



The Management of Spectators Through the Lens of High School Athletic Directors

Nick Elam

Teachers College, Ball State University

Jerry Reynolds

Department of Social Work, Ball State University

Matt Moore

Department of Family Science and Social Work, Miami University

Shelby Weathersby

Department of Social Work, Ball State University

The purpose of this study is to explore the perceptions of athletic directors at high school sporting events during the COVID-19 pandemic. Four hundred twelve (412) high school athletic directors were surveyed and 112 responded. Participants responded to demographic items, and a qualitative, open-ended prompt to elicit detailed experiences, emotional responses, and perceptions of sporting events during the COVID-19 pandemic. Through a grounded theory approach, the following themes emerged: a strong desire for in-person attendance at sporting events, community responses that challenged health and safety of spectators and athletes, and the necessity for COVID-19 related changes such as digital ticketing virtual spectating opportunities. The study illuminates the necessity for flexibility and innovation during a crisis, in ways that are relevant to school leaders entrusted to foster a positive environment at athletic events. Some level of demand for virtual spectating experiences is likely to continue or increase in the future for post-pandemic sporting events. Further research can identify exemplary practices, and those exemplars can serve as a model for other schools and athletic directors.

Keywords: high school athletics, spectator behavior, athletic directors, COVID-19

According to 2018-19 estimates from the National Federation of High School Sports (NFHS, 2022), 7.9 million athletes participate in sanctioned high school athletics in the United

States. For these high school athletes, athletic directors provide the oversight of athletic programs in their school settings. This oversight includes event management, hiring, scheduling, fundraising, budgeting, compliance, and spectator management (Hums & McLean, 2013; Ratts et al., 2022; Sullivan et al., 2014). These responsibilities require athletic directors to make decisions about how to foster a safe and positive sporting environment for their student-athletes. Decision about fostering a safe and positive sport environment to on a new meaning as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic (Ganzar et al., 2022; Zviedrite et al., 2021).

The COVID-19 pandemic forced the first closure of a U.S. school on February 27, 2020, and by March 30, 2020, more schools across the U.S. school closed (to remain closed through the end of the 2019-2020 academic year) (Zviedrite et al., 2021). Most schools offered virtual learning formats to mitigate the academic effects of school closure. The educational, physical health, and mental health effects of widespread school closures, and the closures' effectiveness in combating the spread of COVID-19, will take years to research and understand (Curran et al., 2020; Pyo, 2020; Reid, 2021). Of particular concern with this study is the impact COVID-19 had on athletic directors responsible for the overall climate, health, and safety of high school sports (Bellibas & Liu, 2018; Capp et al., 2022; Reid, 2021). Athletic directors faced challenging leadership decisions necessitated by the pandemic (DeMatthews et al., 2023; Grooms & Childs, 2021; Hayes & Derrington, 2023).

Even before the pandemic, the role of an athletic director was emotionally demanding (Hums & McLean, 2013). Managing athletic programs during the pandemic presented the heightened challenge of managing participant (e.g., athletes, coaches, officials) and spectator behavior (e.g., families, students, and community members) in an environment that was unfamiliar (virtual) and/or potentially hazardous (COVID-19 itself) or volatile (spectators' responses to COVID-19 regulations) (Ratts et al., 2022; Sullivan et al., 2014). Specifically, these challenges included community response and behavior with the health and safety guidelines of multiple entities (i.e., Department of Health, Centers for Disease Control) and minimizing barriers to in-person participation. These challenges were important to address knowing the importance of high school sports on mental health, physical activity, and quality of life for student-athletes, families, and communities (Easterlin et al., 2019; Eime et al., 2013; Marques et al., 2016; McGuine et al., 2021). A key factor to high school sport outcomes is the presence of spectators at events (Dorsch et al., 2009; Knight & Holt, 2014; Wiersma & Fifer, 2008).

While, high school athletic directors regularly manage spectator behavior among their many responsibilities, the academic years 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 posed heightened challenges to athletic directors in this regard. In order to encourage spectator involvement, athletic directors had to think strategically about the deployment of technology and differentiated methods of communicating with stakeholders and engagement of spectators. These included, but were not limited to cashless transactions, digital ticket sales, and the use of various tools to live stream games and virtual spectating opportunities because of attendance restrictions at school venues. Ratts and colleagues (2022) conducted interviews with high school athletic directors and found these new uses of technology were helpful in navigating these challenges of the pandemic and many athletic directors elected to continue using tools going forward. Among these are the provision of live streaming competitions and games.

