

NFHS Network Begins Second Year of Covering High School Sporting Events

BY JASON HADDIX

A little more than a year has passed since the NFHS Network was launched as a digital-content network in a joint venture between PlayON! Sports and the NFHS and its participating member state associations, and all indications signal that it has been a success.

The NFHS Network captures the passion, pride and energy of the high school experience by delivering live high school sports and events to family members and fans whenever they want, wherever they are. The NFHS Network celebrates and showcases the unique accomplishments of students – both the student-athletes participating in the 27 different sports covered by the Network, and the student broadcasters from schools around the country through the School Broadcast Program.

the 51 NFHS-member associations having finalized long-term agreements to be part of the Network. By the end of the initial year, the NFHS Network had 40 states contributing content. Koski believes that the Network could possibly reach 45 states by the end of this coming school year. In addition, he said the NFHS Network is working with eight of the 10 California Interscholastic Federation (CIF) sections as well as several other NFHS affiliate members.

During the Network's first year, it offered live broadcasts of more than 28,000 events, and attracted more than three million unique visitors. NFHSnetwork.com is the largest destination for high school sports broadcasts in the country with more than 10 million video views in its first year.

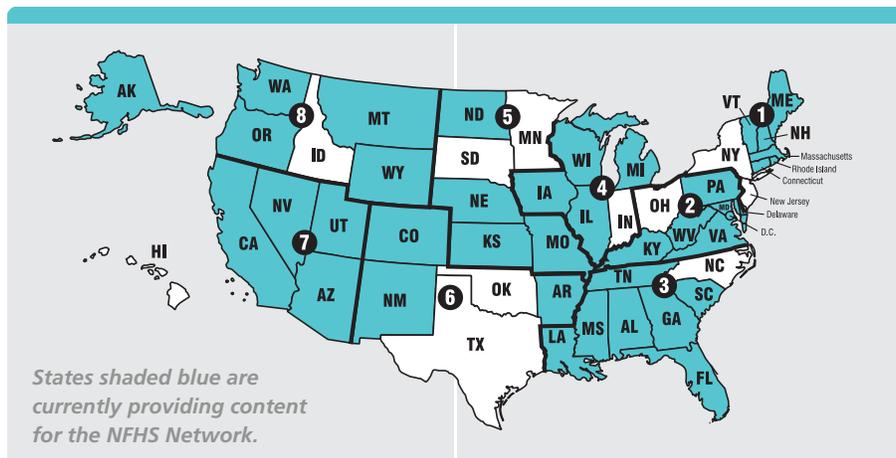
"The NFHS is pleased with how the NFHS Network has performed during its first year," Koski said. "There of course were challenges, but we were able to work through them on a collaborative effort with our Network partners and have a successful launch."

The top 25 most-watched events at www.NFHSnetwork.com included competitive cheerleading and spirit, football, individual and team wrestling, track and field, and a basketball bracket release show.

"I look at the NFHS Network as the opportunity for high school to 'join the big leagues,'" said Robert Rothberg, NFHS Net-

work president. "It is about bringing a high quality sports experience to fans at the same level they expect when viewing college and professional sports."

While the NFHS Network strives to be the primary destination for watching live high school sports, many of the NFHS member associations have contractual agreements with local or regional television



"The NFHS Network is about being able to show what high school sports and activities are all about," said Mark Koski, NFHS director of sports, events and development and NFHS program administrator for the Network. "Everything that happens in the high school setting will be captured on the Network."

The NFHS Network was launched on August 1, 2013, with 28 of



networks to broadcast certain events, like their football and basketball championships. Both the NFHS and the NFHS Network support those ventures for the associations.

“There are always going to be a certain number of events in states that make sense for live television,” Rothberg said. “We structured the Network so that associations would have a lot of flexibility with existing media partnerships and longstanding traditions. Associations that have relationships have been able to maintain them while also participating in the NFHS Network.”

“The NFHS Network typically broadcasts events that are non-televised, and probably have never been broadcast in any way before,” Koski said. “The Network gives students who are participating in these events the opportunity to be seen by their families and friends, as well as the casual sports fan.”

