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Perceptions About Catholic High School Athletics

*Kevin J. Calkins*¹

Abstract: In the largest survey to date on Catholic school identity in athletics (49 U.S. States, $n = 2273$), administrators, counselors, and teachers responded to a survey about the perceived value of interscholastic athletics, school support of athletics, the contribution of coaches to school mission, Catholic identity in athletics, and the importance of the school's athletic director and coaches to have a mission orientation. The results of the study indicate that administrators, counselors, and teachers have positive perceptions of Catholic high school athletics. Teacher perceptions differed more than administrators and counselors based on their age, gender, and religion. At least one Catholic high school from each state except Wyoming (which has no Catholic high school) participated in the study, informing a national perspective.

Keywords: sports, athletics, Catholic high school interscholastic athletics, teachers.

I preside over a large Catholic high school in California. One of my tasks in that role is to preserve, protect and promote a positive and inviting image of the school that will foster and sustain high enrollment and a legacy of satisfied students and families. During a recent strategic planning session, I sought affirmation from a consultant in communications and branding that our high school was perceived foremost as (a) Catholic and (b) college preparatory. The consultant assured me our school was unquestionably viewed as Catholic and college preparatory. But without diminishing those important features, he advised that for purposes of marketing and branding perhaps I ought to consider other attributes of the school. He suggested one particular attribute that people both inside and outside the Catholic community overwhelmingly perceive as a positive feature of Catholic high school education: outstanding interscholastic athletics.

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“Of course,” I thought, “who could disagree with that?” At all levels of American education, from pre-K soccer programs to globally televised collegiate athletics at the highest level, Americans are drawn to, identify with and support their chosen schools’ sports teams. I nevertheless mistrusted my initial enthusiasm for our consultant’s choice of athletics as Catholic high schools’ innate and strongest asset. Was I being truly objective in accepting such a premise, or were ingrained biases controlling me? I competed in organized sports during my school years, enjoy watching and still participate in competitive athletic events, am a lifelong New York Yankees fan, and follow and root for my alma maters. Yet, how are those from other walks of life—with backgrounds, upbringings, interests, experiences and talents different from my own—likely to view and value school sports programs?

More importantly, how do those who lead, teach, coach and minister in our school view its athletics programs? Aside from the time spent by athletic directors, coaches, trainers and related personnel, school sports programs require significant time, resources, accommodations and attention from school stakeholders. While it was encouraging to see how many of our school personnel, at all levels, seemed to enjoy watching our student-athletes compete, do they see interscholastic athletics as an important part of our school’s brand?

This led to a broader question: How do other Catholic high schools perceive their sports programs? Catholic high schools boast some of the most notable and successful high school athletic programs in the country, and athletics certainly provide opportunities to teach life lessons that transcend sports and contribute to whole-person formation. But are Catholic high school athletics programs worth the resources and attention they receive? Do those who devote their careers and lives to Catholic high school education view sports as unreservedly positive? Are they indifferent to—or ambivalent about—sports? Might they even perceive sports in a negative light, as compromising or even threatening Catholic beliefs, traditions, identity, and academic excellence?

Since school administrators, counselors, teachers, and religious mentors are affected by high-profile sports programs, it seemed imperative to gather data revealing how they perceived their high schools’ athletics. Their perceptions, positive or negative, about the value of Catholic high school sports programs might critically affect not only the continued draw and future success of those programs, but also the contribution of interscholastic athletics to the schools’ Catholic identity and broader religious and academically focused mission.

Theoretical Framework

Since ancient times, athletics, competitions, and striving for and attaining physical excellence have been universally praised as worthy contributors to the health, discipline, character, and

strength of the individual and of society (Kelly, 2012). In *The Catholic School* (1977), *The Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium* (1997) and *Renewing Our Commitment to Catholic Elementary and Secondary Schools in the Third Millennium* (2005), among others, whole-person formation is discussed as an integral part of Catholic education. In *Giving the Best of Yourself* (2018), the Dicastery for Laity, Family, and Life, a group of lay people and ordained ministers appointed by Pope Francis to care for the lay apostolate, including the youth, identifies athletic participation as contributing to the holistic formation of young people in Catholic schools. Among the many benefits, athletic participation contributes to character development, a student's sense of humility and loyalty, appreciation for hard work and teamwork, time management skills, and the practice of patience and resilience. Lifelong friendships are often started and nurtured on the athletic field (Dicastery, 2018). In a recent speech, Pope Francis (2022) echoed the Dicastery's sentiments when he commented that when properly understood and administered, athletic participation contributes to the formation of young people and is an essential part of education.

Student formation in Catholic high schools was the focus of Ryan Maher's (2001) and John Krambuhl's (2020) doctoral dissertations. Maher (2001) references sociologists, historians, philosophers, and religious figures to support the notion that physical competition and play have been found in all cultures and societies including American culture, where sports and education have developed a symbiotic relationship. Maher (2001) eventually articulated a rationale for including sports as part of student formation at Jesuit high schools. Among the many benefits of high school athletics, Maher (2001) found that sports help build community among all stakeholders in the school, including students and alumni, and foster school pride. Maher (2001) also commented that athletic experiences help students develop their knowledge of sports, refine their character traits, practice moral decision-making, and deepen their Christian character, which he said is the priority of athletics in a Jesuit high school.

John Krambuhl looked at the relationship between sports and the religious identity of Jesuit high schools. Like Maher, Krambuhl (2020) made the case that sports are an integral part of student formation at Jesuit high schools. Krambuhl (2020) summarized the relevant literature related to sports and play from multiple perspectives, including history, ethics, sociology, organizational theory, and spirituality to ground his study of the relationship between sports and Ignatian spirituality. Ultimately, Krambuhl (2020) agreed with Maher that sports, with all their complexities and tensions, are a critical components of student formation in Jesuit high schools.

