

HIGH SCHOOL ATHLETICS: A HELPFUL PERSPECTIVE

By

Steve Wysowski, Ed.D.

Associate Executive Director, CIAC

The term “high school, education-based athletics” is one that is thrown about by public school educators and athletic leaders, but what does it mean? The term merits scrutiny because some feel that the way the American public views high school sports is flawed. Others feel that high school athletics serve as a training ground for collegiate athletics and that win-lose records are the most vital component of determining an athletic program’s success. Let’s take a moment to take a look at high school athletics and perhaps some of the information presented here can be used to educate parents and clarify the premise of “education-based athletics.”

Certainly, it can be said that high school sports are overshadowed by the professional and collegiate levels in terms of notoriety and recognition. And in that overpowering view, the basic premise of education-based athletics is clouded. Philosophies are far different at the three levels and cannot be mixed. Education-based athletics is an extension of the academic high school program and, as such, its focus is far more expansive than wins vs losses and expecting to make the “next level” of play. In looking at the following chart, based on a 2013 analysis by the NCAA, we see that fewer than 3 ½ percent of high school athletes in the sports listed go on to play at the collegiate level. Fewer than 2 percent of collegiate athletes go on to play at the professional level and less than ½ of one percent of high school athletes will ever make the “pro ranks.” So, why play a sport at all? The key word in that question is “play.”

| Student-Athletes | Men's Basketball | Women's Basketball | Football | Baseball | Men's Ice Hockey | Men's Soccer |
|--|-------------------------|---------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-------------------------|---------------------|
| High School Student-Athletes | 538,676 | 433,120 | 1,086,627 | 474,791 | 35,198 | 410,982 |
| High School Senior Student-Athletes | 153,907 | 123,749 | 310,465 | 135,655 | 10,057 | 117,423 |
| NCAA Student-Athletes | 17,984 | 16,186 | 70,147 | 32,450 | 3,964 | 23,365 |
| NCAA Freshman Roster Positions | 5,138 | 4,625 | 20,042 | 9,271 | 1,133 | 6,676 |
| NCAA Senior Student-Athletes | 3,996 | 3,597 | 15,588 | 7,211 | 881 | 5,192 |
| NCAA Student-Athletes Drafted | 46 | 32 | 254 | 678 | 7 | 101 |
| Percent High School to NCAA | 3.3% | 3.7% | 6.5% | 6.8% | 11.3% | 5.7% |
| Percent NCAA to Professional | 1.2% | 0.9% | 1.6% | 9.4% | 0.8% | 1.9% |
| Percent High School to Professional | 0.03% | 0.03% | 0.08% | 0.50% | 0.07% | 0.09% |

Playing a sport at the high school level serves a vital role in preparing young men and women for the rigors of society. A caring adult who serves as the coach for young student-athletes at the high school level has been entrusted with a great responsibility, one which goes beyond the mere teaching of the basics of the individual sport and the opportunity to provide a winning season.

With a motivated and capable coach, young student-athletes experience a sense of belonging that goes beyond the fields of practice and competition. High school athletes learn the value of sacrificing short-term interests for a long-term goal; they must give up individual honor and talents often so that they become part of a team to work to achieve a common goal.

This is a time when there is increasing pressure to display individual talent. It is a time when pressures on student-athletes are great at the high school level because many misguided expectations are presented to these young men and women. Those expectations often are voiced by an adult and lead the student-athlete to believe that he/she can and should expect a college scholarship offer to play a sport. Rarely is someone, other than a coach, presenting young student-athletes with the reality of the adjunct benefits of playing the sport. Lost are these benefits: the opportunity to participate; the chance to make independent decisions under duress; the practice of self-discipline; time management; and, the achievement of long-range goals through putting off immediate gratification. Coaches need to remind parents of these adjunct benefits. Pre-season meetings and in-season meetings are important opportunities to accomplish this. Other such opportunities can be easily found and made.

Coaches need to remember that their goals need to be aligned with the acquisition of those adjunct skills; and, that those goals need to be articulated and reinforced often. Finding ways to motivate student-athletes to achieve those goals is a coach's responsibility. Coaches must remember that learning must take place, and that the learning must be engaging. That engagement is where the term "play," mentioned above, becomes so appropriate. Engaging in an activity that provides a measure of fun combined with learning is what makes an activity engaging. That engagement also needs to allow student-athletes to take risks and understand that, in taking those risks, they may fail. That rebound from failure is one of the most vital lessons that sports can teach. Dr. Carol Dweck calls this the "growth mindset;" some call it resiliency. No matter the term, honest, helpful feedback is a vital component in moving forward from failure.

Coaches and athletic directors have the difficult task of reminding students and parents of the reasons why participation in sports is so important. That importance goes beyond the misguided hope of an athletic scholarship; it settles in with what can be learned for life through "education-based" athletics.