




The NFHS Voice



With Lost Seasons Last Year, Spring Sports and Arts Should Be Available for All

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Almost one year ago, the balls stopped bouncing in high school gymnasiums, performing arts events were cancelled and moved online, and spring sports were finished before most schools could even start.

March Madness took on a new meaning as schools had to deal with a new opponent – the novel coronavirus that put entire lives on hold for months.

While the timing on returning to sports and performing arts has varied from state to state, a full return is almost completed. The progression of state tournaments in basketball, wrestling, swimming and diving, and ice hockey is underway in many states. While the number of spectators has been reduced, millions of high school students have been able to return to competition.

Perhaps even more significant is that participants in the spring sports of track and field, baseball, softball, lacrosse, tennis and golf will be able to re-engage with their teammates after the lost seasons in 2020 – or will they?

Although there is an expectation that these traditional spring sports will return in 2021 in all states, we have heard reports that the sizes of squads are being controlled in some cases by holding tryouts in sports that, in many cases, have had unlimited participation in the past.

In track and field, some schools that previously did not limit squad size are conducting tryouts due to an increase in the number of students interested in competing, a reduced number of coaches available to direct the program, or COVID-19 protocols that have made handling larger groups more challenging. And even more, some middle schools are conducting tryouts in track and field and turning away seventh- and eighth-graders who don't make the cut – kids who may never return to athletics again.

The same scenario is occurring in middle school and high school performing arts programs in some cases, where participation levels are already down 40 to 50 percent due to the pandemic.

Undoubtedly, many schools have been affected from a financial standpoint by the pandemic. When budgets are reduced, cuts have to be made in some areas; however, those cuts should not come at the expense of high school students who are interested in competing in a sport or activity.

While everyone on a team may not be able to play in a game due to the nature of the sport, creative measures should be utilized to retain all students who are interested – if at all possible. In the case of spring sports where students were unable to compete last year due to the pandemic, not allowing them to

participate for a second year because they don't "measure up" could be devastating.

Middle school and the early years of high school represent the opportune time to engage students in sports and activities such as music and theatre and speech. This is a pivotal time in the lives of 13-to-16 year-olds. Involvement in middle school and high school activity programs could play a positive role in shaping their future lives.

Many high school tennis programs have maintained no-cut programs for years, and, with some creativity, we believe this could be done in a lifetime sport like track and field. Likely, some parents competed in high school track and would be glad to volunteer their services. The school's booster club could be utilized to assist with some of the additional costs. Many individuals would be willing to assist if they knew it was the difference between some kids remaining on the team or being sent home because they didn't survive the tryout.

Cutting a middle school or high school student from a track and field team or a music group could end the student's involvement in those activities for a lifetime, and it could be a serious blow to the student's self-confidence.

We recognize that there are some sports or activities and certain situations where it may not be possible, but we urge school administrators and coaches to be creative with the funds available to let all students who have a desire to be involved in high school activities to remain on the team.

This decision may not affect whether the team wins, but it absolutely could be the victory of a lifetime for those students.

Dr. Karissa L. Niehoff is in her third 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. She previously was executive director of the Connecticut Association of Schools-Connecticut Interscholastic Athletic Conference for seven years.