While the aforementioned authors highlighted the value and contributions of interscholastic athletics to Catholic high school mission and student formation, sports also present mission-based challenges. In *Youth Sport and Spirituality*, Kelly (2015) provides varied

Catholic perspectives from researchers and practitioners about the nature of sports and how Catholic school administrators, coaches, ministers, parents, and teachers can support athletic participation and student formation and avoid a “scoreboard world in which the score at the end of the game is the only thing that matters” (Yerkovich, 2015, p. 209). Dombrowski (2015), for example, encourages a more moderate approach to athletics where “the goal is to mediate between the twin dangers of not taking sport seriously enough and the more perilous tendency to take it too seriously” (p. 25).

The latest published study by the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) highlights the scope of the role played by high school sports. Approximately 7.6 million high school students, including those in Catholic high schools, participated in sports in the 2021-2022 school year (NFHS, 2021). That number does not include students who participate in marching bands, spirit clubs and as fans at athletic events. So, it is not a stretch to conclude that high school sports affect the lives of many more students than just the athletes. Maher (2001) and Krambuhl (2020) noted a high rate of athletic participation among students in Jesuit high schools and agreed that sports contribute to school culture and student formation. The popularity of sports, their contribution to the holistic formation of young people, and their impact on school culture are known and valued. What is not known is how those who lead, counsel, teach, and minister in Catholic high schools view athletics. This study will contribute to and expand the existing body of research that recognizes athletics as a valued and integral part of student formation in Catholic schools but from the perspective of administrators, counselors, and teachers. Three research questions guided this probing study:

1. What perceptions do Catholic high school administrators, counselors, and teachers have about the value of athletics in Catholic schools?
2. Does a person’s role in a school affect their perceptions of athletics?
3. What demographic variables affect administrator, counselor, and teacher perceptions about athletics?

Method

School administrators, counselors and teachers from Catholic high schools listed on the websites of the 174 Roman Catholic archdioceses/dioceses in the United States were invited to complete an online survey. Each high school invited to participate had an athletic program that included a range of sports during the fall, winter, and spring sports seasons, including aquatic sports, baseball, basketball, cross country, football, soccer, softball, and track and field among others. Participation was voluntary and anonymous, and their results were

confidential, conforming to the federal informed consent requirements for the protection of human subjects.

Instrument

An online survey contained 24 sentiment items measuring how administrators, counselors, and teachers view high school athletics as contributing to the mission of Catholic high schools, demographic questions, and questions about respondents' level of interest in high school athletics. Four demographic questions asked each person's state-in-life, age, gender, and whether the participant was Catholic. Additionally, participants were asked to indicate the state where their high school was located, the school's governance model, and whether the school was co-educational or single gender. Participants were also asked to indicate their level of interest in high school athletics, how often they attended athletic events at their high school, their high school role, and the type of high school they graduated from. Finally, respondents had an option to comment in a free response opportunity.

The sentiment items utilized a five-point Likert scale: *Strongly Agree*, *Agree*, *Uncertain*, *Disagree*, and *Strongly Disagree*. A factor analysis was completed to identify homogeneous clusters of items that constituted the major outcome variables in the analysis. A principal component factor analysis of the 24 sentiment items resulted in five distinct factors:

- Support: Seven items that measure Catholic high school support of athletics.
- Value: Five items that measure the perceived value of athletics.
- Coaches: Four items that measure the contribution of coaches to the mission of the school.
- Faith: Three items that measure Catholic identity in athletics.
- Mission: Two items that measure the importance of supporting the school's mission.

These five factors fall into three broad categories: (a) perceptions of Catholic high school athletics programs (Value), (b) support of Catholic high school athletics programs (Support), and (c) expectations of Catholic high school athletics programs (Mission, Faith, and Coaches). These three categories and individual factors were developed after reading the related literature and reflecting on conversations with colleagues about reasonable factors to consider when exploring how athletic programs affect the Catholic high school environment. [Table 1](#) shows the individual survey items under each factor. It is important to note the distinction between the Coaches factor and the Mission factor. The Coaches factor measures a coach's specific involvement in the life of the school whereas the Mission factor speaks to an athletic director's or coach's support of the overall school mission.

Table 1*Factors and Individual Items*

| Factor | Individual Items |
|---------|--|
| Support | <p>Athletic participation is an important factor in the holistic formation of teenagers.</p> <p>School support for a high-quality athletics program should be a Catholic high school priority.</p> <p>Athletics is an essential part of the mission of our Catholic high school.</p> <p>The added costs of athletics to my high school's budget are worth it.</p> <p>In my experience, athletics programs are over-emphasized in Catholic high schools.</p> <p>Athletic experiences are as important as academic experiences in a Catholic high school.</p> <p>Athletic experiences are as important as faith experiences in a Catholic high school.</p> |
| Value | <p>In considering the Catholic high school where I work, I believe that parents place a great deal of emphasis on its athletics program.</p> <p>In considering the Catholic high school I work at, I believe that students place a great deal of emphasis on its athletics program.</p> <p>The public views my Catholic high school as being among the most competitive athletic programs in my state.</p> <p>My high school's athletic teams are among the most competitive in my state.</p> <p>I believe that the enrollment in my Catholic high school would decline without a competitive athletic program.</p> |
| Coaches | <p>Athletic coaches should serve full time in another role in the school to help advance the mission of Catholic high schools.</p> <p>Athletic coaches should attend school retreats or service opportunities.</p> <p>Athletic coaches should be visible contributors to the faith rituals on campus to help advance the mission of Catholic high schools.</p> <p>Athletic coaches should prioritize academic excellence to help advance the mission of Catholic high schools.</p> |
| Faith | <p>Only high school coaches who are Catholic should coach in a Catholic high school.</p> <p>Athletic practices should begin with prayer.</p> <p>Athletic games/contests should begin with prayer.</p> |
| Mission | <p>It is important that the athletic director have a mission orientation.</p> <p>It is important that coaches have a mission orientation.</p> |

