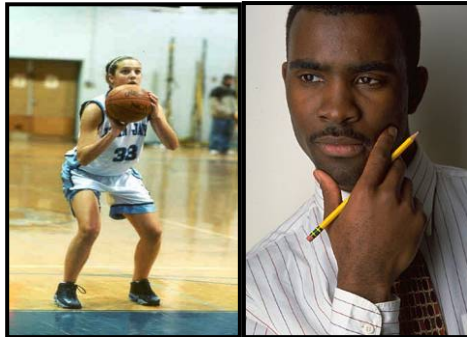


Michigan High School Athletic Association Needs Assessment

**Athletic Director's
Focus Groups Results***

May 30, 2005



**MICHIGAN STATE
UNIVERSITY**



**INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF
YOUTH SPORTS**

*** Research conducted by the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports,
Room 210 IM Circle, Michigan State University, East Lansing,
Michigan 48824 (517-353-6689).**

Study Purpose and Rationale

This study is part of a larger project designed to identify the major issues, concerns, and challenges facing high school sports leaders and their athletes today. Particular emphasis is being placed on identifying the educational needs of high school coaches and problems currently facing high school student athletes. Results will be used in several ways including: (1) to help guide curricular development efforts of the MHSAA Coach Advancement Program; (2) to identify the most pressing practical issues on which researchers from the Institute for the Study of Youth Sports should conduct research studies; and (3) to add to the body of scientific knowledge relative to promoting positive youth development through educational athletics.

How The Study Was Conducted?

As Phase 1 of a larger project, a series of focus group interviews are being held in an effort to map the range of major issues facing key stakeholders in Michigan high school sports today (e.g., high school coaches, principals, athletic directors, parents, and student athletes). The purpose of these focus groups is to identify participants' views of issues and challenges involved in contemporary high school sports and their perceptions of the problems facing student athletes.

This report describes what was learned from focus group interviews conducted with 20 high school athletic directors. In particular, during the 2005 Michigan Interscholastic Athletic Administrators Association Conference, two focus groups (comprised of 11 and 9 persons) of approximately one hour in duration were conducted.

Key questions asked in each group included:

1. What are the best or most rewarding things about being a high school athletic director today?
2. What are the worst or least rewarding things about being a high school athletic director today?
3. What are the biggest challenges athletic directors face when working with high school coaches, student athletes, other administrators and parents today?
4. What are the biggest issues facing high school student athletes today?
5. What are the life skill needs of today's high school athletes?

Who Was Studied?

On March 21, 2005, 20 high school athletic directors [15 males (75%) and 5 females (25%)] voluntarily took part in the two focus groups. On average, the coaches were 48.5 years of age (ranging from 25 to 62 years). Of the 20 participants, 18 were Caucasian (90%) while 2 (10%) were African-American. The athletic directors had an average of 8.2 years of athletic directing experience (ranging from a low of 0 to a high of 24). Ninety-five percent (n=19) of those in the focus groups had high school coaching experience. Educationally, 4 (20%) of the athletic directors had completed a bachelor's

degree, while the remaining 16 (80%) had earned a master's degree. Nine (45%) of the respondents majored in physical education or minored in coaching, while 11 athletic directors (55%) had not.

In terms of school size, on average, 1119 students (ranging from a low of 122 to a high of 3200) attended the schools for which these athletic directors worked. The number of sports offered at each school ranged from a low of one to a high of 37, with the average being 18. Finally, the respondents estimated the racial make-up of their schools to be 83% Caucasian, 21 % African-American, 5 % Asian, 4 % Hispanic with 4% indicating other (these numbers exceed 100 percent because data were collected in a manner such that individual athletic director's estimated percentages and these were averaged over each racial/ethnic group).

What Was Found?

The original intent was to tape-record both focus groups, to transcribe them verbatim and for the investigative team to study the tapes and transcripts identifying major themes. However, as a result of an equipment failure, only one group was recorded. In the case of the group that was not recorded, the investigative team relied on studying the notes of the group's investigator that were taken during the session and the detailed reflections recorded immediately after the session when it was learned that the recorder malfunctioned. The following key points were identified combining the data from the two focus groups.

