

# Why Are The Stands Empty At High School Basketball Games?

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Last week, I sat and watched a few games from the WYMT Mountain Classic and could not help but notice the stands were empty. It was the night of the boys' semi-finals and that is usually a big night for the tournament. The next night someone shared a picture from warmups at the championship game and the stands were noticeably empty again. This is a big tournament with some of the best teams around, but why is no one there? Let's talk about it.

First, I need to say something and emphasize it: LIVE STREAMING GAMES IS NOT THE PROBLEM. Sorry to bust out the caps lock, but I hear that more and more every year and I believe the argument seems logical enough, but it is not based in any reality and no single person who uses that argument has ever provided any proof for it. Take the WYMT Mountain Classic for example, how long have those games been televised or streamed over the internet? It never seemed to hurt the attendance before. Some people may say, "Yeah, but there are a lot more people streaming games now!" Well, WYMT blocks out any other media outlets from broadcasting video from that tournament. You either watch it on one of WYMT's platforms or listen to it on the radio

and that has never changed in the decades that I have kept up with sports around here. Ask the folks over in Breathitt County if their attendance went down after Bluegrass Sports Nation started streaming all of their games. It seems like it only helped their crowds. When I worked at WYMT we monitored whether or not the Game of the Week impacted attendance, and believe it or not, when WYMT broadcasted games the attendance was normally higher due to the promotion and hype surrounding it. If you want to do an actual study and prove me wrong with some facts, I would love to see it. Until then, I will just point you to the evidence above.

I think the biggest issue impacting attendance is the rise of digital entertainment and media. When I was in high school, social interaction was face-to-face and not screen-to-screen. Sporting events were more than just a competition, it was a social event. My wife and I actually became a couple after watching a Perry Central and Hazard game in 2007. I know it's hard for you folks to contemplate a love story THAT romantic, but it is our story. At the risk of sounding like a boomer, I just don't think the students are as invested in beating their rivals as we were back in 2004. Solution? I think schools should invest in their pep sections. Get students shirts for showing up early at big games or give them some time during the day to make signs and work on chants.

The economic issues I think are something to look at too. While I think \$5 is pretty much the standard entry to a game these days and has been for a long time, nothing else is the same price. Families are paying a lot more for groceries and rent than they did in the past and I can't help but think that is a barrier for many people. I'm the oldest of three and for my family to go to one game it would cost \$25 with no trip to the concession stand. I was working the ticket booth at a game a few

years ago and a family of eight people walked in. There was no way I was charging them \$40; I charged the adults and left it at that. To the school districts out there making sure students get in free or at a discounted rate: bless you.

The last reason I think we do not have the attendance we used to see are health concerns. It seems like some people got a taste of being a shut-in during the COVID pandemic and still choose to stay home. The shutdown had a lasting impact on public gatherings, with many people still cautious about attending crowded events. COVID is still around and people who have compromised immune systems or regularly interact with those people feel like they should stay home, and I understand that. The world is different on the other side of the pandemic. Many restaurants still don't have a dine-in option and several stores have permanently adjusted their hours. Some people just don't go out unless they absolutely have to. Solution? This is a tough one that we've been battling for a long time. I would just recommend everyone do their part when it comes to washing your hands and staying home when you are sick. Follow whatever guidelines the experts recommend and make sure we are all safe.

The decline in attendance at high school sporting events is a multifaceted issue that reflects broader societal changes. While it's a challenging trend, it also presents an opportunity for schools and communities to adapt and innovate. By understanding and addressing the underlying causes, high school sports can continue to be a vibrant and integral part of student life. What is the single biggest thing we can do to help though? Get excited and promote your local athletes.

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