



The NFHS Voice



Thanks to NFHS Network, Viewership of High School Sports Continues to Climb

Dr. Karissa L. Niehoff, NFHS Executive Director

Often, the public's concept of high school sports is a football or basketball game televised on a national cable channel between highly ranked prep teams from different parts of the country – or the game-by-game tracking of “star” players like LeBron James or Zion Williamson by national media sources .

And why not? That is the way we follow college and professional sports. While there are certainly fans with loyalties to hometown teams, most viewers want to watch the best teams. When it comes to prime-time games, the networks are only going to feature the top teams and players.

The answer to the above question, very simply, is that high school sports are different. While there are about three percent of the almost eight million participants in high school sports who may play in those marquee college or

professional games on television, the true stories of education-based athletics reside with the other 97 percent.

As the national leader and advocate for high school sports and performing arts programs in the United States, the NFHS is always looking for ways to showcase education-based activities in our nation's schools and to demonstrate the accomplishments of the millions of participants in all sports.

And, for the past seven years through the NFHS Network, we have been doing just that. In addition to the estimated 350 million fans who attend high school games annually, the NFHS has added opportunities for millions of others to watch high school sports through the streaming of more than 100,000 events last year at www.NFHSNetwork.com.

While viewers – and there were more than 14 million visits to the site last year – may be able to watch future college and pro players on the NFHS Network, that's not the focus of those watching games on their phones, tablets or computers. Instead, the Network provides an opportunity for individuals to support their high school teams – perhaps in another part of the country years after graduating from high school. With the 100,000-plus events last year featuring numerous sports and events and divided 50-50 between girls and boys sports, the Network also offers parents or grandparents the chance to watch their kids' and grandkids' games when distances prevent attending games.

Although there was concern by some when we started this venture that streaming high school games on the Internet would adversely affect in-stadium attendance, such has not been the case. About 70 percent of NFHS Network subscribers watch games from beyond a drivable distance.

And the best stories are when the driving distances are REALLY not favorable – as in some other parts of the world. Easily the most heartwarming aspect of the NFHS Network has been the opportunity for men and women overseas in the military to watch their sons and daughters play high school sports. These are truly priceless moments.

While there is still nothing like actually watching a high school game in person, we recognize that technology has provided options for people in all areas of daily life. So, the opportunity to bring high school sports right into the home through the NFHS Network has been a dream come true.

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 100th 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.