

The role of risk minimization...

Biggest game changer in high school sports

By Chad Elsberry, IHSAA Assistant Director

As we head into the heart of winter sports with the football season complete, it seems fitting to pause and reflect on student safety as it relates to education-based athletics.

The biggest game changer in high school sports and sport administration has been the concept and practice of risk minimization. The work undertaken by the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) along with individual state activity associations has sought to maintain a competitive environment while minimizing risk. The reality in today's high school setting is that there are standards and protocols in place to help safeguard student-athletes. It is everyone's job to ensure that those standards and protocols are upheld and utilized when dealing with injuries.

A lot of attention is being given to the sport of football and concussions in the print media, on the web and in film.

In Iowa, the issue of concussion management isn't just a good idea—it's the law and part of the Iowa code. Parents of high school athletes receive a fact sheet entitled, "HEADS UP: Concussion in High School Sports," which details the steps and procedures surrounding concussion management.

The Iowa High School Athletic Association (IHSAA) has been involved in an ongoing dialogue stretching over five decades to reduce injuries and minimize risk surrounding high school sports. At the foundation of educational sports are schools, teachers and coaches--men and women who seek to coach and mentor young people with lessons they will carry into the future. The growth and nurturing of students is the very reason education-based activities are conducted and needed in our society.

In Iowa, there are more than 136,000 participants in both boys and girls high school sports.

While there is inherent risk in any activity undertaken by young people, the risk of high school sport related deaths in Iowa is far less than driving a car, swimming at the lake or even simply walking down the sidewalk or street.

Even the American Academy of Pediatrics maintains the position that contact sports have value given very specific measures and steps to minimize risk. Among those discussion points is limiting or eliminating tackling at the youngest levels of football. That is an important point of emphasis, because many youth leagues do not have in place the protocols and procedures that education-based athletics enforce. The game and environment that people see at youth leagues on Saturday and Sunday is not the same environment that high school students participate in across Iowa. When a student participates in high school athletics, they are working with coaches who have been authorized and received training in coaching philosophy, first aid, concussion management, and other areas of student health.

The reality is that life brings risk, but we must also ask ourselves what are the rewards from participation in education-based activities?

According to the NFHS and other organizations such as the Alliance for Student Activities, student involvement in education-based activities dramatically increases the likelihood for student success later in life. Students involved in activities average fewer absences per year than the general student body. Students who participate in activity programs are less likely to have discipline referrals than the general student population. Young people who participate in student activities consume less tobacco, alcohol, and marijuana than non-participants. Participation in student activities increases student self-confidence. In addition, participants in middle and high school student activities are more likely to enroll in college. Perhaps most important of all, participation in at least one student activity decreases the likelihood that a student will drop out of school.

It's difficult to educate young people and help them transition to adulthood if they are not in the classroom or on the playing field. There are many factors that contribute to Iowa's status of leading the nation in graduation rates. The opportunity to participate and benefit from high school activities is among those factors.

A healthy, honest discussion absent from media hype and anecdotal evidence about contact sports and high school athletics is key to the safety and well-being of young people. It's a discussion the IHSAA has been involved with for part of five decades. It is a discussion we will continue into the future as we strive to serve young people through quality programs that seek to minimize risks and maximize the rewards of participation.

Sources referenced:

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-"Promoting and Protecting the Health of Iowans -- 2013 Vital Statistics of Iowa," from the Iowa Department of Public Health Bureau of Vital Statistics.

-Alliance for Student Activities website at <http://alliance4studentactivities.org/letxequalsa/>

-National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) "The Case for High School Activities," located at <http://www.nfhs.org/articles/the-case-for-high-school-activities/>

-Iowa Department of Education, "Iowa again leads in graduation rates," as published at <https://www.educateiowa.gov/article/2015/10/20/iowa-again-leads-graduation-rates>