




The NFHS Voice



School Spirit is Defining Difference in High School Sports

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Education-based sports in our nation's schools are different than any other level of competition.

Youth leagues and club sports often require significant entry fees, and in many cases, the focus is on competitive success with little concern for skill development, team building or sportsmanship.

High-profile college sports have been disrupted by issues concerning media contracts, NIL and the transfer portal, with the environment a bit like the "Wild West" on campuses throughout the country.

Professional sports, of course, are about the most elite performance, entertainment and winning championships.

Sports in our nation's 19,800-plus high schools instead are much more focused on education, relationships, team unity, having fun and **school spirit**.

School spirit is perhaps the defining difference between interscholastic and other levels of sports – having pride in one’s school, maintaining a connection to the school and coaches for life, supporting all school teams and programs whether a participant or a fan, and contributing to the bond between school and community.

On an individual basis, pride is a key component of school spirit. Students who become involved in sports take pride in their teams and school and tend to carry that pride to their future careers after high school.

High school sports have the potential to boost the spirit of communities as well. There are countless examples every year but one such community was the small town of Fertile, Minnesota, located about 270 miles northwest of Minneapolis. In 2021, Jude Olson, a junior on the Fertile-Beltrami High School nine-player football team, was killed in an accident, which shook the approximately 1,000 residents of Fertile.

Last year, however, the Fertile-Beltrami football team provided a positive boost to the town with an undefeated regular season and a first-ever trip to the Minnesota State High School League Nine-player State Football Championship at U.S. Bank Stadium in Minneapolis.

According to an article in the *Grand Forks (North Dakota) Herald*, many of the town’s residents did not have the means to make the five-hour trek to the game. As a result, local businesses and farmers donated \$25,000 for five charter buses to make sure every fan who wanted to make the trip had a free ride to the game.

“It means a lot to the whole town,” said Jodie Strem, the co-owner of Fertile Oil Company. “We want (the players) to look in the stands and see us and know we are there for them. We are coming down full force.”

While the Fertile-Beltrami Falcons lost to LeRoy-Ostrander in the MSHSL Nine-player Championship, the players and the 274 fans who made the journey will remember much more than the outcome of the game.

This is school spirit at its core and why high school sports are different.

High school activity programs boost the spirit of individuals, teams and communities. Research indicated that in 2020 when these programs were shut down because of the pandemic, the mental health of students was drastically compromised.

In the post-pandemic world, there are fewer face-to-face meetings. High school activities have played a major role in bringing people back together. We know that when schools have strong school spirit, communities respond with support and increased attendance.

School spirit and sportsmanship go hand in hand. If school spirit is channeled in a positive way, and expectations for good sportsmanship are communicated and enforced by school administrators, positive fan experiences will occur.

A survey several years ago by Varsity Brands concluded that high school students with school spirit performed better academically, were more engaged in social and civic matters, and were happier in general than their less-spirited peers.

The survey indicated that the benefits of school spirit are not just confined to the school years. The study suggested that school spirit can have lasting effects, including higher aspirations for continuing education and greater success in later life.

We are pleased to report that Varsity has commissioned a new research study, which will examine the post-pandemic educational landscape and attempt

to understand how the return to in-person schooling has influenced school spirit and its profound impact on student learning, leadership and personal growth. We look forward to sharing the results of this survey down the road.

As the calendar turns to 2024, it is a great opportunity to renew commitments to these programs that involve more than 12 million participants in sports and performing arts – programs that foster and celebrate school spirit.

Dr. Karissa L. Niehoff is in her sixth 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.