

Star-spangled hoops: Not all schools salute the flag

by [Rich Preheim](#) in the [March 8, 2005](#) issue

At this time of the winter countless high school basketball teams are trying to dribble, pass and shoot their way to a state championship. Glamorized in small-town lore and big-budget movies, reaching the state tournament is a dream shared by most any student athlete who has put on a basketball jersey (or soccer cleats or football pads or a wrestling singlet or softball glove). It takes hard work, dedication, commitment, teamwork, preparation, sacrifice.

And in Iowa and Pennsylvania, the pursuit of state basketball supremacy is also supposed to include unquestioning pride in and homage to the U.S.

In the wake of the terrorist attacks of three years ago, the Iowa High School Activities Association declared that sites hosting postseason playoffs for most sports must display the American flag and play the “Star-Spangled Banner.” In this move the IHSAA, which oversees boys’ athletics, joined the Iowa Girls High School Athletic Union and the Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic Association, which had enacted similar measures. As a result, some gyms and fields have become arenas where centuries-old religious beliefs and post-September 11, 2001, nationalistic fervor have been forced to opposing sides.

State championships are often held at large neutral sites, but many playoff games leading up to them are played at smaller high school gyms and fields. The new provisions, which do not apply to regular-season contests, are not problematic for most athletic association members, since all public and the vast majority of private high schools display the flag and play the national anthem as a matter of course. But at least two church-affiliated schools in Iowa and Pennsylvania do not, indicating not disrespect for this country but an acknowledgment of God’s reign over all nations.

In each state, one school—both Mennonite—unwittingly prompted the measures. Christopher Dock Mennonite High School in Lansdale, Pennsylvania, and Iowa Mennonite School in Kalona, Iowa, both founded in the years after World War II, have

never flown the U.S. flag or performed the national anthem before athletic events. (The schools initially didn't even play interscholastic sports.) This practice, born out of a historic Mennonite emphasis on nonconformity and pacifism, caused few problems until the events of 9/11 spawned a flood of hyperpatriotism.

Athletic association officials in both states said they were hit with complaints about the schools' perceived lack of national loyalty in the wake of foreign attacks. IGHSAU executive director Troy Dannen said his association has had a flag policy for 50 years, but it wasn't included in its handbook until 2002. "Quite honestly, we didn't know anyone was not complying," he said. "And we received a rash of complaints [about Iowa Mennonite School]."

Also in 2002 the PIAA moved a soccer tournament from Christopher Dock and its new playing field after receiving criticism. The association adopted its flag-and-anthem requirement on the basis of "the particular stance many of our schools and school administrations were taking, as well as the general public," said assistant executive director Mark Byers. "Not only is it tradition at sporting events, it recognizes those who went before us and fell defending our freedom."

According to the state associations, criteria for hosting postseason playoff contests include seating capacity, locker-room facilities and parking availability. The presence of a flag or the playing of the national anthem would seem to have little connection with the ability to host a game. But notions of patriotism are just as pertinent to athletic competition, said IHSAA executive director Bernie Saggau. Citing the emphasis on citizenship mentioned in the organization's 34-year-old motto, he said, "Citizenship means the 'Star-Spangled Banner' played at state games."

Another view of citizenship is the reason for the absence of the flag and anthem at Christopher Dock and IMS. School officials said they are not traitors or subversives but are glad to be Americans. "We're very happy to be here and be positive contributors," said Christopher Dock principal Elaine Moyer. However, their identity isn't bound by borders or politics. "We don't want to distract from our loyalty to God and our context of being world citizens," Moyer said. "We believe God's spirit is pervasive in all lands." Said IMS athletic director Ron Swartzendruber: "Our allegiance to Jesus transcends any nation."

The Iowa and Pennsylvania athletic associations rent school facilities for postseason playoffs, which technically makes them neutral sites, even if it is the home court or

field for one of the teams. If a school wants to be considered for a playoff site, it can try to meet association criteria. Dannen noted that some schools usually say a prayer before games. "They don't do that when we rent the facility," he said. "We have places we don't go because the PA announcer refuses to remain neutral." But changes are not required of schools. "It's voluntary on their part to open up their doors for our use, and it's voluntary on our part to use those sites," Byers said.

Two other schools in both states are known not to fly the flag or play the national anthem. Under a policy that predates the terrorist attacks, Lancaster, Pennsylvania, Mennonite School will allow the flag to be displayed and the national anthem to be played at playoff games. "If someone else comes in and pays us to use the gym, we can't say they can't do that," said principal Dick Thomas. "Rental doesn't imply endorsement to us."

Mike Watson, boys' soccer and basketball coach at Scattergood Friends School in West Branch, Iowa, said its facilities are not viable for hosting postseason playoff games, rendering the flag and anthem stipulations moot.

Christopher Dock and IMS officials are not challenging their states' positions, even though some have questioned their legality. Officials at both schools say any protest would polarize sides and undermine relationships, which all parties say are good. "I don't feel like they're telling us what to believe," Swartzendruber said. "I would be concerned if we couldn't participate [in postseason playoffs]. . . . There is an advantage of playing at home. I think everyone would agree on that. We just have to rise above that."

The two states' policies do not apply to all sports. In cross country and golf, for example, spectators may not be charged admission and events are held in venues where playing the national anthem and raising the flag are not realistic.

Iowa and Pennsylvania are believed to be the only states with such measures, but many state associations have similar expectations.

"We have never had such a regulation," said Donnie Nelson of the Nevada Interscholastic Activities Association. "Every school in Nevada does [raise the flag and sing the national anthem] without being told to do so." Joe Altieri of the New York State Public High School Athletic Association said, "We do have expectations that our sites will do their best in showing patriotism for our country." But other states exhibit a more moderate stance. "I don't believe we would prevent a school

from hosting if they chose not to fly a flag or play the national anthem,” said Peter Weber of the Oregon School Activities Association.

IMS, Christopher Dock and Lancaster are among the 15 high schools affiliated with the Mennonite Church USA, the largest Mennonite denomination in the United States. Most schools do not fly the flag or play the national anthem. Most Quaker schools, unlike Scattergood, are not members of state athletic associations.

This is not the first time in the post-9/11 environment that the U.S. flag has created a flap at a Mennonite school. In the spring of 2002, Kansas legislators tried to pull state funding for need-based financial aid at Hesston College because it didn't fly the flag, which it hadn't done for three decades. In the final budget sent to the governor, the funding was restored but also included \$500 for a flagpole for the Hesston campus. Then-governor Bill Graves removed the provision from the budget, writing, “It is poor public policy for the legislature to intrude on the rights of private institutions.”