



The NFHS Voice



Acts of Good Sportsmanship on Display in High School Sports

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Perhaps the one aspect of high school sports that best distinguishes it from all other levels of play in our country is the focus on sportsmanship.

Everyone has a role to play. Coaches should concentrate on coaching. Officials must stick to making the calls on the field or court. Players can only play the game between the lines. And parents need to know that their job is to support their kids in the best way possible.

Because of the importance of promoting respect, integrity and sportsmanship in high school activity programs, the NFHS began its celebration of **National High School Activities Month** this week with a focus on this crucial area. October 1-10 has been designated as **National Sportsmanship, Fan Appreciation and Public-Address Announcer Week**.

While there have been some reports of unsportsmanlike behavior this fall, we believe most students, coaches, officials and parents are thankful for the resumption of activity programs and fully engaged in respectful behavior. We have heard of numerous student-athletes going above and beyond to demonstrate that – at the high school level of play – there are, indeed, more important outcomes than winning.

In a football game last month between two Iowa schools, one player received considerable notoriety for his spontaneous act of sportsmanship.

In the fourth quarter of a closely contested game, Mario Hoefler of Charles City High School stopped to help Carter Steinlage of New Hampton High School, who was lying on the field with a leg cramp. Having experienced some cramps himself during the game, Hoefler responded with empathy.

“I saw it all happen in the play,” Hoefler said in a [Today.com](#) article. “I’m running from the far end to get over there and just see him go down. At first, I was running to high-five my teammates, but I saw him grab his calf. I saw him go down and I didn’t see anyone go over there to help him. I know how this feels and wanted to help him get through this cramp until someone came over.”

The photo of Hoefler raising Steinlage’s leg to free Steinlage from his cramp went viral and created considerable national interest.

“I just wanted to help him,” Hoefler added. “I would do it the same over and over again. We’ve played each other for years now. It was more like a brotherly thing to help him out.”

Almost as a sidenote, Charles City won the early September game, 14-8.

Also in early September in Orem, Utah, two high school girls soccer teams came together during a moment of adversity in a unified sign of support. In a

rivalry game between two Orem schools – Orem High School and Timpanogos High School – Orem’s Rebekah Shelley went down after heading a corner kick and wasn’t moving on the turf, which prompted officials to call for an ambulance.

According to an article in the [Salt Lake City Deseret News](#), the Timpanogos coaches and players approached the Orem players and came together in prayer for the injured player. The teams knelt in a circle, put their arms around each other and said a prayer for Shelley.

“A lot of people talk about rivalry, but sometimes there’s more to it than rivalry,” said Timpanogos head coach Robyn Bretzing in the *Deseret News* article. “It was a good display to everyone that there’s more than just the sport. There’s sportsmanship. There’s friendship.

“There’s so much more that these young athletes can learn about life when they play sports,” Bretzing continued. “And that’s one of our biggest jobs as a coach: to raise these athletes to be better people and contributors to their society. To teach them ‘OK, I can let my faith take over and my compassion take over.’”

Shelley had responded by the following morning and was moving and talking and was expected to recover.

Since the start of the NFHS’ [High School Today](#) magazine in 2007, more than 100 articles have been published dealing with accounts of high school student-athletes and teams overcoming adversity, showing respect for the opponent through sportsmanship and reaching out to others in need in their communities.

These recent events in Iowa and Utah, along with others that occur every day, indicate that sportsmanship comes above winning and losing. There will be

adversity along with good times, and a focus on sportsmanship helps students to handle both situations.

While there is still much work to do regarding respectful behavior, there is proof that these programs are making a difference in the lives of many people. These accounts of sportsmanship – and others that occur every day in our nation’s 19,500 high schools – offer great hope for the future of education-based activity programs.

For more information on National High School Activities Month and **National Sportsmanship, Fan Appreciation and Public-Address Announcer Week**, visit the NFHS website at <https://www.nfhs.org/media/1016835/2021-nfhs-national-high-school-activities-month-campaign-booklet.pdf>.

Dr. Karissa L. Niehoff is beginning her fourth year as executive director of the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) in Indianapolis, Indiana. She is the first female to head the national leadership organization for high school athletics and performing arts activities and the sixth full-time executive director of the NFHS. She previously was executive director of the Connecticut Association of Schools-Connecticut Interscholastic Athletic Conference for seven years.