Though the prevalence of live streaming is of high school athletics is newer, scholars such as Reynolds et al. (2022) explored the psychosocial experiences of parent spectators in youth settings, building upon limited research in this area (Weed, 2007, 2008, 2020). Reynolds et

al. (2022) found virtual experiences brought both negative and positive psychosocial experiences for parent spectators. These associated experiences included feelings of gratitude for the continuation of sports, modified interactions with both the athlete participants and other spectators, and feelings of detachment, grief, and loss associated with modifications to spectator engagement, stemming from the pandemic. Participants wanted a return to in-person attendance. Pierce et al. (2020) highlighted the importance of spectator presence through a survey of 10,000+ stakeholders in the youth sports domain (administrators, coaches, and parents). The survey concluded limits placed upon spectator presence evoked elevated levels of dissatisfaction among spectators (i.e., fans and parents).

This study specifically examined the reflections of athletic directors about whether and how to admit spectators during the COVID-19 pandemic. This included questions about both the positive and negative impacts of such decisions (Legg, 2021; Omli & Wiese-Bjornstal, 2011; Stefanson et al., 2020). The aim of this research study was to (a) explore the experiences of athletic directors as it pertained to spectator behavior during the pandemic. This study is relevant to any athletic director or school leader who is entrusted to foster a positive sporting environment. Even though this study focused on interscholastic athletics within the United States, findings from this study have relevance in any nation where interscholastic sporting events are played before spectators.

Method

Data and Participants

We limited the study pool to high school athletic directors from a midwestern state. Participants worked for both public and private high schools with sanctioned sport programs. The research team sent a secure link to a Qualtrics© electronic survey to a high school athletic administrators list serve. A convenient sample along with the use of a virtual platform allowed the research team to reach a large sample in a cost-effective manner. The final sample included 112 out of a possible 412 participants (Indiana High School Athletic Association, 2022). This was a 27% response rate. This was a cross-sectional, exploratory study. Within the state involved in this study, there are approximately 152,000 students (of all identified genders) who participate in high school athletics, ranking 18th nationally. The state where data collection occurred allowed decisions about sport spectating to happen at the local level. Athletic directors shared in this decision-making process. All in-person spectating did require compliance with masking, social distancing, and other safety requirements.

Demographic Characteristics

All study participants listed their title as athletic director (n = 112). The largest percentage of participants reported being in their current position between 1-4 years (n = 43, 38%). Another 32% (n = 36) reported serving as an athletic director for 5-9 years with the remaining 30% (n = 33) reporting more than 10 years of service. 80% of participants (79.5%, n = 89) identified as White. The remaining 20.5% (n = 23) identified as Black or African American. Individuals identifying as a male (90%, n = 101) comprised most of the sample. The remaining

10% (n = 11) identified as female. Participants ranged in age from 29-75 years old with a median age of 48.5 (SD = 6.2).

Participants reported the largest percent of their schools had a rural designation (57%, n = 64) with 23% (n = 26) being urban, and 20% (n = 22) suburban. There was an equal number of schools within each class. Classes sizes are based on the number of students attending schools and the historical athletic success of programs. Both Class 2A and 4A represented 28% (n = 21) of the sample with Class 3A (26%, n = 29) and Class A (18%, n = 21) representing the remaining schools. The largest percentage of schools reported 25-50% of their students received free or reduced lunch (43%, n = 48). 70% (n = 78) of schools reported less than 25% of their students identify as an ethnic or racial minority. Over 92% (n = 104) reported a public-school designation. 86% percent of schools (n = 96) offered virtual spectating options at some point during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Procedure

After the sponsoring university's Institutional Review Board granted approval, the research team sent study information through the approved list serve. The list serve posting provided details on the nature of the study, described the inclusion and exclusion criteria, and provided individuals with a secure link to the survey. We collected informed consent via the survey software prior to participation. Participation in the study was voluntary and anonymous.

