

# Flag Football Expanding Nationwide as Next Emerging High School Sport for Girls

By Dr. Karissa Niehoff on April 10, 2024

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Two years ago, our nation celebrated the 50th anniversary of Title IX, which played a significant role in opening doors for girls' participation opportunities in sports.

Throughout the 2021-22 year, the NFHS led the way in promoting the accomplishments and growth of girls sports at the high school level. From a meager 294,000 participants in 1972 before Title IX's implementation, that number reached 3.2 million by the 50-year mark.

Beyond continual growth in sports like basketball, volleyball, track and field, softball, cross country and soccer, opportunities also arose for girls during those first 50 years in swimming, golf, tennis, spirit, lacrosse, gymnastics, field hockey, ice hockey and others.

The 50-year celebration, however, was just the beginning – and merely a springboard into the next half century of opportunities for girls in school-based sports – both at the junior high and high school levels. And while sports like basketball and volleyball continue to thrive, all eyes are on flag football as the next emerging sport.

Although the Florida High School Athletic Association (FHSAA) started flag football for girls about 20 years ago, most of the sport's growth across the country has come in the past five to seven years. Currently, nine states have sanctioned the sport for girls (Florida, Alabama, Georgia, Nevada,

Alaska, New York, Arizona, Illinois and California), two others are expected to sanction flag this year (Colorado, Montana) and 17 other states are in various stages of pilot programs. That a total of 28 states off and running with this new opportunity for girls.

As a result of this recent growth, the NFHS – the rules-writing organization for high school sports for more than 100 years – has been asked by its member associations to consider publishing national playing rules for flag football, which is currently played under a number of rules codes. A task force is currently being assembled to formulate plans, including appointment of a rules committee and a timetable for implementation. This would be the 18<sup>th</sup> sport for which the NFHS writes national playing rules.

The NFHS is excited about this new sports opportunity – particularly for girls. Flag is a sport of inclusivity, can be played in any season (weather dependent), is fast-paced and offers the excitement of tackle football with a reduced risk of injury. Costs are also minimal since students need little more than a uniform, pair of cleats or athletic shoes.

Girls flag football has been a huge success in the aforementioned states, led by Florida's longest-standing program which now has more than 360 schools and almost 10,000 participants. Georgia reported almost 5,000 participants last year, and the Georgia High School Association, which has received tremendous support from the Atlanta Falcons, held its third state championship last December – and the girls play alongside the boys in Mercedes-Benz Stadium in Atlanta.

After starting as a pilot program in 2013, the Nevada Interscholastic Athletic Association has offered a girls flag football championship since 2017, and interest continues to grow with more than 1,600 participants and three classes of championships.

The Alabama High School Athletic Association held its first state championship this past December in conjunction with the boys state football championships at Bryant-Denny Stadium in Tuscaloosa.

Likewise, the Arizona Interscholastic Association (AIA) staged its first event this past November. A total of 54 schools competed in the first championship, and the AIA expects another 40-50 schools in 2024, with rosters filled with athletes from other sports as well as students who have not previously played sports.

In New York, the New York State Public High School Athletic Association will hold its first girls flag championship June 1-2 after several years as a pilot program. And Illinois and California are sanctioning the sport for the first time in 2024. Although the California Interscholastic Federation is not conducting a state championship yet, schools will begin offering the sport, thanks to support from the Los Angeles Rams and USA Football.

The Illinois High School Association (IHSA) will offer girls flag as a fall sport in 2024 and conduct its first state championship October 18-19. Craig Anderson, IHSA executive director, said the addition of girls flag football furthers the IHSA mission of creating participation opportunities for high school students in Illinois.

The popularity of flag football – for boys and girls – has been growing at the youth levels for the past 10 years. In 2023, about 500,000 girls ages 6-17 played flag football – a 63 percent increase since 2019. At a higher level of competition, more universities are beginning to offer flag football for girls, which will certainly enhance the appeal for girls playing the sport at the high school level. And internationally, the sport received a huge boost with the announcement recently of flag football as an Olympic sport for men and women at the 2028 Olympics in Los Angeles.

The NFHS looks forward to being involved with the continued growth of flag football in schools nationwide, particularly in formulation of playing rules, as more opportunities for participation unfold in all 50 states.

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