



The NFHS Voice



Celebrating 50th State Girls Tournaments, Growth of Girls Wrestling

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In this month when we customarily express our thankfulness for the blessings of life, there is much in the world of high school sports and performing arts for which we are thankful as the 2021-22 series of state championships commence.

First, the almost eight million participants in high school sports – and a similar number of students in performing arts programs – will be able to start and finish state championships in a normal timeframe for the first time since the 2019 fall tournaments concluded almost two years ago.

The pandemic brought 2020 winter championships to a halt, caused the cancellation of 2020 spring championships and created chaos throughout the 2020-21 school year. Although some mitigations such as mask mandates remain

in some areas, it appears a full cycle of state championships are on schedule for the first time since 2018-19.

Second, several girls state championships will have an even higher level of significance as they are conducted for the 50th time, having started shortly after the passage of Title IX in June 1972.

The Indiana High School Athletic Association and the Nebraska School Activities Association will be hosting their 50th state championship in girls volleyball this weekend, and others such as the Alabama High School Athletic Association and the Kansas State High School Activities Association celebrated that milestone last year.

After the landmark Title IX legislation was signed into law by President Richard Nixon on June 23, 1972, girls participation in high school sports skyrocketed, and state high school associations began to offer new championships for girls at a furious rate.

In 1972, there were more states hosting girls championships in tennis (27) than any other sport, followed by swimming (17), basketball (16), gymnastics (15), volleyball (14) and golf (14), with only three states offering track and field. A mere two years later, track and field was No. 1 with 43 state championships, followed by tennis (42), basketball (31), gymnastics (30), volleyball (25) and golf (25).

By 1985, all states plus the District of Columbia were offering girls basketball and track and field championships, followed by tennis (49), cross country (49) and volleyball (46); softball (38) and soccer (21) had started to make an impact across the country as well.

Soccer, in fact, has had the most remarkable growth. In 1971, only 700 girls were playing high school soccer. Twenty-five years later, that number had climbed to almost 210,000; and as the 50th anniversary of Title IX approaches,

there are now almost 400,000 girls playing high school soccer, and the sport ranks fourth in popularity among girls high school sports – all because of that opportunity in 1972.

While there was not an immediate impact, the passage of Title IX also opened the doors for girls to participate in a couple of traditional boys sports – football and wrestling.

Girls first began playing on boys football teams in the mid-1980s and passed 2,000 participants in 2001; however, numbers have leveled off the past 20 years, with the latest totals at 2,404 participants nationally. During this period of time, however, there has been a surge in development of girls flag football programs.

As was noted in the recent October issue of *High School Today* magazine published by the NFHS, five states are currently sponsoring girls flag football (Alabama, Alaska, Georgia, Florida and Nevada), with Georgia, Florida and Nevada offering a state championship. The latest survey indicated 11,209 participants in girls flag football, and interest is expected to expand to other states thanks to a partnership between Nike and the National Football League which will provide state associations money to start pilot programs.

The sport with the biggest growth rate the past five years – both in terms of participants and addition of state championships – is girls wrestling. After girls only had the option of wrestling on boys teams for many years, 20 states have added separate championships for girls just in the past four years.

The first girls participants on boys teams began to appear in the late 1980s, but the opportunity to wrestle on girls-only teams and for a separate state team championship didn't occur until 1998 when the Texas University Interscholastic

League became the first state association to stage a girls wrestling championship, followed by Hawaii in 1999.

California (2011), Washington (2013), Massachusetts (2015) and Tennessee (2017) added state championships to push the total to six states before the explosion the past four years. Even amid the pandemic, six states added girls wrestling championships this past year (Arkansas, Florida, Idaho, Minnesota, Oklahoma and Wisconsin), and now 26 states are offering state wrestling championships for girls.

Participation has jumped from 4,975 in 2005 to 7,351 in 2010 and 21,124 in 2018. In response to this growth, the NFHS Wrestling Rules Committee has established the first separate weight classes for girls, set to take effect in 2023-24.

We salute all schools and state associations that are continuing to create new opportunities for girls to be involved in high school sports and performing arts.

For more information on the 50th anniversary of Title IX in June 2022 and on “Title IX at 50 – Celebrating and Growing Opportunities,” visit the NFHS website at (<https://www.nfhs.org/resources/title-ix/>). The page includes a Title IX Timeline, Title IX Milestones, The History and Importance of Title IX, Title IX Fact Sheet, Title IX Frequently Asked Questions and several Title IX videos.

Dr. Karissa L. Niehoff is in her fourth 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.