Instrumentation

Participants provided demographic information about themselves, and their high school as noted in the previous section. Following these demographic questions, participants read an adapted open-ended prompt (Omli & Lavoie, 2012) about their leadership experience. The prompt read:

The COVID-19 pandemic changed the spectator environment for all involved in high school athletics. Recall your experience as an administrator over the past two years at your school, in terms of managing the behavior and physical presence of spectators. If you were responsible for creating virtual spectating experiences for parents and fans, please share your experiences in this domain as well. Describe your experience in as much detail as possible.

The open-ended question sought to prompt robust descriptions of emotional experiences and the lived experiences of the studied population (Omli & Lavoie, 2012). A pilot test with five athletic directors not involved or included in the research provided the research team an opportunity to evaluate and clarify the wording of the open-ended question. The pilot group made no suggested edits to the prompt.

Data Analysis

Given how COVID-19 prompted many changes to the spectator environment for high school sports, we employed an exploratory design. Given the novelty of how athletic directors

managed spectator experiences throughout a global pandemic, we used a grounded theory approach for data analysis (Creswell, 2003; Oliver, 2012; Omli & Lavoie, 2009; Reynolds et al., 2022). Grounded theory is different from typical theories in the social sciences in that it often does not include causal relationships between variables (Corbin & Strauss, 1990) and is appropriate for analyzing responses from a sample of more than 30 participants (Oliver, 2012; Omli & Lavoie, 2009; Author et al., 2022). This approach is important when the phenomena associated with research has limited precedent (Creswell, 2003). Specifically, the research team followed these procedures for data analysis (Omli & Wiese-Bjornstal, 2011):

1. The research team retrieved participant responses to the aforementioned prompt from a secure online database. Responses ranged from one sentence to over 300 words in length. Qualtrics© did not place limitations on the number of characters participants could type.
2. Members of the research team read all responses to the prompt multiple times to become familiar with the spectating experiences of athletic directors. Members of the research team also used an intercoder agreement (O'Connor & Joffe, 2020). This agreement provided guidelines for coding strategies, definitions, and coding procedures.
3. Each member of the research team reviewed responses to the prompt line-by-line. Members of the research team created a preliminary code for each unit of meaning derived from the prompt (i.e., a sentence or paragraph used by a participant to describe a specific event). The research team triangulated these preliminary codes amongst the various coders.
4. During the coding process, members of the research team grouped data themes with common properties into a single code until a set of three themes emerged that provided a comprehensive account of the data while minimizing conceptual overlapping among themes. The consolidation of data themes involved a constant comparative process which is a hallmark of grounded theory (Oliver, 2012; Omli & Lavoie, 2009; Author et al., 2022). Throughout the constant comparative process, codes that emerged from participant responses were repeatedly compared to the raw data (e.g., responses from other athletic directors). We revised responses until the codes most accurately described a collective summarization of the participant experiences (Creswell, 2003). Three themes emerged to broadly describe the spectating experiences: (1) powerful desire for in-person attendance (e.g., increased ticket sales and spectators), (2) community response and behaviors (e.g., desire to promote health and safety and strategies to offset financial loss), and (3) COVID-19 related changes (e.g., increase in virtual spectating and need for crisis planning management). These key themes were central to shaping spectator behaviors in the minds of athletic directors.
5. After finalizing lower- and higher-order themes, the research team developed a theory to provide a holistic representation of the data related to positive spectator experiences and the stability of high school sport offerings. According to Creswell (2003), a grounded theory can “assume the form of a narrative statement, a visual picture, or a series of hypotheses or propositions” (p. 56). For this study, the research team created a diagram to illustrate the prompt responses of study participants. (See Figure 1.)

Figure 1. Spectating Decisions of High School Athletic Directors



Trustworthiness of Findings

The research team followed protocols for grounded theory research and exceeded the requirement for at least 30 participants (Creswell, 2003). This result allowed for the development of a theory grounded in the experiences of a large sample of informants. The research team employed triangulation to ensure greater veracity of interpretations than would have been possible if a single coder had developed the theory alone (Omli & Wiese-Bjornstal, 2011). To establish greater trustworthiness of the findings, we engaged an additional individual with experience in qualitative methodology to review and validate the suggested themes.

