

The State of High School Sports in Colorado

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Everybody makes a big deal out of the “big three” professional sports commissioners. Roger Goodell makes \$40 million plus, but gets reamed for weak penalties on domestic violence in the NFL. Adam Silver acts swiftly in his first test as NBA commish and ends up on the cover Sports Illustrated. Rob “the Man” Manfred inherits the world’s slowest game and will get to answer Pete Rose questions for the next decade. And it’s all front-page and Twitter news.

Meanwhile, out in the prairie-dog infested plains of Aurora, Paul Angelico, the eighth Commissioner of the Colorado High School Activities (CHSAA), labors in near – and blissful – anonymity, performing one of the most important jobs in education.

The decisions made by the Pueblo-born and Wasson High/UNC-educated Angelico, and his staff of seven administrators and nine support staff, affect 344 high schools and their almost 284,000 students, 70 percent of whom participate in at least one of the CHSAA’s 30 sanctioned sports and activities.

So, as we begin the 95th year of high school competition under the CHSAA’s auspices, I sat down with the commissioner of the organization, which, while not as visible or controversial as the big money professional leagues, makes important decisions that impact most of us, especially during our high school years and the years our offspring are in high school.

The U.S. is one of the few countries in which competitive high school athletics exist. Is the cost of athletics justified in public institutions where academics should be stressed above all else?

The U.S., because of our free-market system, is the most appropriate country in the world to have athletics as part of the curriculum. Sports are an effective, and safe, laboratory for learning life lessons. There are some lessons that are taught so much more effectively in the gym than in the classroom.

What is the most significant threat to the future of high school athletics in Colorado today?

The lack of understanding by the public as to what the real purpose of high school sports is. We must communicate to parents that we offer these sports as life building skills for their kids not as a means to scholarships. The public conversation too often focuses on wins and losses and playing time.

This all sounds so theoretical. What do you guys (the CHSAA) actually do?

We spend a lot of time communicating with our member schools, particularly athletic directors who are the unsung heroes of high school athletics. We interpret and enforce our rules and hand out penalties when necessary. We organize committees in every sport, which, in turn, establish fair playoff formats. We train, test and register officials in every sport. We certify coaches who don't teach. We're constantly seeking media coverage for our schools and athletes. Most people aren't aware that we have state leadership conferences for student council, music festivals throughout the state and state speech and debate tournaments.

Clarify the how and why of putting Valor Christian into the Centennial Conference for football?

We try to keep conferences in groups of four, six or eight. We also try to follow school and school district wishes in keeping their teams together for natural rivalries and to reduce travel costs. In this case, all those factors came together that made the Centennial Football Conference the most logical choice. It also made sense for Valor to

have to qualify for the football playoffs through conference play like every other school. Because of their success, and a perceived imbalance in facilities, existing conferences had not wanted Valor as a member. They played an independent schedule and qualified in a unique way. Actually, Valor is a member of the Jefferson County League for all other sports.

Are parents of high school athletes as bad as people say?

All parents, including myself, cannot be totally rational when it comes to the thing they prize most – their own kid. While it is a common theme in youth sports that parents are crazy, the truth is that only a small percent are irrational. There are plenty of supportive parents out there.

Tell me about a “crazy” parent.

A family took us to court because I denied eligibility to the son who transferred without a family move and with strong indications that the transfer was athletically motivated. Under oath, the mom told the judge that she woke up one morning with the knowledge that she was going to die very soon. They hurriedly called a family meeting and decided that, because of her imminent death, her son needed to return to his neighborhood school. The judge ruled in her son’s favor and, no doubt buoyed by the decision, she’s still kicking.

What’s the worst part of being commissioner?

Declaring kids ineligible.

Why have eligibility rules if participation is good for kids?

Good question. A big reason that teams and athletes are held in such high esteem is because schools and the CHSAA have high standards for the participants. Without rules, all that we do would just be recess. A student needs to know that they have earned the privilege to compete and that it is not a right. These activities are also a great incentive for some kids to get passing grades so they will be eligible for the sport that they love.

What's the most gratifying part of your job?

I get to be the mouthpiece of the association, to brag about all the great stuff that schools and kids do every day. I really enjoy getting to talk about how what we do affects kids' lives in a positive way and prepares them for life after high school.

What's the role and purpose of chsaanow.com? Why take media "in house"? You do a great job with the site, but I think there's misperception about its goals and purpose.

Chsaanow.com came about because we saw a continued decline in the amount and type of press high school athletics were receiving. Newspapers today cannot dedicate the space they once did to high school sports. We continued to see that there was not one place to go to find results, scores and stories from all around the state. We believe that the kids in Flagler are as important as the kids at Mullen, but they don't have a media outlet to tell their story. This web page is working towards covering all sports, all ends of the state and all size schools. We are getting more local papers throughout the state involved.

