

The school year is well underway and the official start of fall will be upon us. Concurrent with the start of school is the fall sports season. Many people in the community look with anticipation to the Friday night ritual of high school football. School athletics are tangible. There are scores to tell you if a school “has a good team.” And, people just enjoy seeing talented athletes compete to provide them with plenty of fodder for “coffee shop talk.”

Athletics appear to be a big part of what we do because they are so visible. This is the first time in 446 weeks I’ve written on the topic so trust me, there are many other things to which schools give attention. From the perspective of issues with parents, unfortunately, athletics use up an inordinate amount of time.

So why do we bother to have school sports? In Europe, they have a totally different approach. Students only go to school until the early afternoon because the school just covers the basics. What we call “extracurriculars” are provided by the local town. So after school, the students would go somewhere else to participate in say, the town soccer club or town band. The schools then would just focus on, well, school.

In an article by Julie Doshan on “Why We Play,” she quotes Minnesota State High School Leagues Associate Director Jody Redman as saying, “I like to win, but it’s not our purpose. Our purpose is education. It’s human growth and development of the inner lives of kids.”

I think Redman’s statement of the purpose of athletics in schools is spot on. Those of us who have worked with student athletes have seen the positive impact their participation has had on their academic work and on personal development. Participation on a team provides an opportunity to teach “soft skills” that would be difficult to teach in other settings.

I still remember the first time I saw a basketball scrimmage. Though there are officials, coaches are permitted to pace the sideline and give direction to players as they play the game. Players are getting feedback in real time. “What a great educational model,” I thought. Compare doing that to having the players sit in a classroom for 90 minutes to hear theory and see diagrams. You could spend a year “teaching” the game but without the opportunity to put the theory into practice, an athlete does not emerge.

In this country, we have made athletics an integral part of what we do in schools. We have a core value in our district: Individual – “We value every individual and provide ample opportunity to them to develop their skills and talents.” We provide many avenues for students to explore and develop their skills and talents and athletics is one of them. What we’ve learned from doing this is that when a student is given opportunity to shine in the area of his or her giftedness, there is an “overflow” effect that helps him or her in weaker areas. This is what Redman was referring to when she talked about human growth.

Those of us who see the value of school athletics and want students to continue to reap the benefits are concerned about their future. One of the threats to the future of school athletics is parents themselves.

My wife has an uncle who lives in upstate New York. A few years ago he celebrated his 50th year as a high school sports referee. I asked him what has changed the most in those 50 years and without a millisecond of hesitation, he said, “Parents! They’ve taken all the fun out of the game.”

Throughout the country, there is a shortage of officials to referee high school athletic contests. A survey by the National Association of Sports Officials (NASO) found the 95% of the 60 governing bodies for high school sports reported canceling or rescheduling games due to a lack of officials. That same survey found that 76% of respondents listed poor sportsmanship by parents as the single biggest reason officials quit.

The Ohio High School Athletic Association asked officials to name the worst part of their jobs. Poor fan behavior was the No. 1 answer. Making this even more problematic is that the “abuse” of officials doesn’t end with the game. It continues on social media.

Next week, we’ll take a look at another threat to the future of school athletics.