




The NFHS Voice



Anxiously Awaiting Return of Fans in High School Sports, Performing Arts

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The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted everyday life for almost a year at this point. There is hardly anyone who would dispute the validity of that statement. In order to survive and continue moving forward during the past 12 months, we have been faced with finding new ways to accomplish our daily tasks.

Instead of meeting face to face with a group of people, we converse with people in rectangles on computer screens.

Instead of sitting together with family and friends in crowded restaurants, we pay someone to bring the food to our homes.

Instead of those shopping sprees at the nearest mall, we order online and provide more business for the army of overnight delivery vehicles in our neighborhoods.

In high school sports and performing arts, everyone from the students to coaches, officials, parents and administrators have had to adjust to new ways of doing things. In many cases, students must wear masks even in competition and isolate from their friends away from school in order to continue playing. And while students and others have been willing to do whatever it takes to provide participation opportunities, everyone is looking for that light at the end of the tunnel.

Hopefully, most of these protocols that limit interaction will vanish when the pandemic subsides, although some aspects of the “new norm” may continue, such as online meetings.

However, there is one thing in the world of high school sports and performing arts that must return to normal as soon as possible at high schools across the country – stadiums and auditoriums full of family, friends and other fans cheering for the 12 million-plus participants in high school activity programs.

While the cardboard cutouts and piped-in music have been creative attempts to make it feel like people are in the stands, nothing can replace parents, students and others in the community lending positive support to high school students involved in sports and performing arts.

We are grateful that the NFHS Network has allowed fans to watch high school events online during the past year. Many schools have taken advantage of the NFHS Network’s High School Support Program that includes two free automated-production cameras (Pixellots). And while these units will continue to be used going forward as an option for watching events, nothing can replace fans in the stands, gyms and auditoriums.

One of the key differences in education-based activities conducted within the school and out-of-school club sports is the support of fans in the community. Students in high school activities are playing for the love of the game and to be involved in positive programs with their peers.

On a normal Friday night prior to the pandemic, more than seven million fans attended high school football games weekly across the country. And it is estimated that about 350 million people attended high school sports annually prior to the pandemic. While we recognize it may take some time before those numbers are equaled again, things are trending in the right direction.

Recently, several states have increased the number of spectators allowed for winter sports, such as basketball, being conducted indoors. In Tennessee, attendance at games is limited to one-third of the gym's capacity; in Michigan, attendance is capped at 20 percent. In Arizona and West Virginia, however, the decisions can be made by individual schools with no set restrictions, although social distancing must be maintained.

These are great signs that we have at least reached second base in our return to normalcy, and one day soon one of the tenants of education-based high school sports and performing arts – parents and other fans – will be back in full force throughout the country to support high school activity programs.

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.