Results

This section expounds on various themes constructed from the analysis of the open-ended prompt. We intend for each participants' voice to be heard through examples used as illustrations for themes. We categorized statements into one of three themes: (1) a powerful desire for in-person attendance, (2) community response and behaviors, and (3) COVID-19 related challenges. Each of these larger themes included two subthemes. These themes emerged from initial coding/surface content analysis (first iteration of thematic analysis), identification of pattern variables (second iteration, subthemes), and application to the data set (third iteration, primary themes) (Anfara et al., 2002). We also reviewed the data to identify potential trends in groups defined by the characteristics of the athletic directors and their schools. Utilization of

crosstabs demonstrated the absence of such trends. Thus, it appears athletic director experiences remained consistent across characteristics.

A Powerful Desire for In-Person Attendance

High school athletic communities across the Midwest state “craved in-person attendance.” While participants felt virtual spectating provided a “fine short-term solution,” athletic programs experienced “excitement as spectator attendance went from zero to full capacity.” One athletic director responded, “Managing spectators throughout the pandemic was exceedingly difficult for several reasons. Guidance was varied from the CDC, state, and local authorities, which made it difficult to hear one voice. Everyone had an opinion on the risks or severity of the pandemic, which made enforcement difficult. However, one voice remained consistent – the desire to watch our student-athletes in person.” This desire led to an increase in ticket sales when permitted and a commitment from community members to be socially responsible to ensure in-person attendance could continue as long as possible.

Increase in Ticket Sales

Many athletic directors reported, “Our ticket sales have gone through the roof,” since allowing in-person attendance. One respondent shared, “When we returned the fan bases were great as they were happy to be able to see sports again, even if they had to follow crazy guidelines to do so. We saw a large spike in our attendance pre-COVID.” Another athletic director shared, “There were times early in the pandemic that our county was considered red, and we did not allow any spectators. While this was obviously easy to manage, it was very depressing and did not provide the same positive atmosphere for our student-athletes and families. As restrictions decreased, there was a powerful desire for in-person attendance, which spiked ticket sales. Multiple athletic directors noted how recent crowd sizes are the best in recent history. One athletic director stated, “Our fan base was starving for in-person sports after being without that opportunity for over a year. They showed up in full force.” In the process of showing up, spectators knew they had to “be compliant with rules so we could keep in-person events going. If they did not, we would end in-person watching right away.”

Social Responsibility

The increase in ticket sales led to both positive and negative experiences for athletic directors as it relates to spectators fulfilling their civic duties. Athletic directors shared, “Managing spectators was better than I expected. We had a few issues with masks at first, but then our families became used to our policies,” and “Most of our fan behavior experiences were positive.” Another athletic director conveyed, “I am pleased overall with spectator behavior at our school over the past two years. On a rare occasion I may need to briefly remind a fan about appropriate game day behaviors. However, the positive fan experiences far outweighed the negative.” Numerous athletic directors reported “no difference in fan behavior before and after COVID.”

While many athletic directors experienced positive outcomes with the return to in-person spectating, this experience varied for other athletic leaders across the state. One athletic director

voiced, “There is a sharp rise in inappropriate fan behavior coming out of COVID. We say all the time we live in a world where people want to protest.” Another added, “Once we returned to full attendance, we saw an uptick in unsporting behaviors compared to events prior to COVID.” Several athletic directors communicated, “Managing spectators throughout the pandemic was difficult for several reasons. Everyone had an opinion on the risks or severity of the pandemic” and “Some parents and many fans had unreasonable expectations and at times refused to cooperate with policies.” Athletic directors also conveyed that they did not get “enough help from the school community.” One athletic director recounted, “I felt like the COVID police, trying to get everyone to adhere to the restrictions. Some people would cooperate, while others would not.” Another athletic director echoed this sentiment, “The only problem with spectators was getting them to wear their masks while seated and out in the communal areas. I did not like policing this and many spectators did not want to be told what to do.” A final athletic director shared, “many people did what they could do support in-person spectating, others made it a large challenge and did not respond the way we would expect from our school community.”