Results

There were 2,273 responses, 20% of the invited participants, to the online survey distributed in January of 2023. Most of the participants in the study were lay people (93%), Catholic (85%), male (56%), between the ages 31–50 (50%), and teachers (40%). More administrators, counselors, and teachers responded from co-educational high schools (65%) than from single gender schools (female-only schools represented 11%), and there was almost an even split between respondents from schools with a diocesan governance model (45.37%) and respondents from private, religiously owned schools (44.80%). Fifty-six percent of the respondents graduated from a Catholic high school.

Table 2 shows the number of responses from five geographical regions in the United States. At least one Catholic high school from each state except Wyoming (which has no Catholic high school) participated in the study.

Table 2

Responses from Administrators, Counselors, and Teachers

| Geographical Region | Number | Percent Total | Surveys Sent | Percent Responding |
|---------------------|--------|---------------|--------------|--------------------|
| Northeast | 646 | 28 | 3,825 | 17 |
| Southeast | 334 | 15 | 1,772 | 19 |
| Midwest | 686 | 30 | 2,851 | 24 |
| Southwest | 146 | 7 | 687 | 21 |
| West | 461 | 20 | 1,965 | 23 |
| Total | 2,273 | 100 | 11,100 | 20 |

The response rate across the geographical regions was not uniform, ranging from 30% in the Midwest to seven percent in the Southwest. The largest number of responses in the Midwest were Ohio (166), Illinois (152), Indiana (108), and Michigan (89). California had the single largest number of responses, 289 or 13%. Means for the outcome variables were calculated for each geographical region. All means for the outcome measures were relatively similar except for faith in the Northeast ($\mu = 3.86$), which was considerably lower than faith means for the other geographical regions.

Outcome Measures

Survey respondents revealed a strong interest in high school athletics. Forty-six percent of the respondents indicated that they are extremely interested in Catholic high school athletics, and 57% frequently attend athletic events at their high school. Table 3 shows the means and standard deviations from the outcome measures and the correlations among them. Mission ($\mu = 4.58$) and coaches ($\mu = 4.28$) had the highest means, and support ($\mu = 3.81$) had the lowest mean. About 55%

Table 3*Means, Standard Deviations, and Correlations for the Outcome Measures*

| Outcomes | Means | Standard Deviations | Correlations | | | |
|----------|-------|------------------------|--------------|---------|-------|-------|
| | | | Mission | Coaches | Value | Faith |
| Mission | 4.58 | 0.59 | 1.00 | | | |
| Coaches | 4.28 | 0.59 | .43* | 1.00 | | |
| Value | 4.15 | 0.71 | .26* | .19* | 1.00 | |
| Faith | 4.14 | 0.77 | .45* | .61* | .15* | 1.00 |
| Support | 3.81 | 0.69 | .10* | .15* | .27* | .02 |

*Indicates correlation was significant at $\alpha = 0.01$ level (two-tailed)

of survey respondents disagreed that athletic experiences are as important as faith experiences in a Catholic high school, yet 83% disagreed that only Catholic coaches should coach in a Catholic high school. There was strong support for athletic practices (70%) and games (83%) beginning with prayer.

Correlations among the outcome measures are also listed in Table 3. All relationships among the outcome measures were statistically significant except for faith and support, and the strongest relationships were with faith: coaches ($r = .61$) and mission ($r = .45$).

Multiple stepwise linear regressions were calculated for the outcome variables with demographic variables as predictors. Table 4 shows the results of these regression analyses and the strongest predictors of each variable, including the standardized regression coefficient *Beta* and R^2 for each of the regressions. The support variable, for example, had a *Beta* coefficient of .353, which means that for every one unit increase in level of interest in athletics, support increased .353 on average while the other predictors are held constant. An R^2 of .341 for support means that 34% of the variability is explained in the regression model. Athletic events attendance and religion are the most common predictors of the dependent variables. Athletic events attendance is a predictor for value ($t = 4.40, p = < .001$), coaches ($t = 6.89, p = < .001$), mission ($t = 5.90, p = < .001$), and

Table 4*Significant Betas and R^2 from Five Stepwise Regression Models*

| Predictor | Support | Faith | Coaches | Value | Mission |
|--------------------------------|---------|-------|---------|-------|---------|
| Level of Interest in Athletics | .353 | DNE | DNE | .087 | DNE |
| Athletic Events Attendance | .127 | DNE | .124 | .127 | .102 |
| Religion | -.151 | .571 | .265 | DNE | .246 |
| Gender | DNE | DNE | .139 | DNE | DNE |
| School Type | DNE | .171 | DNE | DNE | DNE |
| School Governance Model | DNE | .115 | DNE | DNE | DNE |
| R^2 | .341 | .128 | .080 | .048 | .041 |

Note. All Betas are significant at $< .001$. DNE = Did Not Enter Stepwise Regression