1. What are the best (most rewarding) things about being a high school athletic director today?

Interactions Contact with the Student Athletes

- Seeing kids grow on and off field, being around the kids
- The different relationships you have as an AD—you develop different programs that keep you connected to kids

Having an Impact on Student Athletes

- You create more opportunities for kids
- You can effect participation—effect how many kids get involved/have opportunities
- You have a bigger influence on a variety of events
- You have a different kind of impact (than coaches and teachers) on kids
- Programs impact youth who will be leaders in the future—you have a hand in helping kids be successful and grow
- Athletics is a different kind of experience—it can be personally rewarding as “kids thank you for coming to games”

- Hall of Fame athletes come back 15 years later, and you see the impact you had on them

The Opportunity to Interact with Parents/Community Members

The Relationship You Have with Coaches

- Good relationship with coaches—working with them/guiding them
- You get to coach coaches—help young coaches grow
- Coaching coaches is very rewarding

2. What are the worst (least rewarding) things about being a high school athletic director today?

Balancing Roles and Managing Time

- Late night time demands of position—you do not see own kids enough and cheat your own family
- Balancing dual roles: AD, Assistant Principal, and Family
- Lack of time to do everything—figuring out how to balance your time
- Saving money at a district level means more work for you and less time to do it in

Budget Problems

- Some schools have pay to play/participate and it works well, while others are trying to avoid it **as they are** concerned about crossing the line – becoming more like AAU / non-school club sports

Lack of Appreciation by School Administrators for One's Efforts

- Every AD works two jobs—one type of administration during day; another type of administrator at night and weekends.
- School administrators do not appreciate what it takes—they only care if they do not get problem phone calls
- Lack of gratitude from bosses/administrators. They do not thank you enough. They only intervene when there is a problem

Parents

- Parents do not understand the dynamics of being a coach and running a team
- Parents would rather have their child be all-state than win a team state title
- Student athletes learn poor sportsmanship from their parents

Other

- The politics of working with all the related school departments—you must jump through a lot of hoops to get things done
- Lack of support staff
- Discipline problems

3. What are the biggest issues facing kids today?

Sports Specialization

- The pressure for single sport specialization from some of the coaches (which is in conflict with the administration/AD view). This puts pressure on the student athletes
- Coaches only want their athletes to play their sport
- Coaches who coach their sport both at school and in outside of school programs such as the AAU
- Getting athletes (to participate in lesser sports (volleyball) because of the pressure to train year round for a primary sport
- You ask coaches in their interviews about their opinion about multi-sport athletes –most know if they want the job to say it is good...but some change this philosophy when they actually get their coaching position
- Athletes missing practices because of outside school team demands

The Pressure to Succeed Placed on Today's Student Athletes

- The pressure to succeed athletically and academically—get good grades no matter how they get them. Student athletes getting pushed to succeed – pressure to get scholarships
- The pressure to win, be a CEO. ACT causes athletes families to hire sprint coaches to be more successful. Take supplements and steroids to do this—meet the pressure. The kids are victims. This has increased the last few years
- People saying the student athlete must be better than other students--you must be better
- The student athlete is caught in the middle because the coach says one thing and parents/ outside individuals say other things
- Kids become burned out and tired because of the pressure
- Outside sports take time
- Kids are involved in so many things they cannot focus on one
- Student athletes have so many things to do – may have to limit what they play
- There is pressure for both boys and girls--few gender differences exist with this issue.
- Girls' AAU may be more pressure than boys

- Nobody is teaching kids about time management. Yet, student athletes are overscheduled. Do the kids understand what commitment involves and how to handle it? This is a life skill
- Sports becoming less fun for participants and spectators

Out of School Sports Programs

- Out of School programs impose a different mentality than school sports
- Schools have no control over out of school sports

The Attitude People Have About Sports Today

- Let us do whatever it takes to win—okay to cut corners. Kids learning how to cheat today
- It is a privilege to play, but parents and athletes do not always see it that way—they see sport as something they are entitled to

Poor Sportsmanship

- On the part of fans, players, and parents
- The professional and collegiate programs are poor models of sportsmanship. Players do not understand why they cannot do the same things they see when they go to college or professional games
- Parents do not think poor sportsmanship is that bad
- Students (fans) think it is a game and funny to have the AD come talk to them...they do not always take poor sportsmanship seriously

Parental Issues

- Parent competitiveness—my child must do better than yours orientation
- Parents are not involved
- Parents think their kid is the best athlete, but are looking through rose colored glasses

Lack of/Declining Funding for School Sports

- There is no money or very small budgets
- Schools must shift focus to fundraisers, use of boosters or development offices
- Pay for play participation

