



## The NFHS Voice



# High School Sports, Activities: Opportunity for Everyone to be Included, Accepted

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Seemingly overnight, the focus across the country is not on the COVID-19 pandemic or the restarting of sports. The horrific tragedy in Minneapolis and the ensuing protests in major cities across our nation have resulted in a sobering wake-up call that there are issues that must be addressed as fervently as the development of a vaccine for the novel coronavirus.

These are worrisome scenes from across the country and are signs that we have much work to do regarding racial injustice and equality for everyone. Many of the cities ravaged this past week are homes to our member state associations, including the city of Indianapolis where the NFHS and the Indiana High School Athletic Association reside.

In due time, the national health crisis will subside, businesses hopefully will be able to re-open and people will be able to return to their jobs. But what is the timetable for an end to racial injustice in our nation? If the clashes of this past week do not provide the necessary signal that these issues are more important than anything we have ever faced and could make or break our nation, nothing will.

Sports often provide an escape from the ugly scenes on the news. With high school sports – like most other sports – sidelined during the pandemic, we cannot “escape” the scenes of the past week. Perhaps, for the moment, that is a good thing as the nation can collectively focus on one goal.

That goal is to treat everyone the same, 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 – as in teamwork – work together to accomplish a goal. Nationwide, we have much work to do.

Our hearts are broken at what we have seen and heard this past week. Our thoughts, prayers and condolences go out to the families of Dreasjon Reed, Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, George Floyd and many other African Americans who have lost their lives in racially motivated tragedies just this year.

We must value the life of every single person in our country, and we must continue to provide opportunities for all people to succeed. Everyone must be a part of the solution, including participants, coaches and others in high school sports and performing arts in our nation’s schools. And to those students, coaches, officials and school administrators who represent these targeted populations, the NFHS stands with these groups for positive change.

By the end of the sixth day of the recent protests, one thing seemed to be crystal clear: the lack of a strong national voice emphatically calling for Americans to value the life of every single person – calling for an end to prejudiced, bigoted behavior.

We believe there is no better national voice than high school sports and performing arts programs, where opportunities exist for boys and girls of all races, all religions, all levels of ability to work together, to trust each other and to eventually make a difference on the streets of our nation.

Is everything perfect in education-based athletics and performing arts? Certainly not as we noted in this column last fall after reports of a couple of incidents of racism and disrespect had surfaced. We stated that high schools must establish a culture that values the worth of every single person – both players on the school's team and players on the opposing team. There must be a no-tolerance policy regarding behavior that shows disrespect for another individual.

School-based sports and activities provide that unique opportunity to be part of a team and to provide identity, a sense of self-worth and a reason for engaging in academics. In high school sports and activities, all students are included, accepted and feel like a valued member of a community. Those protesting this past week are demanding much of the same.

When it comes to the opportunity that sports provides to bring everyone together, no one said it better earlier this week than Patrick Mahomes, the star quarterback of the Kansas City Chiefs. Mahomes said he was thankful that he had grown up in locker rooms with people from “every race, every background” and he hopes America “can learn from the injustices that we have witnessed to become more like the locker room where everyone is accepted.”

In one of our columns last fall, we stated that racism was one of our greatest concerns nationwide. By mid-March, we were sure that fighting the COVID-19 pandemic was our greatest concern. This past week has been a rude awakening that indeed dealing with racial injustice MUST take center stage.

*Dr. Karissa L. Niehoff is in her second year as executive director 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, which celebrated its 100<sup>th</sup> year of service during the 2018-19 school year. She previously was executive director of the Connecticut Association of Schools-Connecticut Interscholastic Athletic Conference for seven years.*