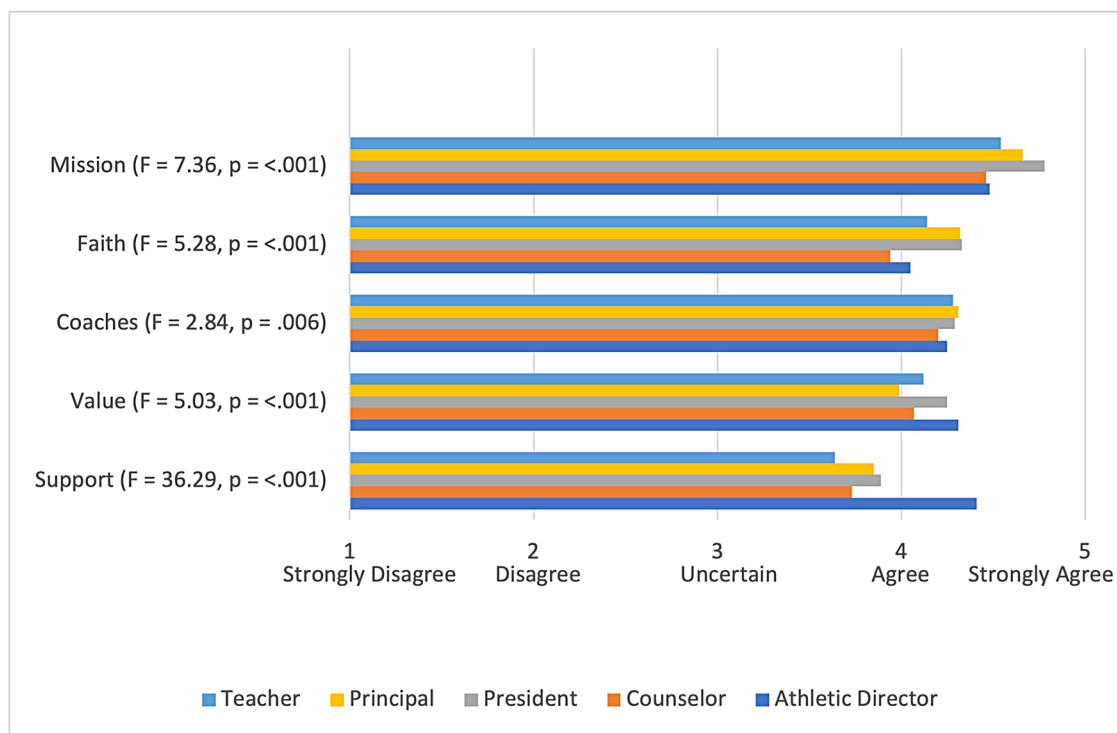
support ($t = 5.40, p = < .001$). Religion is an important predictor for faith ($t = 12.12, p = < .001$), coaches ($t = 7.50, p = < .001$), mission ($t = 6.97, p = < .001$), and support ($t = -4.34, p = < .001$).

School Role Differences

Figure 1 shows the means for school roles and an analysis of variance testing mean differences according to school role. All outcome variables showed significant mean differences. The athletic director position had the highest mean scores for support and value, and the president and principal roles had the highest means for mission, faith, and coaches. Teachers had the least amount of agreement with the support variable, $\mu = 3.64$, and counselors had the lowest mean score for faith, $\mu = 3.94$ (see Figure 1).

Figure 1

Means and ANOVAs for the Outcome Measures According to Role



Differences Among Teachers

Several Chi-Square tests were conducted to analyze the relationship among demographic factors, school role, and survey items. The results of the Chi-Square tests for significance showed that teachers were the only school role that showed consistent differences in levels of agreement for the survey items. Tables 5, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 show the different patterns of levels of agreement among teachers and gender, age, and religious identity for various survey items.

Table 5

Teacher Levels of Agreement and Disagreement for Expectations of Catholic High School Athletics Programs According to Gender

| Expectations of Catholic High School Athletics Programs | Gender | Agree | Uncertain | Disagree | χ^2 |
|---|--------|-------|-----------|----------|----------|
| Athletic coaches should serve full time in another role in the school. | Male | 77% | 13% | 10% | <.001 |
| | Female | 58% | 29% | 13% | |
| Athletic coaches should attend school retreats or service opportunities. | Male | 85% | 11% | 4% | .010 |
| | Female | 82% | 13% | 5% | |
| Athletic coaches should be visible contributors to the faith rituals on campus. | Male | 86% | 8% | 6% | <.001 |
| | Female | 82% | 12% | 6% | |
| Athletic practices should begin with prayer. | Male | 66% | 20% | 14% | .035 |
| | Female | 75% | 17% | 8% | |
| It is important that the athletic director have a mission orientation. | Male | 92% | 7% | 1% | .029 |
| | Female | 95% | 5% | <.001 | |
| It is important that coaches have a mission orientation. | Male | 93% | 6% | 1% | .024 |
| | Female | 95% | 5% | <.001 | |

Table 6

Teacher Levels of Agreement and Disagreement for Expectations of Catholic High School Athletics Programs According to Religion

| Expectations of Catholic High School Athletics Programs | Religion | Agree | Uncertain | Disagree | χ^2 |
|---|--------------|-------|-----------|----------|----------|
| Athletic coaches should serve full time in another role in the school. | Catholic | 71% | 20% | 9% | <.001 |
| | Not Catholic | 58% | 20% | 22% | |
| Athletic coaches should attend school retreats or service opportunities. | Catholic | 87% | 9% | 4% | <.001 |
| | Not Catholic | 71% | 20% | 9% | |
| Athletic coaches should be visible contributors to the faith rituals on campus. | Catholic | 88% | 9% | 3% | <.001 |
| | Not Catholic | 68% | 13% | 19% | |
| Athletic practices should begin with prayer. | Catholic | 74% | 16% | 10% | <.001 |
| | Not Catholic | 54% | 29% | 17% | |
| It is important that the athletic director have a mission orientation. | Catholic | 95% | 5% | <.001% | <.001 |
| | Not Catholic | 87% | 11% | 2% | |
| It is important that coaches have a mission orientation. | Catholic | 95% | 5% | <.001% | <.001 |
| | Not Catholic | 88% | 10% | 2% | |