4. What are the biggest challenges high school athletic directors face today?

A. In working with student athletes

- Trying to put a program in place that will be a positive experience for all kids
- Code of conduct—dealing with - enforcing the code of conduct
- Teaching student athletes about balance—balancing time, decision making
- Pressure on kids in AAU type programs/parental pressure on child. Kids caught in middle
- Athletes feel they should get special treatment just because they are an athlete—e.g., it is okay to miss class, etc. This makes divisions between athletes and non-athlete larger. Athletes thinking they can get away with stuff (shop lifting).
- Getting students, spectators and athletes to **behave appropriately** when they see poor behavior at the college level
- Teaching character (depends on the coach)

B. In working with parents

- Getting parents to keep athletics in perspective—this is high school sports—the goal is not scholarships, but to learn how to play as a team
- When parents and coaches work together you have bigger effects- 90% of the parents (silent majority) do a good job and help a lot. They do not get attention, and they do things not expecting to get anything in return on their time investment
- Sometimes, as athletic directors, we neglect and do not acknowledge positive parents enough
- Some parents are high flyers and go right to the top (to the superintendent) versus going through channels - they need to follow the protocol. This may not be the parents' fault, but the superintendents' for not insisting they go through channels
- Because parents are so involved in other areas, this over involvement carries over to athletics
- Coaches who are not parents do not understand what it is like to be a parent when it is your kid that is involved. If you can understand where the parents are coming from that it is key
- Parents demanding coaches be released

C. In working with administrators?

- Budget problems and cuts
- It helps if the senior administrators had athletic backgrounds
- Central administrators with no athletic background setting athletic policies and procedures. Experts do not have a say
- Getting kids out of class for athletic events
- Too much micro managing

- Sacred cows—certain sports get preferential treatment
- The amount of paper work has increased so much—hard to keep up

D. In working with coaches?

- To overcome a coach's tunnel vision—they only think about their program versus other sports and other school activities in general
- Coaches are better informed about elite performance today –they know what it takes to get better and the commitment needed. In the summer, every coach wants the athlete to train for his or her sport
- The need for coaches to recognize the educational perspective; need to connect with teachers (even if the coach is a non-teacher)
- Getting coaches to manage their emphasis on winning/outcome attitude. Getting them to teach life skills. The focus should be on educational athletics
- Getting them to recognize the need for coaching education
- There has been a change in who is coaching today. Today's coaches do not understand conditioning, nutrition, biomechanics and liability
- Coaches need to better understand ethics. We must get them to better enforce the rules and discipline athletes
- Many coaches are not teachers, so they do not have an educational perspective
- Finding a method to work with each coach...get to know his or her personality

Recommendations

- You need to get the parents and coaches on same page—when this occurs, the kids will follow
- You need to address parents head on - do not shy away from doing so
- Some schools have had success in training kids on time management and prioritization. This should be considered
- Dealing with poor sportsmanship: get with a group of student leaders (athletes / non-athletes) and parents and inform them of your expectations. Have them lead / demonstrate good sportsmanship. This educational approach seems to work better than always having to go talk to everyone
- Talk with opposing the team / fans before the game about proper behavior. For example, at a game where the opponent had a reputation for being rowdy, the AD approached the fans and asked for a few representatives and told them the expectation. They had no problems at the game, and players thanked her for a great game/ environment
- There are laws on hazing now and nothing big has happened in Michigan YET. However, there is a need for communication and intervention. Things have changed since many of us were playing. Coaches coach the way they were coached, but now things are different and today's coach may need to change some things because hazing is an issue today
- School leaders must get involved in non-school youth sports. Educate parents and young athletes. Get parents involved in a positive way early

- MHSAA Coaches Education program recommendations:
 - Like the changes that have taken place over past year (more interaction, coaches enjoying it more)-continue these
 - Have a pool of speakers where coaches can choose what topic (e.g., conditioning, nutrition, sportsmanship) and contact the speaker
 - Have books to recommend
 - Form a partnership with the Michigan Athletic Trainer Society (have both at their convention)
 - Do a better job with marketing

Acknowledgements

The investigative team would like to thank Kathy Vrugink Westdorp, MHSAA Assistant Director, for her invaluable support in helping organize and set up the focus group sessions. We would also like to acknowledge the 20 athletic directors who volunteered to participate and so freely shared their opinions with us. Their extra efforts to make these sessions happen were greatly appreciated.



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