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Participation in High School Athletics Has Long-lasting Benefits

By Dr. Steve Amaro, CMAA on January 22, 2020

<https://www.nfhs.org/articles/participation-in-high-school-athletics-has-long-lasting-benefits/>

High school athletic programs have been studied for more than a century. Early studies focused on how athletics helped foster a collective identity and generated pride for participants and community members. These studies evolved to clarify how participation brought about improvements in physical health, stress management and academic benchmarks. Today, there are numerous studies that focus on all types of participation benefits, but what sometimes goes unappreciated is the impact that high school athletics has on students after they graduate.

Participating in high school athletics has long-lasting, definitive benefits, especially when athletic leaders create an environment that challenges and rewards the growth mindset. When participants are supported in this way, they develop lifelong habits that transcend high school.

Three of the most important participation takeaways that students continue to practice after graduation are: 1) a stronger sense of self-confidence in building relationships with others and having an expanded capacity for empathy; 2) developing a better understanding of self and in so doing understanding how their actions affect others; and 3) building foundations for lifelong fitness habits.

These takeaways do not happen without purposeful oversight. All school leaders have a role in maintaining safe environments that allow students to experience meaningful, positive participation. To impact students so they can apply what they learn in athletics to post high school life, adult coaches and mentors need to value character education more than wins and losses. When coaches understand they can start students on a path to reach their unfulfilled potential, they can help students set the foundations for a lifetime of success.

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Building Relationships Through Team

Scoring the winning points against a rival, hearing the roar of the crowd after a goal or attaining a personal record after a track or swim meet are just a few high school athletic moments replayed in participants' minds over a lifetime. Participants do understand these moments have meaning to their schools and communities, but these are secondary goals.

What students remember most from their athletic participation is the relationship and celebration they share with their teammates. High school athletes work together daily in strenuous practices preparing for stressful situations in search of positive outcomes. In this pressured environment, students build relationships and learn to care for each other.

This concept of being part of a team makes athletes more marketable to colleges and employers as they want people who can perform under stress and follow a business or collegiate plan of action. They want students and/or employees who can take initiative and make meaningful relationships so that everyone contributes to make an organization better.

Being part of a school team is unique because no single outcome can be accomplished individually. Regardless of score, each game is dependent on the contributions of all team members. It is through this experience that high school participants cultivate a second family and learn to value each other; to maximize both team and individual potential, teammates learn to care for each other both on and off the field of play.

As an example, if participants find their teammates struggling in a game, in the classroom or even in social or family relationships, they are more likely to help each other as they have developed a close bond in working toward a common athletic goal.

Essentially, athletics allows students to develop care and empathy. They learn to see things outside of their own personal perspective and feel for their teammates. On high-functioning athletic teams, teammates can even predict and anticipate what their teammates experience, which allows them to create a support system that transcends the field of play. This care for others transfers to post-high school experiences, and athletes can maintain this care and empathy throughout their lives.

Understanding Limitations and How to Push Past Them

Being part of an athletic team also allows students to expand their understanding of themselves and others. At the beginning of the season, students may not clearly discern how their participation will affect themselves or their teammates. Athletes learn about themselves and even experiment in visualizing what they can attain. In one season – a very short amount of time in the overall school year – athletes have the potential to experience their perceived limitations and push past what they think they can accomplish.

In learning to understand their own personal limitations, athletes also discover how their own choices affect them and their teams. It is this experience that allows them to gain a better understanding of themselves. Many explore what sacrifices they need to make to achieve a common goal, what help they can offer to teammates, and what individual ways they can change and hold themselves accountable. The situations that athletes experience allows them to have a more realistic understanding of how they can set goals and what they can achieve as they move into the collegiate world and workforce.

Foundations of Fitness

Being an athlete in high school allows students to experience rigorous physical activity while still maintaining high mental acuity. It is this focus that allows high school athletes to set a strong foundation for fitness habits that last long after graduation.

This may seem like common sense for school leaders; however, the United States faces an obesity epidemic where lifespans are cut short due to unhealthy nutrition and exercise habits. Regular exercise lowers stress levels and blood pressure, and it increases self-esteem.

Regardless of the sport, students who participate in athletics are more likely to continue to exercise for a healthy body and mind. Furthermore, some athletes will continue to participate in physical activities not only to find the physical and mental benefits, but also to build relationships with others by becoming part of a local recreation team and a part of a larger community.

The Education of Coaches Is Integral to Success

Positive outcomes do not happen accidentally; coaches play a huge role in athletes realizing the benefits of high school athletics. In many ways, they play the most important role in setting the tone of any program. High school students actively seek out adults who they see as mentors; however, if coaches downplay character development with an overemphasis on winning, they reduce the chances that students will experience any benefit of athletic participation and may actually cause lasting physical and psychological damage.

To be vigilant and create a positive environment for students, school leaders need to develop plans to support and provide continual educational opportunities for all stakeholders. School leaders need to stay current in national trends and research. Coaches need to expand their professional networks and be part of organizations that support the growth mindset. Parents need to be offered information nights that clarify the purpose of high school athletics. Students need to be taught proper representation expectations and sportsmanship.

A one-stop shop to address all of these individuals is provided by the NFHS with its online courses through the NFHS Learning Center (www.NFHSLearn.com). Regardless of the provider of professional development, all paid and volunteer staff should be encouraged and supported in continual professional development that focuses on maximizing the character growth of all participants.

In our fast-changing, immediate gratification environment, high school athletic contests are metaphorical classrooms that provide meaningful learning for the athletes and the students who attend. The impact to the participants can be long-lasting and beneficial.

Coaches and administrators who stay current on best practices are better equipped to deal with the challenges they face from oversensitive parents and community members; they can set and monitor environments that reward the growth mindset and communicate how athletic participation sets a strong foundation for life success after graduation. Schools that provide this atmosphere develop students who maintain lifelong habits they carry with them for the rest of their lives.