Table 7*Teacher Levels of Agreement and Disagreement for Catholic School Support of Athletics According to Gender*

| Catholic School Support of Athletics | Gender | Agree | Uncertain | Disagree | χ^2 |
|---|--------|-------|-----------|----------|----------|
| Athletics is an essential part of the school mission. | Male | 73% | 16% | 12% | <.001 |
| | Female | 66% | 17% | 17% | |
| Athletic participation is an important factor in the holistic formation of teenagers. | Male | 90% | 6% | 4% | <.001 |
| | Female | 90% | 8% | 2% | |
| School support for a high-quality athletic program should be a priority. | Male | 78% | 13% | 9% | <.001 |
| | Female | 78% | 13% | 9% | |
| The added costs of athletics are worth it. | Male | 73% | 19% | 8% | <.001 |
| | Female | 71% | 20% | 9% | |
| In my experience, athletic programs are over-emphasized. | Male | 41% | 18% | 41% | <.001 |
| | Female | 36% | 26% | 38% | |
| Athletic experiences are as important as academic experiences. | Male | 53% | 10% | 37% | <.001 |
| | Female | 48% | 13% | 39% | |
| Athletic experiences are as important as faith experiences. | Male | 33% | 11% | 56% | <.001 |
| | Female | 28% | 9% | 63% | |

Table 8*Teacher Levels of Agreement and Disagreement for Catholic School Support of Athletics According to Age*

| Catholic School Support of Athletics | Age | Agree | Uncertain | Disagree | χ^2 |
|---|---------------|-------|-----------|----------|----------|
| Athletics is an essential part of the school mission. | 30 or younger | 58% | 17% | 25% | <.001 |
| | 31-50 | 66% | 18% | 16% | |
| | 51 or older | 80% | 11% | 9% | |
| Athletic participation is an important factor in the holistic formation of teenagers. | 30 or younger | 88% | 9% | 3% | .005 |
| | 31-50 | 89% | 7% | 4% | |
| | 51 or older | 92% | 7% | 1% | |
| The added costs of athletics are worth it. | 30 or younger | 67% | 20% | 13% | <.001 |
| | 31-50 | 71% | 19% | 10% | |
| | 51 or older | 76% | 19% | 5% | |
| In my experience, athletic programs are over-emphasized. | 30 or younger | 37% | 17% | 46% | .013 |
| | 31-50 | 36% | 23% | 41% | |
| | 51 or older | 38% | 19% | 43% | |
| Athletic experiences are as important as academic experiences. | 30 or younger | 45% | 27% | 28% | .005 |
| | 31-50 | 51% | 11% | 38% | |
| | 51 or older | 56% | 9% | 35% | |
| Athletic experiences are as important as faith experiences. | 30 or younger | 18% | 13% | 69% | <.001 |
| | 31-50 | 32% | 10% | 58% | |
| | 51 or older | 34% | 9% | 57% | |

Table 9

Teacher Levels of Agreement and Disagreement for Perceptions of Catholic High School Athletics Programs According to Gender

| Perceptions of Catholic High School Athletics Programs | Gender | Agree | Uncertain | Disagree | χ^2 |
|--|--------|-------|-----------|----------|----------|
| The public views my Catholic high school as being among the most competitive athletic programs in my state. | Male | 70% | 15% | 15% | .034 |
| | Female | 60% | 20% | 20% | |
| I believe that the enrollment in my Catholic high school would decline without a competitive athletic program. | Male | 78% | 14% | 8% | <.001 |
| | Female | 81% | 9% | 10% | |

Table 10

Teacher Levels of Agreement and Disagreement for Perceptions of Catholic High School Athletics Programs According to Age

| Perceptions of Catholic High School Athletics Programs | Age | Agree | Uncertain | Disagree | χ^2 |
|---|---------------|-------|-----------|----------|----------|
| The public views my Catholic high school as being among the most competitive athletic programs in my state. | 30 or younger | 56% | 22% | 22% | .029 |
| | 31–50 | 66% | 17% | 17% | |
| | 51 or older | 69% | 15% | 16% | |

Tables 5 and 6 show all items in the “Expectations of Catholic High School Athletics Programs” category with different levels of agreement according to gender and whether the teacher was Catholic. There were different levels of agreement for the item measuring whether athletic practices should begin with prayer. More female teachers (75%) and Catholic teachers (74%) agreed that athletic practices should begin with prayer than male teachers (66%) and non-Catholic teachers (54%). Non-Catholic teachers disagreed more than Catholic teachers with each item in this category. In other words, the expectations of Catholic high school athletics programs for non-Catholic teachers were different than Catholic teachers.