How are you handling the ever-growing issue of club sports?

This could be an entire story unto itself. We need to reemphasize our purpose as compared to the goals of clubs and the great differences that exist. This doesn't make clubs bad or good, just entirely different than us. No one can offer what we can to communities and kids, regardless of their economic status.

What is the greatest high school game/match/tournament you've ever seen?

I don't know if it was the greatest, but one that I will never forget was Coronado vs. Evergreen in the 1992 5A State Volleyball Tournament. Coronado was behind in the third set by quite a bit. I watched the coach, Joan Powell, call a timeout and talk to her players. After that, she sat down and never stood back up, never said a word to the kids on the floor. Coronado came back to win the match and the state tournament. Sometimes, you've just got to know when to let the kids take control.

Is CHSAA a government agency?

No. We are what you might call “quasi-governmental.” That means if we didn’t do this job, a governmental agency would have to. That would involve tax dollars and would put a whole different spin on a lot of what we do. Currently, we are a nonprofit 503c-b business.

If you’re not a governmental agency, where does your operating budget come from?

All of our funds are self-generated from tournament ticket sales, corporate sponsorships, t-shirt sales, member service fees, television and web ads.

I know you love all sports and activities. But which event always leaves you smiling?

Oh, man, there are several that do that for me. Student Leadership Conference at CSU in the summer, as well as our Music Gala in the spring, are two. In sports, I think it would have to be the State Wrestling Tournament. The pure athletic aspect of the sport and the fact they these kids are mortal enemies during the match and then stand up and shake hands afterwards really defines what sport should be about to me.

Describe the typical high school coach.

The vast majority of people who get into high school coaching do it because they love working with kids, teaching not just skills, but values, as well. Sure, coaches are competitors, but most don’t put winning above teaching. My high school gymnastics coaches at Wasson, Mike Larson and Fred Schamberger, were great because they had very high standards and expectations. And they treated every kid the same. There are a lot of coaches like them out there.

How much recruiting of athletes is going on?

Good programs and coaches’ reputations recruit without saying a word. If coaches are recruiting, they are doing it in a way that they are not being accused of it, as we are not getting the reports we used to on this subject.

Briefly describe the CHSAA's current transfer rule. How is it working?

Currently, when a student transfers schools without moving and the transfer happens in the summer, they lose 50 percent of their varsity eligibility. If the transfer happens in the course of the school year, the student loses 100 percent varsity eligibility. The rule is all about keeping academics as the first priority. Stats show that transferring is academically harmful to students and we do not want to have athletics be a driving force in the reason for a transfer.

The CHSAA is responsible for the classification system that groups schools by size for state playoffs – 1A, 2A, 3A, etc. What are the most common complaints you get regarding classification?

Most complaints revolve around the inequities of the size of the largest school in a classification and the smallest. The only way to address that is to have more classifications. Most schools agree that a state our size cannot support more than five classifications. And there is always the problem of schools which are perennial powers and schools which are historically unsuccessful. We have examined many plans in the past that would create more competitive balance, but have not been able to come up with anything that is more black-and-white and defensible than a system based on enrollment. The CHSAA Classification and League Organizing Committee is charged with recommending league alignments and classification numbers for a two-year cycle. The committee's recommendations go to our legislative group to be voted on by the membership for approval.

Who hires you?

The CHSAA Board of Directors, a group of superintendents, principals and athletic directors elected from nine geographic districts, along with representatives of the Colorado Association of School Boards, Colorado Association of School Executives, Colorado Department of Education and an appointee from the Colorado State Legislature.

I go to a high school game and hear people complaining about the officiating, which I think is generally pretty damn good. Who assigns those officials? What is CHSAA's relationship with officiating?

Actually, schools assign those officials. Leagues normally hire an assigner who chooses officials with input from the league schools. There is not a surplus of officials because of public perception of the job and geography. We make sure every official is registered and has passed certain tests before they go on the list that schools pick from.

What is the future of high school athletics?

I am optimistic about the future of high school sports. Our participation numbers continue to grow. Regardless of outside competitive opportunities, there's still nothing that compares to competing for your school, winning a letter, earning the respect of your teachers and fellow students. We need to be more open to new and different kinds of sports and not be as traditional as we are today, but that should come in time.

Seems like your job, while unique in Colorado, is not so different from everyone else's: There are things you love about it and frustrations that will probably never go away. Significantly important for most people to know is that the rules that govern our high school teams and competitors are not made by a single "czar" but by the schools themselves in a democratic fashion. I'm guessing that when you retire, you won't be applying for the commissioner's job in the NFL, the NBA or MLB.

True.