

Then They Came For Me

By: Dana Abbott, NISCA President-Elect

The disturbing trend among intercollegiate athletic programs to drop swimming and diving, or baseball, or gymnastics, often citing budgetary reasons, is obviously of great concern to the coaches and athletes in those sports. Should it also be of great concern to *high school* coaches and athletes in those sports? On the one hand, YES, because the opportunities for post-high school participation and competition are being diminished every year. On the other hand, isn't high school enough?

That's a very simplistic view, but the only thing certain about this topic is that it is NOT simple. The impact of this trend to drop athletic programs looks different depending on your perspective, but the thread that ties all the perspectives together IS very simple: This is B-A-D for swimming.

The arguments against dropping swimming and diving, or baseball, or gymnastics, are many. Here are just a few:

- Just as high school and club swimming and diving are the great feeders of the university programs, so are the university programs the great feeders of our national and Olympic teams. Can we be so blind so as not to see the implications of this?
- Cutting programs because they are not "satisfactorily competitive" will only serve to exacerbate the problem; with fewer programs to go to, the strong programs will get stronger, and the less strong programs will get weaker still, and become even -less-competitive, which could lead to their being cut, too.
- Need to save \$500,000 in a \$38 million dollar budget? Why not tighten the belt department-wide 1.3% instead of dropping an entire program and hurting the student-athletes who have committed themselves to that institution?
- There are only a relatively few institutions that have the resources to be national champions. A somewhat larger number will be able to make the top ten at the national championships. What of the others? Should they be cast aside because they can't be "satisfactorily competitive"? Have the people making the decisions to cut programs forgotten that they are also the ones who frequently espouse the belief "It's not the destination, but the journey"?

Maybe we need to reconsider what the real purpose of these athletic teams is, both at the high school and university level. The Mission Statement of the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) states that

"...interscholastic activities...will enhance the educational experiences of high school students... The NFHS will promote participation and sportsmanship to develop good citizens through interscholastic activities which provide equitable opportunities, positive recognition and learning experiences to students while maximizing the achievement of educational goals."

[<http://www.nfhs.org/>]

Further, in its “Case for High School Activities”, it states:

“The National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) and its membership believe that interscholastic sports and fine arts activities promote citizenship and sportsmanship. They instill a sense of pride in community, teach lifelong lessons of teamwork and self-discipline and facilitate the physical and emotional development of our nation’s youth.”

[<http://www.nfhs.org/case.htm>]

(The studies and statistics cited by the NFHS regarding the positive influences of athletic participation on high school students are staggering. Please take the time to read it.)

But that’s just high school. What about the NCAA? Where does it stand on the purpose of athletics in colleges and universities? Not surprisingly, on very similar ground.

“The NCAA strives to maintain intercollegiate athletics as an integral part of the educational program and the athlete as an integral part of the student body.”

[“About the NCAA”, NCAA General Information, www.ncaa.org]

What’s this? “Integral”? What else does the NCAA have to say?

Its purpose is to “...promote and develop educational leadership...”

To answer its own question, “What is the NCAA?”, the NCAA supplies this answer:

“The National Collegiate Athletic Association is the organization through which the nation’s colleges and universities speak and act on athletics matters at the national level. It is a voluntary association of approximately 1,200 institutions, conferences, organizations, and individuals devoted to the sound administration of intercollegiate athletics.”

There are those who would question whether the last item is actually being followed, that of “sound administration.” What constitutes “sound administration”? Is it sound to cut a program, citing budgetary restrictions that require an immediate end to the program, without considering remedies that could counter funding shortfalls (or maybe spending excesses in other areas)? Is it sound to terminate programs that are judged as not being “satisfactorily competitive” without defining what that means, or is it just the failure to win a conference championship or beat the big conference rival?

Phil Whitten, Editor-in-Chief of *Swimming World* magazine, wrote an editorial in the April 2001 issue of *S.W.* that merits reading. It addressed the recent decision of the University of Kansas (“KU”) to drop its swimming and diving program. Unfortunately, the demise of the Nebraska and Iowa State programs swiftly followed. (The entire article can be found at <http://www.swiminfo.com/lane9/news/2409.asp>) The reasons were all similar. And the programs were all from the Big 12 conference, leaving only Texas, Texas A&M, and Missouri. Will anyone else follow soon? Does it make a difference to the high schools?

What percentage of high school swimmers goes on to swim in college? Is it much different than the percentages of other high school sports? If the number of opportunities

for post-high school participation in one sport decrease, does that have any impact on the national or international scene for United States athletes? Does this seem all that much different than the mega-mergers of big business when big companies grow bigger by acquiring the assets of other companies? We're seeing it happen in the airlines, the energy companies, communications and other media companies every day. Does it bode well for the public to have fewer opportunities and options? No, and the same can be said for the shrinking of athletic opportunities that is being caused by dropping swimming programs. And baseball. And gymnastics. And others.

All of the non-revenue sports are now aware that if this can happen to the biggest Olympic success story of all time, the sport that, if it were its own country, would have ranked eighth at the 2000 Games in medals won, this can happen to them, too.

There is a story from World War II about the oppression and terribly tragic circumstances imposed on people of many ethnic, racial, and religious backgrounds that could help open some eyes:

"In Germany the Nazis first came for the Communists and I didn't object because I wasn't a Communist. Then they came for the Jews, and I didn't object because I wasn't a Jew. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I didn't object because I wasn't a trade unionist. Then they came for the Catholics, and I didn't object because I was a Protestant. Then they came for me." -Pastor Martin Niemoller, Dachau, Germany, 1941

This isn't just a fight to save swimming and diving at a few schools. Can ANY sport afford to stand by and sigh with relief that it was swimming and diving, or baseball, or gymnastics, and not them who got cut? Are women's sports sacrosanct because of Title IX protection? No. It's all in the numbers. It's balance. It can happen to them, too.

It's too late at some institutions, but not at others. Don't wait for a knock on the door. There may not be one.