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An MHSAA Commentary From Communications Director John Johnson: A Day In The Chute

There are never more high school athletes gathered in a single spot for an Michigan High School Athletic Association Championship during the school year than when around 2,000 runners representing over 400 schools converge on Michigan International Speedway for the Lower Peninsula Cross Country Finals.

It's an ocean of color – from the tent city set up on the infield of the racetrack, to the 250 runners taking part in every race as they burst off the starting line and then recongregate just past the finish line in an area commonly known as “The Chute.”

As a cross country family for a number of years, we found the sport to be competitive but cordial. The congenial way everyone treated each other, the camaraderie that existed – not just between teammates, but between the runners from different schools – made for an enjoyable experience.

At this year's meet, a portion of my work was to walk down the chute at the conclusion of each race to oversee media interviews with the runners as they exited the course. In past years, I monitored this activity from the perimeter driving a golf cart, only seeing tired runners. But after the eight races this year, my eyes were opened and my faith in what we do in educational athletics was reaffirmed.

There was the entire range of human expression – exhaustion and exhilaration; celebration and concern; and plenty of respect...plenty of sportsmanship.

Three young men from three different teams walking down the chute, holding each other up, all seniors, asking each other if this would be their last race. One runner from the east side of the state talking to a runner from the west side, recalling the first time they ever ran together in a race as freshmen and how he brought out the best of him – and these were two guys that finished in the middle of the pack.

“Help me,” a weak voice called from behind as I turned around just in time to help keep a young lady from falling to the ground as she walked down the chute. With the help of a nearby trainer, we got her on her way. A few others weren't so lucky, requiring the help of EMT's after their races, but they were eventually okay.

(more)

2-2-2 MHSAA Commentary – A Day In The Chute

Kids in different colored uniforms, of all different colors of skin, congratulating, celebrating and comforting the others around them.

The top finishing individual runners and teams all enjoyed each other's company in the chute. Talking about the grief they were going to catch from their parents if they dared to go to the after-the-meet party when they got home. Joking about roughing up a pair of new shoes before a race so they wouldn't stand out. Basically being teenagers, enjoying the company of other teenagers with whom they'd build relationships while having fun playing their favorite sport. And that's what high school sports are all about.

Was there rivalry on this day? Sure. Did these kids want to win? Absolutely. Was there disappointment on the part of those who fell short of their expectations? Definitely. But in the chute, all that was set aside.

Their perspective was enjoyable to be around. I wish it was contagious and that kids and coaches in every sport would catch it. In a few weeks, 16 teams will gather at Ford Field for the MHSAA Football Finals, and I would love to see this same interaction at the conclusion of each of the eight championship games. For that matter, I'd love to see it at our Basketball Finals, our Soccer Finals and lot of our other finals.

But if history repeats itself, I'll see the team coming up on the short end of the score keeping their helmets on throughout the post-game ceremonies, afraid to show their faces; and the head coach condoning it by doing nothing about it. It should be a time for celebration for both teams, but many times teams act like receiving the trophy that doesn't say "champions" on it is the worst thing that has ever happened in their life.

By the way, if only being a finalist in an MHSAA Tournament is the worst thing that ever happens in your life – you're going to have a pretty good life. For the kids in the chute, they enjoyed the competition, they enjoyed each other's company, and they enjoyed the moment while keeping it all in perspective.

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NOTE: This commentary can be heard this week on the radio program MHSAA Perspective, which airs on over 40 radio stations across the state, and can be heard on-demand on the MHSAA Internet Broadcast Network – www.mhsaanetwork.com.

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