Community Response and Behaviors

As evident with the social responsibility section above, athletic communities across the state varied in their spectator responses. Of particular concern to athletic directors was promoting the health and safety of all involved and finding ways to work through the budgetary impacts of revenue loss. All the respondents indicated, “COVID-19 was extremely challenging in maintaining health and safety measures for our athletes, fans and coaches.” Athletic directors relied on the “compliance of others to follow state and local guidelines consistently.” With these guidelines came financial hardships for many athletic programs. During COVID, there was a decrease in ticket sales, the need for exploring new revenue streams, and trying to be respectful of the impact COVID-19 had on the financial status of many student-athletes and their families. One athletic director shared, “It was really challenging to balance health and safety with the need to financially support our efforts. I would wish that challenge upon nobody.”

Health and Safety

All athletic directors shared similar thoughts about “ever changing protocols for the different sports, seasons, and venues making their job challenging.” Athletic directors reported, “overseeing capacity limits, mask wearing, and social distancing for spectators.” Various programs established attendance restrictions such as “two people per athlete, presale tickets only, and immediate family only.” Athletic directors referenced additional responsibilities to promote health and safety such as, “signage, marking off seats, adjusting entrances and exits, monitoring restroom use, separating home versus away fans, sending detailed COVID protocols for visiting schools and ensuring social distancing with fans.” Furthermore, athletic directors often “led contact tracing of student-athletes in multiple practice and competition scenarios.

While athletic programs worked to promote the health and safety of spectators, they did not always receive an appreciative response from community members. One athletic director shared, “Our population was very reluctant to wear masks and follow rules that were set. This led to much conflict.” Other athletic directors expressed how their oversight of COVID-19 protocols led to increased job stress, in ways above and beyond those noted by Hums & McLean (2013).

One athletic director mentioned, “Repeatedly asking spectators to comply with COVID-19 policies like masks and social distancing was stressful.” Another administrator added, “As we got into the year, mask fatigue, frustration, and other factors crept in and it became increasingly difficult to manage, especially as some communities lifted their mask requirements or did not enforce them.” A final athletic director voiced, “Parents were understanding, but we have had several issues where parents become vocal about us not doing enough or that we are doing too much. In the beginning spectators were very compliant with the rules and regulations, but as we got further in, they became more unruly. Health and safety became less important in the eyes of others.”

Revenue Support

Despite the mixed reactions to COVID-19 protocols, members of the community understood the fiscal impact of the pandemic on high school sports. Numerous athletic directors expressed appreciation for families who were willing to “pay for digital tickets or subscription fees for online viewing to help offset ticket sales.” One athletic director discussed, “teaming with a local cable service to broadcast sports and to generate revenue from advertisement.” A second athletic director shared a similar partner with a “local radio station with advertisement buys.” Additionally, several athletic directors reported, “many families and local businesses offered sponsorships to offset lost revenue.” Athletic directors also received “donations to the athletic office, which helped during the pandemic due to low crowds. These types of changes would not be needed if it were not for the pandemic.”

COVID-19 Related Changes

The COVID-19 pandemic triggered multiple changes to the world of high school athletics. Two key changes were the need for alternate spectating options for students, families, and community members and the ability to plan in a crisis environment. The transition to virtual spectating and managing the crises associated with a global pandemic provided athletic directors with both teachable moments and significant challenges, as a rough equivalent to the challenges faced by school principals in transitioning to virtual instruction during this time (DeMatthews et al., 2023; Grooms & Childs, 2021; Hayes & Derrington, 2023).

Virtual Spectating

Athletic directors understood the need for digital ticket sales and virtual spectating options, but experienced mixed emotions with delivery. Many athletic directors reported virtual spectating was “frustrating at time with glitches and internet issues,” “underutilized by the community,” and “had such inadequate quality and customer service it was not worth the investment.”

On the reverse side, outside of the challenges noted above, athletic directors believed virtual spectating provided opportunities for community engagement and school spirit. One athletic director responded, “when we reduced spectator entry, we offered a free live stream to many of our events. We had incredible numbers tune in to watch.” Another athletic director added, “This was a fantastic way for our school corporation to engage grandparents and out-of-

town friends and family in the sporting events of their loved ones.” Several athletic directors noted, “It was nice to offer spectators the option of watching from home if they were not able to attend in person” and “Live streaming became a necessity to engage our families, community members, and student-athletes.” A final athletic director summarized, “virtual spectating was not perfect, but it provided fans the safety and comfort needed to not spread COVID-19 and still support their team.”

