

7.6 Million Reasons to Keep High School Sports

By Bob Gardner

I'm not quite sure what qualifies a former college basketball coach to assess the state of high school sports, but last week in USA Today's online edition, the following headline caught my attention: "Former college coach proposes ending high school sports." Wow!

This article, which originally was published in the Reno (Nevada) Gazette-Journal, contained thoughts and ideas of Len Stevens, a former college basketball coach and current executive director of the Reno-Sparks Chamber of Commerce. Mr. Stevens suggests we should "kick it (high school sports) to the curb" and go the way of the European model focusing solely on club sports.

The author of the article, Dan Hinxman, suggests that Mr. Stevens' thoughts might be preposterous, ludicrous and, perhaps, downright offensive to some individuals. Mr. Hinxman is correct. As the head of an organization that provides leadership to 51 state high school associations, 19,000 high schools and more than 7.6 million student-athletes involved in high school sports, I am pleased to report that funeral arrangements have been cancelled.

What Mr. Stevens probably doesn't know is that many of those countries employing the "European model" would trade their model in an instant for the education-based philosophy of high school sports in the United States. After listening to my report at the 9th International Session for Educators at the International Olympic Academy in Greece last summer, representatives from many nations marveled that our programs receive little or no government

support in our schools, and the universal wish of the delegates from other nations was that their programs could be more like ours.

Mr. Stevens suggests that since club sports have been growing in the United States we should end high school sports and go exclusively with club sports, which “would answer a lot of problems and put the high school focus back where it belongs – on education.”

What Mr. Stevens doesn't account for is that if sports were removed from American high schools, the focus would not be on education. The focus would be on trying to locate students who abruptly left school – dropouts – when sports were taken away.

And, by the way, the education component is the singular unique component of the U.S. model. Student-athletes learn much more than how to set a screen in basketball or cover the first-base bag in baseball. While the number of teacher-coaches has dwindled, most schools that employ out-of-school coaches require those individuals to complete an education course, such as the NFHS Fundamentals of Coaching course.

On the other hand, club sports lack an educational component. These programs exist solely for the purpose of improving one's athletic skills and, through that process, hopefully landing a college scholarship. The team concept rarely exists and there is no overall philosophy to help prepare students for life after school, which is a major goal of education-based sports within the schools.

Mr. Stevens also noted that no one attends games any more. Really? A survey conducted by the NFHS last year indicated that more than 510 million people attended high school sporting events during the 2009-10 school year. On Friday nights in the fall, there are 7,000 high school games being played every week. On winter nights – two to three times a week – there are about 18,000 girls and boys basketball games being played. More than 7.6 million

high school students compete in high school sports, and those numbers have risen for 22 consecutive years.

How many of those 7.6 million kids would still be around if the only option was to join a club team? The clubs only want the very best athletes, and fees can range from \$5,000 to \$10,000 a year to be involved with a year-round travel team.

A large majority of high school students who are involved in sports are there to have fun, to be with their friends, to compete and learn and to be a part of a team. Kids have a need to be needed and to be a part of something positive, to be involved with their peers and coaches who care. Many students involved in sports do not have a support system at home – their high school teammates and coaches are their lifeblood. This concept simply does not exist through club sports.

At our recent National Athletic Directors Conference in Indianapolis, several high school athletic directors talked about their days as high school athletes and the importance of these programs.

Monica Maxwell, a middle school athletic director from Indianapolis, said, “I knew I wanted to get out of my neighborhood. If it wasn’t going to be through athletics, it was going to be through the military . . . I think that story – my story – is a story of many athletes. They know that their ticket out of their neighborhoods is going to be athletics.”

Lanness Robinson, an athletic director from Tampa, Florida, said, “If I didn’t maintain a 3.5 grade-point average, my mom wouldn’t let me play sports. That’s the only reason I tried because otherwise I didn’t care. I believe that athletics is the greatest dropout prevention program that we have . . . I think the three most identifiable people on the school campus . . . are the head football coach, the principal and the quarterback. What does that say about school? I’ve read stories where schools have actually made the decision to cut

programs and I think in most cases, they reinstate athletic programs because they found that it doesn't work."

John Evers, a retired athletic director from Indiana, said "When good things happen – if a team is making a great playoff run – the community comes together. That's not something you often get outside of athletics. I've never seen a town rally around a chemistry class, but I have seen them rally around a team of kids doing something special."

Becky Oakes, director of sports at the NFHS, said in a recent issue of High School Today, "Students enjoy the school–community identity that comes with playing in high school. In general, high school coaches will treat each student as part of the team and the community; this is the selling point that high schools have far over any club team."

Certainly, there are challenges in many states, mainly due to funding issues. But even in those situations when funds become tight, more often than not the community responds because it sees the value of these programs for young people. With all due respect to Mr. Stevens, there are 7.6 million reasons we're going to keep sports within our schools.

***About the Author:** Bob Gardner is executive director of the Indianapolis-based National Federation of State High School Associations, the national leadership organization for high school athletic and activity programs.*