On August 7, a newly redesigned www.NFHSnetwork.com site was launched. The new site features a more modern look based on the principles of responsive design, better functionality to improve the user experience and the addition of integrated data from Digital Scout scoring apps. Users will now have the opportunity to clip and share their own highlights and share them on their own social media platforms and email.

In addition, content is not limited to PC-based viewing. The Network has mobile apps available for download on Android or IOS devices. Koski said research indicates that 60 percent of the NFHS Network users were viewing content on mobile devices and that is an upward trending figure. He noted that the new responsive design has dramatically improved the mobile viewing experience.

The Network offers several options for viewing content. Live games and sports on-demand during the first 72 hours is accessed via a subscription. There are four types of time-based subscriptions – day, month, 6-month and 12-month – that provide unlimited access to all content on the Network – tens of thousands of live events per year. Signing up to be a member is free for consumers and allows for the viewing of other live and on-demand high school events. This tier also gives the member access to on-demand sports programs 72 hours after the live broadcast.

“Those customers from last year who subscribe again this year

will be able to navigate the website and find the content they wish to view,” Koski said. “One goal is to increase the number of yearly subscriptions. We believe the students’ family members and friends realize the benefits of the Network, but we want to also reach the casual high school sports fan as well.”

The Network hopes that having a brand that the general public recognizes can help to gain views. Several ways to increase the NFHS Network brand have been explored, including partnerships, major corporate sponsors and teaming with other media outlets to broaden the Network’s reach.

“We are in conversations with some media partners and exploring strategic opportunities,” Rothberg said. “But at the same time, we believe that the NFHS Network is a standalone consumer experience that can more than succeed in its own right.”

One of the highlights of the first year was the School Broadcast Program. The program is a major component of the Network as a vast majority – more than 70 percent – of the content on the Network this year were school-produced events. Students now have a recognizable brand-backed platform to stream content worldwide.

“What I am looking forward to seeing 10 years from now is the next great broadcaster,” Koski said. “That person will be that much better because of the opportunities he or she had with the School Broadcast Program and been in his or her profession of choice four years sooner.”

Cleveland High School in Tennessee is one of the top content-producing schools associated with the School Broadcast Program. The school offers broadcasting classes as part of the Career and Technical Education Department. Those students have produced more than 165 events that are available at www.NFHSnetwork.com. Sporting events make up a large portion of the total, but there are also news programs, graduations, school assemblies and academic events.

“For the school, the biggest benefit has been getting exposure,” said Jon Souders, Cleveland High School broadcast instructor. “Being part of the NFHS Network has assisted us in getting awards for most outstanding program in the state. We have schools all over the country contacting us on a regular basis, asking how we do this, or how we do that.”



He added that the students have the opportunity to develop on-air skills and behind-the-scene ones as well. All the opportunities the students have at Cleveland High School have resulted in the broadcast program growing from 100 participants eight years ago to nearly 250 of the school's 1,400 students.

"They really want to strive to improve constantly because they know that everyone is watching," Souders said. "They are not simulating real world; we are actually doing live broadcasts and having the NFHS Network as the backbone give us a national network to broadcast through. For a high school to have this is a tremendous opportunity."

Schools are afforded the opportunity to benefit financially from adopting the program. One opportunity is through the sales of sponsorships that can be incorporated into broadcasts. The school keeps all advertising revenue that it generates on its own.



Schools also participate in a revenue-sharing program that provides the school with a portion of the subscription revenue generated from their self-produced events.

The NFHS Network distributed more than \$100,000 in revenue to the schools affiliated with the School Broadcast Program.

"Having a national audience gives you the flexibility to go to a donor and ask if they would be willing to sponsor us for 'x-amount' of money, as we have so many

viewers literally around the world," Souders said. "That has helped us buy equipment and helps us fund our program for our students. It gives us credibility and sponsors are willing to put money into it."

With the increased funding and visibility, Cleveland High School streams all events with three to six cameras and will have an elevated cable cam installed that runs along the sideline for the upcoming football season.

"People love high school sports," Rothberg said. "It is one of the things that really hold communities together. What we are building with the NFHS and our state association partners is changing people's ability to stay connected to their schools." ☺

Jason Haddix is coordinator of sports at the NFHS after serving internships in the Publications/Communications Department. He is a 2013 graduate of Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis where he earned a bachelor's degree in medical imaging and a certificate in journalism.

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