

The True Meaning of High School Sports

By Jeff Erickson

Sitting in my chair as BSSD Student Activities Director and as a player, parent, coach, official and fan of high school athletics I have seen almost everything in the spectrum of competition. More and more there seems to be a misunderstanding of what role high school sports should play in our lives, and more importantly, in the lives of our children. The following outlines what I think SHOULD be the goal. (Much of it is taken from a recent article I read that mirrors my thoughts.)

I'm fully aware that high school athletics are entertaining ...not entertainment. They aren't primarily about state championships, earning scholarships or playing for Team USA. Those are simply wonderful side benefits, when they happen. The true reason we have athletic competition for high school students is to further extend the reach of classroom education. That's the reason scholastic sports developed in the first place, more than a century ago, and that's why they continue to exist.

Unfortunately, not everyone grasps this reality. It seems a small but vocal number of individuals - who represent every demographic that's naturally connected to high school athletics - are confused. They apparently believe a 15-year-old competitor should be treated like a professional athlete, and that the local basketball team has the same goals and motivations as the Los Angeles Lakers or even the UAA Seawolves. But they don't; and they shouldn't.

Let me outline the multiple benefits athletic competition provides to young people. First, training in preparation for competition and membership on a team teach a bevy of essential life lessons, many of which will be invaluable in the workplace. There's learning to work in unison with others; following detailed directions; earning what you desire; managing setbacks and overall adversity, and feeling a sense of community.

In addition, with obesity impacting a startling one third of the entire U.S. adult population, and nearly 20 percent of all those between two and 19, scholastic athletics provide an ideal way for young people to stay in shape and maintain a healthy weight. And since studies indicate that overweight teens are far more likely to struggle with weight-related issues during adulthood, any opportunity for teens to stay fit is extremely valuable.

Further, multiple studies have shown that scholastic athletes do better in the classroom than their classmates who don't play sports. And it's worth noting that student-athletes become much more adept than their peers at time-management, which may certainly contribute to the better grades they achieve.

And while youth-level sports often have built-in guidelines to ensure equal playing time, high school athletics teach the hard lesson that we all have different levels of ability. It can be difficult for a youngster to accept that he or she will get less playing

time than a classmate based on skill, size, or strength, but it's a key lesson, since life is rarely a level playing field.

Collectively speaking, all the aforementioned benefits are the case for high school sports. And they're overwhelmingly convincing. Sadly, though, some individuals fail to understand and choose to view scoring points and winning games as the primary reason any high school has a basketball or volleyball team. This is more than just frustrating or annoying – it's potentially tragic.

Excessive pressure to achieve on the playing field – more than just conventional lessons about competition – can give student-athletes more stress than they can process. In turn, this can lead to mental health issues, chronic anxiety, and worse.

As for injury, all athletes are at risk – they're an unavoidable part of physical activity. But the pressure to quickly return to the lineup can potentially lead to abuse of opioid painkillers or, in the case of concussion, long term danger to the student's health.

Of course winning and losing both are important components of athletic competition. But their significance isn't rooted in cheers or trophies, but in the life lessons they teach. And it's worth noting that competition is integral to our education system. For example, consider those trying out for lead part in the school musical – only one person can get the part.

I'm not going to suggest that we need some major, structural change to scholastic sports. Far from it. What I do wish is to send a strict caution to parents, coaches, school administrators, and fans that we overemphasize scoring and winning to the detriment of all our young people. We need to ensure that our greatest concern isn't how many points Johnny scores, and how many wins the local team compiles, but whether or not all participants have a safe, positive experience, and, in the bargain, learn something about life.