Crisis Planning

The COVID-19 pandemic presented an opportunity for athletic administrators to think critically about future crisis planning. One athletic director noted, “We had to adapt on the fly. We had to try innovative approaches to programming, and we learned along the way. For instance, we learned how to increase the number of sporting events we stream online. We learned about new software and strategies to keep individuals engaged.” A different athletic director shared, “We used COVID-19 as an opportunity to engage our students in a new way. We developed our media class to extend it into athletic home events. We used student-based groups to keep school spirit alive.” Some other athletic directors shared how they, “Developed a virtual plan for future sporting events,” “Created a crisis plan for future pandemics or community emergencies, and “found ways to use COVID-19 to bring the community closer together and find new purpose in sport.”

Discussion and Conclusions

This study explored the experiences of high school athletic directors during the COVID-19 pandemic, who went to great lengths to reintroduce athletics and allow student-athletes to enjoy the benefits of participation (Easterlin et al., 2019; Eime et al., 2013; Marques et al., 2016). Through an open-ended qualitative prompt and grounded theory approach, participants were able to document varied experiences associated with both their role as leaders in a high school athletic department and interactions with various stakeholders. This study is among the first known to document these experiences. The authors found that despite the challenges associated with promoting health and safety, there was a strong demand for the continuity of high school sports, even amid environments filled with several risk factors. Additionally, community members had varied responses to the adaptations required to comply with local COVID-19 guidelines. Some of these practices were aided by technology (i.e., digital ticket sales, live streaming of events) and were welcomed changes, yet in other situations, there was resistance to change. Additionally, there were some noted changes deemed positive, as others stated the pandemic heightened concerns about inappropriate fan behavior.

The COVID-19 pandemic necessitated creative approaches (some successful, some unsuccessful) by athletic directors related to fostering a positive in-person environment, launching and facilitating a virtual spectator experience, crisis planning and safety measures, generating revenue, and enduring the emotional toll of it all. With all of these themes, there were strong elements of interconnectedness that supported the grounded theory model (Figure 1). There is a give and take response required in these types of situations (Reynolds et al., 2022). In-person spectating was reliant upon a community response and behavior that promoted the health and safety of student-athletes and others. The changes in spectating plans led to fiscal challenges

and need for new revenue streams to account for more virtual opportunities. The intertwining of these themes made it challenging for athletic directors to promote the physical, mental, and social health of student-athletes, their families, and the community (Bellibas & Liu, 2018; Capp et al., 2022; Reid, 2021).

These findings can be helpful to any school leader entrusted to foster a positive athletic environment, especially when operating in a crisis environment like that created by COVID-19. The challenges with making decisions about spectator management, budgeting, compliance, and how to host events (Hums & McLean, 2013; Ratts et al., 2022; Sullivan et al., 2014), came across in each of the themes. For example, while some athletic directors noted benefits of virtual attendance similar to those found in previous studies about in-person attendance in the United States (Dorsch et al., 2009; Knight & Holt, 2014; Wiersma & Fifer, 2008), it is unclear whether student-athletes and spectators benefit to the same extent from virtual attendance.

Regardless of whether a public health emergency of similar magnitude reemerges in the future, further research in the above areas is warranted. For example, some level of demand for virtual spectating experiences is likely to continue or increase in the future for various reasons: to cater to would-be attendees who cannot attend an event due to being out-of-town, or contending with injuries, illnesses, transportation issues, scheduling conflicts, or other factors.; to serve as a student-run action learning opportunity for a media program within the school; to generate advertising revenue for the school; etc. Further research can identify exemplary practices in these areas, and those exemplars can serve as a model to other schools and provide athletic directors with evidenced-based approaches to support their decision-making.

Follow-up interviews or further outreach to study participants could benefit study results. This study only collected information at one point in time from participants. While this approach is consistent with prior research (Author, 2022a; Author, 2022b), this lack of follow-up did not enable us to explore unanticipated responses and obtain nuanced answers (e.g., crosses based on participant responses) when the initial response might be too general or simplistic (Rubin & Rubin, 2005). Future studies will offer study participants the ability to opt in to a follow-up focus group.

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