the pandemic in mid-March, which shut down all high school sports competition.

Two-thirds of the states were unable to complete state basketball tournaments, and participants in the traditional spring sports of baseball, softball, track and field, and lacrosse – in most cases – were never able to take the field.

With spring sports unable to even get off the ground, state associations could not compile comprehensive surveys of sports participation for the 2019-20 school year. As a result, for the first time in the 50-year history of the survey, the NFHS is unable to release its annual summary of high school sports participation.

However, there is a silver lining to report. Though complete statistics are unavailable, numbers from a couple of sports last fall were obtained; and the optimism surrounding a positive trend in football participation came to fruition.

After annual declines of 23,311, 20,540 and 30,829 the past three years, participation by boys in high school 11-player football in 2019 dropped by only 2,489 – from 1,006,013 to 1,003,524. These numbers suggest to us that parents are appreciative of the risk minimization efforts that have been put in place. Every state has enacted rules that limit the amount of contact before the season and during practice, and every state has established concussion protocols and laws.

Participation in 11-player football reached an all-time high of 1,112,303 in 2008-09, and except for 2013-14, has declined every year since; however, this year's decline is the smallest in 10 years.

The continued enthusiasm for football has been evident this fall – even amid the COVID-19 pandemic. State associations have worked with government, education and health leaders to do everything possible to offer the sport at some time during the 2020-21 season.

Some of the 34 states that are conducting football this fall have started play, and there is a special sense of gratitude on the part of students, coaches, officials and fans for the opportunity. While there may be pauses with some players and teams quarantined, and while 17 other states will not play until later in the school year, the excitement and anticipation of Friday Night Lights continues.

In addition to football, girls volleyball continued its tremendous growth last fall, increasing by 9,751 participants for a total of 462,559. In the past 10 years, the sport has added 60,000 participants and has passed basketball as the No. 2 sport for girls behind track and field.

Though a complete participation report for 2019-20 will not be available due to the loss of spring sports, totals on more fall and winter sports from 2019-20 will be formulated in the coming weeks. Judging from the early returns, it appears the past year's participation numbers would have started the NFHS on a new streak of record participation if spring sports had not been cancelled.

Most likely, next year's participation survey will be anything but ordinary as well. Vermont is playing 7-on-7 football and outdoor volleyball; football is set for winter or spring in 17 states; volleyball and soccer have been pushed into 2021 in a number of states; and spring sports may not finish until late June or early July in other states.

Regardless of the challenges in compiling participation statistics in 2020-21, the opportunity and desire to participate in all education-based activities remain.

Dr. Karissa L. Niehoff is starting her third year as executive director 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, which celebrated its 100th year of service during the 2018-19 school year. She previously was executive director of the Connecticut Association of Schools-Connecticut Interscholastic Athletic Conference for seven years.