Tables 7 and 8 show all items in the “Catholic School Support of Athletics” category with different levels of agreement according to gender and age. There were three different age groups: 30 or younger, 31–50, and 51 or older. All but one item in the “Catholic School Support of Athletics” category showed different levels of agreement according to gender and age. The youngest group (30 and younger) differed more than the other two groupings on every item where gender and age both showed different levels of agreement. Most notable were three items where the 30 and younger grouping had sizeable percentage differences from the older two groups. While 58% of the youngest group of teachers agreed that athletics is an essential part of the mission of Catholic high school, 80% of the oldest group of teachers agreed. Regarding the item that measures whether

athletic experiences are as important as academic experiences, 37% of the youngest teacher group agreed compared to 56% of the oldest teacher group. A similar difference was found on the item that measured whether athletic experiences are as important as faith experiences in a Catholic high school. Only 18% of the youngest teachers agreed that athletic experiences are as important as faith experiences, while 32% of the 31–50 group and 34% of the 51 or older group agreed.

Tables 5, 6, 7, and 8 show that the youngest, non-Catholic, and female teachers disagreed more than the older, Catholic, and male teachers with the survey items. The first item in Table 9 showed a different level of agreement for both gender and age and followed the same pattern as the previous four tables. The youngest group of female teachers disagreed more than the older groups of male teachers that the public views their Catholic high school as being among the most competitive athletic programs in the state.

Discussion

The primary purpose of this study was to explore the perceptions of Catholic high school administrators, counselors, and teachers of interscholastic athletics. The study results indicate that the responders have positive perceptions of Catholic high school athletics, and that teachers, depending upon their age, gender, and religion, thought differently about some factors.

All outcome measures had favorable agreement with the survey items. Mission had the strongest support (95% *agree*) followed by Coaches (85% *agree*) and Value (82% *agree*). Most survey respondents viewed athletics as an essential part of the mission of their Catholic high school (77% *agree*). Additionally, 85% agreed that a high-quality athletics program should be a priority for Catholic high schools, and 94% agreed that athletic participation is an important factor in the holistic formation of young people. This last item supports church documents and related publications that name the holistic formation of young people as the primary reason Catholic schools exist (e.g., [United States Conference of Catholic Bishops \[USCCB\], 2005](#)).

Although responses were generally positive about Catholic high school support of athletics, there was less agreement for support (66% agreement) than for mission, coaches, and value. Three of the seven items that measured Catholic high school support of athletics lowered the overall agreement even though those responses are positive. For example, 48% disagreed that athletic programs are over-emphasized in Catholic high schools, but that is a more favorable response than the 31% agreement with that item. In other words, a majority agreed that the support of athletic programs in Catholic high schools is appropriate.

Differences in the other two items are more nuanced. Both items asked about the relative importance of academics and faith to athletics. Fifty-six percent agreed that athletic experiences are as important as academic experiences, and 35% agreed that athletic experiences are as important as faith experiences.

There were more favorable responses than not for the item measuring the relative importance of the academic and athletics relationship. The results of a regression analysis for support showed predictive relationships with level of interest in athletics and athletic events attendance. Not surprising is that 84% of athletic directors agreed that athletic experiences are as important as academic experiences. Nearly all responses from athletic directors (94%) indicated they are extremely interested in athletics, as should be the case, and 99% stated they frequently attend athletic events, also an expected response from athletic directors.

Also not surprising are the 50% of teachers and 48% of counselors who disagreed that athletic experiences are as important as academic experiences. The teacher role is particularly relevant considering their role as content and instructional experts. Teacher agreement that athletic experiences and academic experiences are equally important lessened as the teacher's interest in athletics decreased. About 72% of teachers extremely interested in athletics agreed that athletic experiences are as important as academic experiences. About 33% of teachers somewhat interested in athletics agreed that athletic experiences are as important as academic experiences. Finally, about 24% of teachers not so interested in athletics agreed that athletic experiences are as important as academic experiences. Another interesting data point is that about 37% of teachers are somewhat or not at all interested in athletics. This is important to note because, historically, many teachers have also coached in Catholic high schools to help supplement their income and develop their relationships with students outside the classroom. These student and teacher relationships are emblematic of the Catholic high school experience, which supports school mission.

There was less agreement that athletic experiences are as important as faith experiences (55% *disagree* and 10% *uncertain*). Faith experiences are what make Catholic high schools unique, especially when compared to private and secular independent high schools or public high schools. These results point to the distinctiveness of Catholic high school mission: that even though interscholastic athletics are very popular and Catholic high schools possess some of the most successful athletic programs in the country, there are nevertheless competing values and experiences that are considered as or more important than sports.

Like the item about athletic experiences and academic experiences, school role and demographic factors affected responses equating the importance of athletic and faith experiences. While Catholic teachers disagreed more than non-Catholic teachers (62% and 46%, respectively), the difference between Catholic athletic directors and non-Catholic athletic directors was not as pronounced. Only 28% of Catholic athletic directors disagreed that athletic experiences are as important as faith experiences, and 22% of non-Catholic athletic directors disagreed. Also interesting is that roughly 71% of priests who are also teachers disagreed that athletic experiences are as important as faith experiences, and 57% of religious sisters and 53% of religious brothers who are teachers also disagreed that athletic experiences are as important as faith experiences.

A little more than half (54%) of the survey respondents agreed with items measuring faith. Much like the challenge with items measuring the Support factor, one of the three items measuring faith had strong disagreement. Only 7% of respondents agreed that only high school coaches who are Catholic should coach. A regression analysis of the Faith factor showed predictive relationships with religion, school type, and school governance. Catholics who work in a religious-order-owned high school disagreed more (86%) than Catholics who work in a diocesan owned high school (77%). Roughly the same percentage difference exists for Catholics in single gender schools (all-girl schools, 88% *disagree* and all-boy schools, 87% *disagree*) versus Catholics in coeducational high schools (about 78% disagreement). Even responses from the clergy and the vowed religious did not have strong agreement with this item (18% *agree*). Sufficient to say then, these results indicate that a coach's faith identity does not contribute to the perceptions of Catholic identity in athletics. Anecdotally, this is my experience too. Non-Catholic coaches, whether from a different Christian denomination or no faith tradition, or Catholic coaches not actively practicing the faith, can contribute to the formation of their athletes and often form life-long relationships. The underlying assumption is that the coaches understand and support the school's Catholic identity.

