



The NFHS Voice



National Coaches of the Year Focused on Education-based Philosophies

Dr. Karissa L. Niehoff, NFHS Chief Executive Officer

 @KarissaNFHS

It is hard to imagine that any profession is more important and has had as significant of an impact on other people than the high school coaching profession.

Memories from participating in high school sports more often than not involve coaches – men and women who not only helped us learn and play our particular sports better, and have fun doing so, but who, in many cases, helped us navigate through that stretch of life.

And along with health-care workers, teachers and other individuals who work with young people, we all should be indebted to high school coaches for their additional time and effort the past two years. In addition to their normal busy schedules, these individuals have faced numerous additional burdens related to the pandemic.

It is indeed one of the highlights of the year when the NFHS has the opportunity to recognize some of these individuals who have devoted their lives to coaching high school sports.

Earlier this week, the NFHS recognized more than 650 individuals for their efforts as high school coaches during the 2020-21 school year, including 23 as National Coaches of the Year. As you might imagine with individuals selected for this honor, their accomplishments are amazing.

The 23 coaches selected for this national honor have led their respective teams to a combined 116 state championships. While four of the coaches won their first state title this past year, several others have won 10-15 state championships.

Specifically, Ron Insinger is the winningest high school boys basketball coach in Pennsylvania history. Jeffrey Howard has won 10 Ohio boys state cross country titles – most in state history. Jesse Nelson retired as the winningest girls basketball coach in Kansas history. John Dwyer won his 12th Illinois state lacrosse championship with a perfect 25-0 record. Kristin Liles has led her teams to 11 state girls tennis titles in Oklahoma.

While the accomplishments of these five individuals, along with the other 18, are extraordinary, the state titles, career victories and perfect records are not the only defining measures of success – far from it in fact. Responses by these individuals to the “Coaching Philosophy” section of the nomination form reveals what is really important in education-based athletics.

Kit Harris, the boys and girls wrestling coach at Baldwin High School in Baldwin City, Kansas, who led his team to the 2021 Kansas State High School Activities Association Girls Wrestling State Championship, said “to be successful at something is meaningless unless you are a good person along the way.” He

stresses the 5C's – character, competing, citizenship, classroom commitment and community.

Insinger, who has won 984 games as boys basketball coach at Loyalsock Township High School in Williamsport, Pennsylvania, said, “My philosophy has always been to strive to make each student-athlete a better person than they were at the beginning of each season. The wins and championships are a bonus. If I enhanced each player's integrity by the end of each season, we were all winners! For me the ‘score’ that matters most is the one that measures their effort and ultimately only they know the score.”

Samuel “Bunky” Colvin, boys soccer coach at McIntosh High School in Peachtree City, Georgia, who has a 400-58 record and seven state championships, reveals his key to success: “I firmly believe that if all we do is win titles, we have not fulfilled our duty as coaches. The most valuable thing players should receive from participation in soccer is a staff devoted to helping players become the best students and people they can become. We are in the business of creating leaders who will impact the world for good. Winning games will always come second to helping our young men to prepare to win in life.”

Linda Drust, the Girls Spirit Coach of the Year from Cartersville (Illinois) High School, certainly understands her mission as a high school coach: “It is my philosophy to facilitate opportunities through my position as cheer coach that will prepare my team for immediate success as well as opportunities for success after high school. I coach my athletes for a short time in their life, and accepting that I have an opportunity to enhance their experience to be better students, spouses, parents and people is my core value for being a coach.”

And perhaps the most direct philosophy comes from the Girls Softball Coach of the Year, Ed McQuade, of Greenway High School in Phoenix, Arizona,

“My coaching philosophy is simple and easily duplicated: FOCUS ON CHARACTER - wins and losses will take care of themselves.”

These are but a few of the amazing individuals selected as NFHS National Coaches of the Year for 2020-21 – all of whom have impacted student-athletes in positive ways for decades.

In addition to these 23 individuals, we salute all of this nation’s high school coaches for the extra burdens they are continuing to carry during these challenging times. They deserve our utmost respect and appreciation.

Dr. Karissa L. Niehoff is in her fourth year as chief executive officer 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.