



The NFHS Voice



Focus on Sportsmanship Needed as State Championship Season Begins

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Rivalry games are among the most highly anticipated – and hotly contested – matchups in high school sports every year. Some of these games have been played annually for decades, so the emotions are higher, and the intensity is stronger to secure bragging rights for another year.

Unfortunately, several high school football rivalry games recently have moved beyond spirited contests and ended with fights, chaos and violence – the exact opposite of one of the major tenets of high school sports: **Good Sportsmanship.**

And the bad behavior and disruptive acts have not been relegated to players on the field. In one school district, there were fights in the stands among spectators – both adults and students. Henceforth, the stadium will be divided

into sections, and the number of fans will be limited. In addition, in some schools, students will only be able to attend games accompanied by a parent or guardian.

In a rivalry game in another state, a similar occurrence of fans fighting in the stands brought police to the stadium, and the game was cancelled at halftime. The opportunity for participation by players on the field was erased by senseless acts in the stands.

And in yet another football matchup, multiple fights on the field among players in a rivalry game brought the game to an abrupt end in the second quarter.

In addition to these unsportsmanlike acts – and others – that have occurred within playing venues, there have been several reports of gun violence that have occurred on school property outside stadiums. In most cases, these events mirror the increase in gun violence at large gatherings nationwide. Often, fights between individuals not connected to the game whatsoever occur outside stadiums and, unfortunately, some end violently with the use of guns.

In our meetings with directors of state associations last month, sportsmanship – or the need to improve behavior – was one of three recurring issues mentioned most often by these leaders who govern programs for the 8.2 million participants in high school sports.

As the regular season begins to wind down in football and other fall sports, the contests naturally become more intense. And while winning crucial games is important to players, coaches, parents and other fans, the way and manner in which those involved handle winning or losing is even more important.

Although perfect behavior has yet to be achieved – and never will be – the pursuit of good sporting behavior MUST be ongoing.

Rather than spectators like the ones described above, more **fans** are needed at high school sporting events. Fans support the officials, the players and the coaches, unlike those who are involved in fights or **fanatics** who tear down and do harm to the participants, the school and the community.

NFHS playing rules are written to encourage sportsmanship. Participation in these programs should promote respect, integrity and sportsmanship. However, for these ideals to occur, everyone involved must do their part.

If coaches act in a sportsmanlike manner, their behavior sets the tone for players, spectators and others. If coaches, however, are constantly complaining about the decision of contest officials, spectators are more likely to do the same.

There must be a collaborative, working relationship between contest officials and game administration to promote good sportsmanship and safely conduct the contest. Every individual has a role to play in creating a positive, sportsmanlike atmosphere at contests.

The [Sportsmanship](#) course on the NFHS Learning Center is an excellent resource for everyone involved in schools sports and activities – coaches, students, parents, administrators, officials, and leaders and students in the performing arts.

This revised course provides an understanding of what good sportsmanship looks and sounds like, clearly defines everyone's roles during interscholastic events and reaffirms a commitment to maintaining those roles for the betterment of the students and activities involved. The course also features interviews with students, parents, coaches, administrators and officials about sportsmanship.

And as postseason contests begin, schools should make sure they are prepared from a safety and security standpoint – not only for games, but for practices inside and outside the building as well.

Many resources are available for high school athletic administrators to implement after-school safety and security programs, including two **free** courses on the NFHS Learning Center – [Afterschool Security](#) and the new course, [Emergency Action Planning for Afterschool Programs](#).

Establishing a culture of positive behavior in our schools starts with each of us, no matter our role – coach, student, administrator, official, fan or parent. We all must commit to treating one another with dignity and respect.

Dr. Karissa L. Niehoff is in her eighth 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 8.2 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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