

510 Million Fans Attend High School Sporting Events

BY EAMONN REYNOLDS

More fans attend high school basketball and football events than the same sports at the college and professional levels combined, according to a survey conducted by the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS).

During the 2009-10 school year, approximately 336 million fans attended high school regular-season and playoff games in football and girls and boys basketball – more than 2½ times the 133 million spectators who attended events in those sports at the college and professional levels.

In addition, attendance at events in the top 16 high school sports from a participation standpoint was approximately 510 million during the 2009-10 school year, including 468 million during regular-season events and 42 million for state association playoff contests.

The NFHS surveyed high school athletic directors at small (up to 1,000 enrollment), medium (1,000 to 2,200) and large (more than 2,220) high schools and multiplied the average regular-season attendance (based on the schools that responded) in each sport by the number of schools in each enrollment category that sponsor the sport. A similar method was used to determine overall attendance at postseason events conducted by NFHS member state associations.

In addition to basketball and football, others sports included in the survey were baseball, cross country, field hockey, golf, ice hockey, lacrosse, soccer, softball, swimming and diving, tennis, track

and field, volleyball, water polo and wrestling. Where applicable, attendance for both boys and girls contests was included.

When combining attendance at regular-season girls and boys contests, basketball led the way with about 170 million fans, followed closely by football with 166 million. Soccer ranked third at 24 million, followed by baseball (20 million), volleyball (17 million), softball (15.8 million), wrestling (10 million), track and field (6.6 million), ice hockey (6 million), swimming and diving (4.8 million), lacrosse (4.5 million), cross country (3 million), water polo (1.8 million), tennis (1.8 million), golf (1.3 million) and field hockey (800,000).

While there are about 40 sports listed in the NFHS High School Athletics Participation Survey, the remaining sports not included in the attendance survey have minimal participation numbers nationally and would collectively add fewer than a million spectators annually. This is the first attempt (through the means of a survey) by the NFHS, the national leadership organization for high school athletic and performing arts activities, to determine national attendance figures at the high school level.

“This first-of-its-kind survey of attendance figures at the high school level is certainly a great sign that high school sports continue to be a big part of communities throughout our nation,” said Bob Gardner, NFHS executive director. “A ticket to a high school sporting event remains one of the best values for the entertainment dollar.”



Athletic directors who participated in the survey indicated that they are constantly implementing new strategies to increase attendance, maintaining a heavy emphasis on ticket affordability for fans.

"While ticket prices for professional and collegiate athletics continue to increase significantly, the ticket prices for high school athletics remain affordable," said Lane Green, athletic director for the Olathe (Kansas) School District. "Fans can watch a well-played, competitive contest without feeling like they need to take out a second mortgage on their houses to attend the game."

Other athletic directors believe that in addition to keeping the seats cheap, striving to give fans incentives to attend events through various in-game promotions is equally as important.

"At our school, our girls basketball coach offered free admission to any student who contributed one non-perishable food item to a food drive," said Gary Stevens, athletic director at Saco (Maine) Thornton Academy. "Our student body also frequently participates in what they call a 'white-out,' a promotion where all students are encouraged to wear a white shirt to the game. Promotions like these create a sense of community and help reinforce school spirit."

Johnny Evers, athletic director at Newburgh (Indiana) Castle High School, supports the idea of using promotions to boost attendance, and believes that making high school athletic events "fan-friendly" should always be a priority of any athletic program.

"We have watched the professional leagues and colleges market their product for years with the promotions they do outside and inside the games," Evers said. "All too often, high school athletic administrators do not feel the need to compete with such initiatives. Every time we make a game a special event, it is a powerful drawing card. Many high school athletic directors now understand the need to reach out to the fans and make sure a high school event is a 'cool' destination again."

Not unlike the pattern at higher levels, a team's success certainly plays a role in attendance figures. For example, if a football team competes well into the state tournament, attendance numbers are likely to increase the following season. However, Dewitt Central Clinton (Iowa) Athletic Director Brent Cook believes that in order

for any school to lay the foundation for a successful athletic program, getting the youth of the community involved is imperative.

"At some of our football games we invite our youth teams to scrimmage during halftime, as well as our youth dance teams and baton groups," Cook said. "This helps boost our gate receipts, but mostly we are interested in bringing our young players and families into our facilities and letting them watch our high school teams."

Overall, high school athletic directors agree that maintaining high attendance numbers is simply a part of the goal of educational-based athletics, which is to give kids opportunities to grow and learn valuable life lessons during their time as student-athletes. According to Jay Hammes, athletic director at William Horlick High School in Racine, Wisconsin, those who regularly attend high school events help to establish this initiative.

"With the lack of parent and community support in some schools, we all need to support and focus on student engagement and the importance of keeping our youth involved with education-based activities," Hammes said. "This should be a concern of everyone involved in interscholastic sports because by working with professional educators, it ensures that we are keeping these kids off the streets and off the couch."

With current budget issues forcing schools to cut back on athletics, programs will face some challenges to keep attendance numbers at current levels. Despite this looming issue, Air Academy (Colorado) High School Athletic Director Diane Shuck believes that schools' efforts regarding positive sporting behavior will always reflect high attendance numbers.

"I will always commit the funds to help get our student body excited about supporting our athletes," Shuck said. "Since there are so many other things kids have as options today, it's important to support our athletes and activities. I hope that schools will continue to give kids a positive outlet, and what better place than at an athletic event that supports their peers." ☺

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