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TOP STORY URGENT

MIKE CLARK: Are prep sports on the decline? Don't believe it

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The Times

Were you feeling the heat last week in the prep sports Twitterverse?

It wouldn't be surprising, because the annual participation survey released by the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) generated plenty of hot takes.

The biggest takeaway, which many commentators latched onto, was the news that overall participation in prep sports decreased in 2018-19 for the first time in 30 years. Close behind was the news that football numbers were down 2.9% to 1,006,013 players nationwide, the lowest total since the 1990-2000 school year.



To a lot of people, or at least a lot of people with loud voices, that means two things: prep football in particular and prep sports in general are losing their relevance.

The truth could be a little more nuanced.

Let's look at the overall numbers first. In 2017-18, there were more prep athletes — 7,980,886 — than in any year since the NFHS surveys began in 1969. And last year's total of 7,937,491 — a decrease of just 0.5% — was still the third highest all-time. So before we ring the death knell for high school sports, let's see how things trend for the next few years.

What's striking about the overall numbers being so high is that it likely means more kids overall are playing high school sports. From a historical perspective, that's clearly true. Until the passage of Title IX in 1972, girls had few, if any, competitive outlets at the prep level.

And when the surveys first started, most male athletes in high school played two or three sports. Now we're in the age of specialization, when many kids play or practice one sport year-round. So for the overall numbers of kids in prep sports

to be at historically high levels, there must be more individual athletes competing now.

That's good news, because the benefits of prep sports are many. It's something that binds a community together in a powerful and unique way. Here in the Region, we see that every week in the fall when the Friday night lights come on in football stadiums, and most nights in the winter when some of the biggest high school gyms in the country play host to the game that made Indiana famous.

Not every kid will play football or basketball, obviously. But many get into what you might call the "lifetime" sports in high school — the activities that can keep you fit and active far past your teen years, like swimming, running, tennis or golf.

But let's get back to football. There's been no shortage of hand-wringing, or of a kind of smug satisfaction, at the sport's declining numbers. The prep game's fate is tied in some people's minds to that of the NFL. The pros clearly have a safety

problem that was ignored for too long, leading to sad endings for too many former players.

At the same time, it's also clear that high school football is a safer game than it was 40 or 50 years ago. Coaches are more aware than ever of the game's potential health issues, and are both better equipped and more inclined to address them.

Helmet technology has improved. Proper tackling methods are have become an increasing point of emphasis. The importance of proper hydration and the danger of heat-related injuries are better understood. There also has been research showing high school players do not necessarily have more cognitive issues than their peers.

It's understandable that football is a harder sell now for some athletes and their parents. And it's not a sport for everyone.

But there are still far more high school athletes playing football than any other sport, and in most towns, it draws more spectators than any other.

Prep football remains a powerhouse on the Region sports scene and beyond. And the feeling here is that it will remain so for some time.

Mike Clark

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