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COMMENTARY: High school sports aren't a product

Steve Timko 4:50 p.m. EST November 14, 2016



(Photo: pixelheadphoto, Getty Images/Stockphoto)

New Jersey's fall sport tournaments are in full swing and while we hope high school athletics are entertaining, they should never be viewed as entertainment or – as they were recently described in a Courier-Post column – a “product” (“[Minnick: NJSIAA has brought plenty of controversy to football](/story/sports/2016/11/11/minnick-njsiaa-has-brought-plenty-controversy-football/93661584/)”).

Scholastic sports aren't primarily about state championships or earning scholarships. Those are simply wonderful side benefits, when they happen. The true reason we have athletic competition for high school students is to further extend the reach of classroom education. That's the reason scholastic sports developed in the first place, more than a century ago, and that's why they continue to exist.

Unfortunately, not everyone grasps this reality. It seems a small but vocal number of individuals—who represent every demographic that's naturally connected to high school athletics—are confused. They apparently believe a 15-year-old competitor should be treated like a professional athlete, and that the local football team has the same goals and motivations as the Green Bay Packers or Notre Dame Fighting Irish. But they don't ... and they shouldn't.

Speaking as the head of the 98-year-old nonprofit governing body of New Jersey high school athletics—which conducts tournaments and crowns champions throughout New Jersey in 32 different sports, representing about a quarter of a million girls and boys – I see time and again that some individuals choose to view scoring points and winning games as the primary reason any high school has a football, field hockey or soccer team. This is more than just frustrating or annoying—it's potentially tragic.

I'm not going to suggest that we need some major, structural change to scholastic sports in New Jersey. Far from it—I'm certain our conferences and tournaments already are among the best anywhere in the country, and our scholastic athletes benefit immensely from this.

What I do wish is to send a strict caution—to parents, coaches, school administrators and journalists—that we overemphasize scoring, seeding and winning to the detriment of all our young people. We need to ensure that our greatest concern isn't how many goals Johnny scores, where teams are seeded in a tournament or how many wins the local varsity squad compiles, but whether or not all participants have a safe, positive experience ... and, in the bargain, learn something about life.

Steve Timko is executive director of the New Jersey State Interscholastic Athletic Association.

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