



# Even with Pay-to-play, High School Sports are Bargain

BY ROBERT B. GARDNER, NFHS EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR, AND NINA VAN ERK, NFHS PRESIDENT

As the article on page 10 states, funding of public education in our nation's schools faces some serious challenges now and over the next few years. And as a result of a decreasing amount of assistance from state and federal governments, school leaders are looking at other options to fund school activity programs.

Among the ways that schools are offsetting reductions in the budget for athletics and other activity programs is the use of participation fees, or "pay-to-play" as it has come to be known. Although this concept was limited to some states in the Northeast 20 years ago, it is now commonplace in most areas. While 33 states indicated the use of participation fees in 2009, it is likely that some schools in every state have been forced to consider this option.

As Jim Tenopir, our chief operating officer, stated in the education funding crisis article, it is worrisome that more students (and their parents) are incurring additional personal costs to participate in education-based activity programs, which, heretofore, have been funded by the school district's budget. Certainly, short of an economic turnaround and funding increases from the state and federal levels, the hope would be that schools can offset these losses through corporate support or fund-raising rather than charging students and their families to play.

We would suggest, however, that even in those situations where students are being charged a modest (in most cases) fee to participate, education-based athletics and activities within the school system remain an incredible bargain. Even in those cases where schools are charging as much as \$500 per sport, the fee is mere pittance of what some families spend to involve their sons and daughters in out-of-school club programs, where the educational component is missing.

The popular theory by many parents is that by involving their children in out-of-school club programs, the coaching and preparation will be better than what they receive through the high school team and will greatly enhance the chance for a full-ride athletic scholarship for their son or daughter.

We certainly acknowledge that there are a few high school athletes who may benefit from a year-round focus on one sport because they have the skills and talent to play at the next level; however, among the

7.6 million participants in high school sports, these individuals are few and far between.

Consider these numbers: About three percent of high school basketball players, five percent of high school soccer players, five percent of high school football players and six percent of high school baseball players will play at the NCAA level. From the high school to the professional level, the odds are better at winning the lottery. For example, less than one-half of one percent of high school basketball players will be drafted by an NBA team.

Many families incur huge debts trying to chase college scholarships for their kids – money they wish they had back for college tuition when the scholarship offers fail to materialize. Through research of articles on this subject, it is common for families to spend \$5,000 to \$10,000 a year funding their child's athletic pursuits in out-of-school programs. Three years ago, the College Board estimated the average annual cost at a four-year public school was about \$6,200 – very similar to the annual expenditures by many families for club sports.

In some cases, participation in an out-of-school program in a particular sport could be beneficial, but often athletes (and their parents) are lured into giving up other sports in the high school setting – thereby forfeiting the educational component – to focus solely on one sport and to chase the dream of a college scholarship.

Following is a testimonial from Dave Ramsey's Web site: "In our town, travel soccer is \$1,500 a season. There are three possible seasons – spring, fall and summer. Parents' rationale is that my kid will get a scholarship to college because they are going to be such a good player. Save the \$3,000 to \$4,500 a year and put it in a college fund. It will grow to fund college, plus some."

We couldn't say it better ourselves. Contrary to popular belief, a student doesn't have to play on an elite travel team to be noticed and receive a college scholarship. College coaches will find deserving athletes on high school teams.

Despite the current financial challenges, which might include paying a fee to participate, education-based high school sports remain the best choice for the majority of high school students and their families. ©