

Historic Growth: Girls Flag Football Now an IHSA Sanctioned Sport

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BLOOMINGTON - A proposal to add girls flag football to the Illinois High School Association (IHSA) calendar was approved by member schools shortly after the start of the new year, and the sport was officially added by the organization on Feb. 14, with the state championships decided on Oct. 18-19 at a site to be announced.

Girls flag football has been played, mainly in Chicago and its suburbs, along with schools from the Peoria and Bloomington-Normal areas, with the NFL's Chicago Bears sponsoring an unofficial state tournament in 2022 and 2023, with the Chicago Public League conducting a city-wide tournament in 2021. Back Of The Yards charter school won the 2021 tournament, while Villa Park Willowbrook winning in 2022, and Chicago Lane Tech taking the crown in 2023.

"The addition of girls flag football furthers the IHSA mission of creating participation opportunities for high school students in Illinois," said IHSA executive director Craig Anderson in a press release on Feb. 14. "The sport has experienced significant growth in a short amount of time, and our member schools are excited to see it become an IHSA sport. The Chicago Public Schools Athletic Administration and the Chicago Bears both deserve significant praise for their grassroots efforts in shepherding and supporting the growth of girls flag football in Illinois."

Girls flag football is played on a field 70 yards long by 30 yards wide, with two 10-yard deep end zones, with seven persons on the field. Only forward passing and direct handoffs are permitted, the quarterback has seven seconds to get off her pass and can only run if the ball is handed off to her, Defensive players lined up at least seven yards off the line of scrimmage can rush, unless it's a running play, The ball is blown dead when a players' flag is pulled off, when a ball carrier is forced out of bounds, or when her knee or body touches the ground. Offensive penalties also involve a loss of down, while defensive penalties also carry an automatic first down.

Each possession starts at the five yard line, with no kickoffs, and the offense has four downs to cross midfield, after which each play becomes a goal-to-go situation. Inside the five yard line and the 30 yard line on either side of midfield are no-run zones, where only passing plays are permitted. Touchdowns are six points, with one-point conversions spotted at the five, and two-points conversion spotted at the 10; there are no goalposts at the end line of the end zone. Safeties are two points, and intercepted passes on conversion attempts can be run back for two points as a defensive conversion.

"It is important for the IHSA continue to adapt to the interests of our students and schools," said Dan Tully, the principal at Niles Notre Dame College Prep Catholic and the president of the Board of Directors. "Girls flag football is somewhat unprecedented in terms of its growth and timeline in achieving an IHSA state series. We are enthusiastic about how much has been accomplished in such a short amount of time, and expect that participation will continue to increase in the years ahead."

Over 100 schools across the state have committed to the inaugural state series for 2024, while 40 more schools are expected to compete in 2025. The entry deadline for teams who expect to play will be Sept. 7, and teams will be required to have at least nine practice sessions before being permitted to play, with a maximum of 25 games allowed before the start of the state series.

The vast majority of schools will be from both the Chicago and Peoria areas, with Belleville Althoff Catholic and Virden North Mac expected to be the first schools from Southern Illinois to start in 2025, and East Alton-Wood River, Brooklyn Lovejoy, Marion, Nashville, Salem, Sparta and Triad set to begin in 2026 at the earliest.