The other two items that measured Catholic identity in athletics had a more positive response. There was strong agreement that athletic practices (70% agreement) and games (83% agreement) should begin with prayer. School presidents and principals had identical levels of agreement, 80% agreed for practices and 91% agreed for games. Athletic directors had strong agreement (86%) that games should start with prayer and slightly less agreement that athletic practices should start with prayer (62%). Ordained clergy and the vowed religious had stronger agreement than lay people that athletic practices and games should start with prayer, 91% and 95% versus 80% and 69%, respectively. The oldest age group (51 or older) had the highest agreement with both prayer items, 74% for practices and 86% for games.

The correlations of the coaches variable with faith and mission are important, especially considering that the items measuring mission and coaches are strong. For example, 71% of Catholic teachers agree that coaches should serve full time in another role in the school, should attend school retreats or service opportunities (87% *agree*), should be visible contributors to the faith rituals on campus (87% *agree*), and should prioritize academic excellence (99% *agree*).

A regression analysis of the Coaches, Mission, and Faith factors showed Religion had the largest Beta value for each factor and therefore had strong predictive relationships with those factors. When controlling for Religion, the items measuring Coaches, Faith, and Mission did show differences in results. For example, non-Catholic teachers agreed less (58% *agree*) than Catholic teachers (71% *agree*) that coaches should serve full time in another role in the school. Non-Catholic teachers (68% *agree*) also agree less than Catholic teachers that coaches should be visible

contributors to the faith life of the school and less than Catholic teachers (71% *agree*) that coaches should attend school retreats or service opportunities. The only item that did not show a difference between Catholic and non-Catholic teachers is the item measuring that coaches should prioritize academic excellence, an item that was not about faith.

The positive correlation between the Faith factor and the Coaches and Mission factors speaks to the significance and interconnectedness of these relationships among the survey respondents. These are opportunities to highlight the Catholic mission with athletes and support the overall school mission. The point is particularly salient when considering some of the comments made in the free response opportunity. For example, one person commented that “Sports is often the reason people come in the door. We are in a very competitive conference and most athletes have intentions of playing at a higher level. I believe it works well here because our athletic director is mission-aligned and works with campus ministry to develop a calendar that allows athletes to participate fully in the religious aspects of the school. It truly is an education of the whole person.” Another person said, “Athletics are a great way for young men and women to grow in their faith and grow into young adults. We need strong minded coaches who emphasize growth as great men and women.”

Teacher levels of agreement to survey items varied more than any other school role when controlling for gender, age, and religion. Non-Catholic teachers had different expectations of athletics programs than Catholic teachers. Catholic teachers agreed more (71%) than non-Catholic teachers (58%) that coaches should be involved in the life of the school and that practices should begin with prayer (Catholic teachers, 74% vs. non-Catholic teachers, 54%). While Catholic teachers agreed more (95%) than non-Catholic teachers (88%) about the importance of the athletic director and coaches to have a mission orientation, the differences were not as significant.

Male and female teachers also had different levels of agreement about the expectations and support of Catholic high school athletics programs. Male teachers agreed more than female teachers that coaches should be more involved in the life of the school. For example, while 77% of male teachers agreed that coaches should serve full time in another role in the school, only 58% of female teachers agreed. Male teachers agreed more than female teachers that Catholic high schools should support athletics programs except on the items measuring formation and school priority. On both of those items, male and female teachers agreed that athletics is an important factor in the holistic formation of young people, and that athletics should be a Catholic high school priority. But female teachers agreed more (75%) than male teachers (66%) that practices should begin with prayer and slightly more that the mission-centeredness of the athletic directors and coaches are important. It is interesting to note that female teachers agreed less than male teachers (female, 66% vs. male, 73%) that athletics is essential to the mission of Catholic high schools. One reason to

highlight this difference is that there are more female teachers in Catholic high schools than male teachers (Smith & Huber, 2023).

Different levels of agreement exist for the three age groups of teachers, too. The youngest grouping of teachers agreed least that Catholic high schools should support athletics programs. Only 58% of teachers 30 and younger agree that athletics is essential to the mission of Catholic high schools while 80% of teachers 51 and older agreed. Younger teachers agreed less than the two older groupings of teachers that the costs of athletics are worth it, and that athletic experiences are as important as academic and faith experiences. Younger teachers agreed more than teachers 31 and older that athletics are over-emphasized.

Conclusion

This study was prompted by my curiosity about how others who work in Catholic high schools view athletics. According to school leaders, counselors, and teachers, athletics are an important aspect of the Catholic high school experience. More than 90% of survey respondents also supported the notion that students and parents place a great deal of emphasis on a school's athletic program. Furthermore, about 70% viewed their high school athletics program as the most competitive in their state, and roughly the same percentage agree that the public also views athletics programs in Catholic high schools as the most competitive in their respective states.

So yes, athletics matter in Catholic high schools. It matters to those who attend, pay tuition, work, and minister in Catholic high schools. Eighty-four percent of all respondents agreed that Catholic high school enrollment would decline without a competitive athletics program. This sentiment was also captured in the free response opportunity. One person commented that "... we need to do more to promote our athletics programs. Sports are vital for Catholic high schools to thrive." Another commented that "Sports are essential, and sports sell the school." As Catholic high schools strategically plan for the future, they should realize the positive perceptions about interscholastic athletics from school stakeholders and consider leveraging sports to advance school culture and student formation.

