

SNG-Nowlan-Friday night football-11-11-13

Lessons from Friday night football

By Jim Nowlan

My rural high school is again in the football playoffs, and the frenzy locally is palpable.

Can we learn anything from the intense focus on high school sports that could benefit the academic side of high school? I have some ideas.

Recently, I drove the several miles to the neighboring town to the playoff game. My rural town is consolidated with another town into one school district, as is common in depopulating rural Illinois.

The consolidation, long staunchly opposed by most, came about in large part because one fall one of the schools lacked enough players to field a competitive football team!

Along the highway to the playing field elaborate signs, painted by parents and students, exhorted the team to greater glory for the local area.

At the high school, the student lockers of football players are emblazoned with signs that proclaim their team membership, making them part of the in-crowd. Football standouts are lionized by students and community alike. One third of all the high school boys are on the football team.

In contrast, school sports are not part of education in most countries I know of, so parents overseas can focus attention on their children's academic progress.

Yet school sports are valuable, in moderation, and I think other countries are missing something. Think of the stimulating competition and the team-building values of girls' volleyball

and basketball, something not available to girls when I went to school, lo those many decades ago.

My high school's football team is very good, and strong teams have become a tradition. But the academics in the school are mediocre at best.

ACT scores are barely at the state average. The results would be way below average if the scores of Chicago's struggling public high schoolers were eliminated from the state averages. ACT scores locally haven't moved in a decade.

So can we channel some of that community and parental energy devoted to sports into academics? I think so.

In the 1920s and '30s, my high school participated in a day-long county track and field—*and* declamation—meet.

After the track and field events were over, the declamation contest was held, at which a girl and a boy from each school gave speeches. The speech scores were an integral part of the track and field scoring, and often determined which school won the overall meet.

The speeches were a big deal, according to a local historian; big crowds attended. The school yearbooks devoted as much space to the speeches as to the exploits on the running track.

I think a key to the intense interest in high school sports—and declamation in the past—lies in competition with area schools.

So here is my idea.

We should initiate competition among high schools based on academics. We already have in place conferences of schools of similar size and socioeconomic status.

And since 1900 we have had the Illinois High School Association, which sanctions and oversees sports as well as music, speech, debate, even bass fishing, competition. The IHSA is

overseen by high school principals, so we have the infrastructure to direct the academic competition.

Schools would compete based on ACT (American College Testing) scores (which every Illinois high schooler takes), so every student would feel involved.

In addition, the speech, science Olympiad and scholastic bowl teams would compete within the conference as well. Scores from those events would be added to the outcomes of the ACT scores.

Possibly the speech and other academic clubs could hold a single, major conference meet, to heighten involvement and interest.

I would also throw in some financial incentives. Every school would have some serious “skin in the game.” All schools in the conference would contribute money to a scholarship fund, which would go to the school that won the academic competition.

Winning schools could go on to compete at regional and state levels.

Classes of schools would be set by both enrollment and socioeconomic indicators, so that New Trier, with 2 percent low income students, would not be competing with East St. Louis, with probably 95 percent low income.

(Income and educational achievement of parents are the most significant indicators of student achievement.)

We must do something to increase parental and community interest in academics. Some of the frenzy surrounding Friday night football should be redirected to academics.

Otherwise, countries that are focused as intently on academics as we are on sports will soon “have us for lunch” in economic terms.