

As Students Return to Sports, Sportsmanship and Respect Must Be Emphasized

By Dr. Karissa Niehoff on December 10, 2020

[*nfhs news*](#)

Every now and then, an event occurs that serves as a wake-up call and reminds us that we have some work left to accomplish. We are aware of two such events recently that were rather disturbing, and the issues behind those events need our full attention.

Understandably, school leaders have been focused on simply getting high school athletics programs restarted – or rallying teams on Zoom calls in some parts of the country until restarts are possible. However, once those programs are up and running, the core messages of education-based activities must take center stage.

First, we believe most student participants who have been able to return to competition are grateful for the opportunity simply to be playing sports or participating in performing arts. We have heard of many instances of students going the extra mile to help others, or teams involved in community service projects. Even with reduced seasons and stringent mitigation measures in place, there have been expressions of thanks for the chance to return to the field, gym or stage.

Students, coaches and athletic directors have their hands full trying to meet COVID-19 requirements on a weekly basis, which has certainly made for a stressful environment in schools nationwide. However, those core values of education-based athletics and performing arts such as sportsmanship and respect must continue to be emphasized.

The first event occurred the day after Thanksgiving when race-related friction led to a brawl at the conclusion of a football playoff game between two Florida schools. Disciplinary action has been taken by the Florida High School Athletic Association, but the fact that another racially motivated incident occurred in high school sports is disappointing.

High school sports and activities exist to lift people up, not demean or tear people down. The goal is to treat everyone equally, treat each other with respect, regardless of the color of one's skin – the very fundamentals of high school sports and activities in our nation's schools where all genders, all races, all religions work together to accomplish a goal. Obviously, we still have work to do.

In another event last week in one of the more blatant displays of unsportsmanlike conduct in recent memory, a player from Edinburg (Texas) High School, running full steam from the sideline, bowled over the referee after the official had ejected the player for two consecutive unsportsmanlike behavior penalties.

While the player was escorted from the stadium by police and charged, and the Edinburg school district removed the team from the Texas University Interscholastic League (UIL) playoffs and denounced the player's

actions, the video went viral. This was a bad and ugly scene.

This absolutely is not what education-based high school sports is about, but it shows what can happen when the intensity of the sport supersedes having fun and working together as a team. This happens when an individual is more concerned about himself than the team. There are several non-negotiables as a high school sports participant, and assaulting an official is at the top of that list.

Last year, we heard reports of officials retiring early because of boorish behavior by parents and other fans; however, we believed that once teams returned to play from the lockdown, the support for officials would be stronger as students would be grateful for the opportunity to play, and parents and other fans would be thankful for the chance to attend contests and/or support their children. And despite this incident, we still believe this to be the case, and we hope this is an isolated case that never occurs again.

This event comes on the heels of reports from several states about increasing needs for officials – mostly due to some men and women opting not to officiate this year due to health concerns from COVID-19.

The NFHS continues its efforts to recruit more officials through its #BecomeAnOfficial program at highschoolofficials.com. Now in its fourth year, almost 50,000 individuals have expressed interest in becoming an official and have contacted their state association to start the process. And the interest has continued with another 6,000 people expressing interest in the first six weeks of this school year.

While we desperately need more individuals to officiate high school sports, we must ensure that they are treated with respect and protected from verbal and physical abuse. These individuals are giving of their free time to make sure the games go on for millions of high school student-athletes.

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