School role and certain demographic factors affected some responses to the survey questions. Age, gender and religion affected teacher responses more than school administrators and counselors. Teachers also had the least amount of agreement for Catholic school support of athletics. Teachers are likely affected by sports more than any other role in the school due to their frequent student interactions and by extension, the relationship with their students' parents. Teachers have the unique opportunity to develop meaningful and transformational relationships with students that affect their attitudes and behaviors, and the opportunity is only magnified if teachers are also coaches. More study is needed to better understand teacher perceptions about

athletics because of the significance of their role and the importance of athletics to students and parents in a Catholic high school.

There is another important reason to understand better the teachers' perceptions: They are the future leaders of Catholic high schools. Unless a teacher is a Catholic high school graduate or attended a university with training specific to Catholic schools, their formation as Catholic educators is likely to start in the classroom, on the athletic field or in the gym and will affect their attitudes and eventual decision-making if they choose to become administrators in Catholic high schools. What teachers think about athletics matters.

The results of this study support my long-held view that athletics are an important part of the Catholic high school brand and experience. I have always enjoyed and appreciated interscholastic athletics because of my competitive and active nature, the friendships I developed through my involvement in Catholic high school sports, and because of coaches and mentors who took the time to guide me as a former athlete and as a Catholic educator for more than 25 years. One of these adult mentors is a priest I met at a high school wrestling match. He eventually officiated at our wedding, baptized one of my sons and has been a family friend for more than thirty years. Sports have created meaningful community for me.

Professionally, interscholastic athletics has had an impact on my vocation as a Catholic educator. In four different states and five dioceses, including my current one, the athletic experience has been formative for students and adults, including school employees. Interscholastic sports fosters community and supports the intellectual, physical, social, emotional, and spiritual benefits for students that are woven into the day-to-day Catholic high school experience. Pope Francis echoed this sentiment during a speech about interscholastic sports in Catholic schools: "The reality of play is fundamental, especially for the very young: it gives joy, fosters sociability and engenders friendships, while also being formative. Thanks to sport we can establish strong and lasting relationships. Sports create community" ([Pope Francis, 2022](#)).

But I am also challenged by the survey results. While these data reinforce my positive personal and professional experiences with sports, as a school president now leading a large Catholic high school with a robust and successful athletic program, I also acknowledge the growing view of modern-day sports as a path to celebrity, power and wealth, whatever the personal or ethical cost. Such concerns were expressed in the free-response opportunity in the survey. The second most frequent comment had to do with a general concern about the relative importance of sports in the current high school environment and broader American culture. One person commented, for example, "I feel that education right now is at a bit of a crossroads. Schools are having to make a choice between mission and keeping doors open. Unfortunately, when this occurs, education becomes a business. As soon as we start to treat education as a business, we lose sight of why we are truly here. We should be focused on truly engaging

hearts and minds through relationship. This includes athletics but unfortunately this mission is often disregarded as the driving force in the school's efforts." Pope Francis also cautions about the relative importance of sports outside the context of formation: "Sports run the risk of degenerating into a machine of business, profit, and consumer-driven showmanship, which produces celebrities to be exploited. But this is no longer sport. Sport is an educational and social good and it must remain so" (Pope Francis, 2022).

Some possible concerns about the impact of sports in the current high school environment were captured in three questions asked of school administrators, counselors, and teachers. Participants were asked (1) whether student athletes recruited to play college athletics should be able to graduate early from a Catholic high school to enroll in college early; (2) whether Catholic high school leaders should support name, image, and likeness (NIL) opportunities for their student athletes if their state law allows it; and (3) whether some Catholic high schools intentionally recruit athletes.

All three questions received varied results. About 82% agreed that Catholic high schools intentionally recruit student athletes. Regarding NIL opportunities, about 38% were uncertain whether Catholic high schools should support NIL opportunities for athletes, and roughly the same percentage agreed and disagreed (29% *disagree*, 33% *agree*). And finally, about 63% disagreed that students should be able to graduate early and another 21% were uncertain. These topics have the potential to derail the positive and purposeful value of athletics in Catholic high schools and feed a narrative that Catholic schools are more interested in the "scoreboard world" discussed by Yerkovich (2015) than in forming Christ-centered students. Monitoring the development of these issues and exploring them more deeply will be necessary to protect the positive contribution that athletics make to the formation of students.

The research contained herein is new and contributes to the body of research about Catholic high school athletics. Survey results provide a baseline understanding about what administrators, counselors, and teachers think about athletics. Follow-up studies are necessary, especially about whether respondents' perceptions as set forth in this study are in fact being realized in Catholic high schools. Do athletic practices and games begin with prayer? How many coaches work full time in Catholic high schools, and do they attend school retreats and service opportunities? Is there evidence that coaches prioritize academic excellence? Answers to these and other questions are necessary to fully know the effect of athletics in Catholic high schools.

Limitations

The findings of this study are limited because only high schools both listed on the archdiocesan/diocesan websites and that gave contact information were contacted to participate, and not all high schools contacted chose to participate. Additionally, because

respondents with an interest in athletics were more likely to respond to the survey than those not interested in athletics, those who responded may not have been representative of all Catholic high school educators, limiting the universality of the study. Finally, multiple persons from the same school may have responded to the survey, and responses may have been influenced by how favorably the athletic programs in their schools were perceived. The responders' anonymity made it impossible to track this occurrence, an omission of less concern, however, since the study's unit of analysis was the individual respondent, and the study was not designed or intended to compare schools.

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