

South Bend Tribune

VOLLEYBALL

South Bend area IHSAA boys volleyball continues to rise in popularity



[Kyle Smedley](#)

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SOUTH BEND — Two years ago, boys volleyball wasn't even sanctioned by the IHSAA. If high schoolers wanted to play, they'd have to [join their school's club team](#) — if it even offered one.

Now, 137 different schools have boys volleyball programs that will compete in the second IHSAA-sanctioned state tournament. Ten of those teams are in the *South Bend Tribune* coverage area, including all three South Bend Community School Corporation schools, Saint Joseph, Penn and more. South Bend Washington did not have a team last season but hosted its first-ever home game Thursday, April 16 against Riley.

From last year: [Penn wins IHSAA boys volleyball sectional title](#)

Another rising sport: [South Bend area at the center of girls flag football popularity boom in Indiana](#)

For some, like Wildcats junior Bradford Washington, joining the volleyball team began as a way to keep in shape during the offseason of other sports like football. In his two years with the program, Washington has grown to develop a legitimate appreciation for the sport through a strong connection with his teammates.

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“We meet up out of school a lot; we’ll play at other places,” Washington said. “If there’s an open church, we’ll go there. We know each other outside of volleyball; we’ve been with each other for a long time, and that’s how the team chemistry came ... I just like playing with my brothers.”

Riley head coach Warren Bynum Sr. said he’s hoping local middle schools can start boys volleyball teams, strengthening the pipeline to high school teams and promoting further widespread growth of the sport within the IHSAA. Bynum Sr., who is also the Wildcats’ girls head coach and is Clay’s former girls head coach, has already begun regularly offering youth camps at Riley.

While he has a passion for the sport regardless of gender, Bynum Sr. said the most intangible quality that makes boys volleyball appealing is quite simple.

“It’s fun,” Bynum Sr. said. “It just caught on, and I think part of our growth was getting some athletes in, and they spread the word to other athletes. Now, we have nice crowds for our home games. They’re excited and jumping.”

For student-athletes like Penn junior Kelan Whitehouse, volleyball became an outlet when other sports were too mentally taxing.

“I came from an individual sport, and I used to be super hard on myself because I had no one else to go to,” Whitehouse said. “In a team, it’s a team atmosphere, and when you have someone else building you up, you can get out of that mindset a lot easier. I felt a lot happier in this sport.”

He was a key member of Penn’s sectional championship-winning team last season and aims to go further in the state tournament this time around. The Kingsmen are led by co-head coaches Kelley and Mark Watts, the former of whom has been especially pleased to see the gradual erosion of the stigma that boys volleyball is “girly.”

That’s why she beams with pride when watching multi-sport athletes like Indiana Wesleyan football commit Christian Bonner suit up for Penn.

“I think they’re going to start coming around,” Kelley Watts said. “This isn’t so demanding and taxing on your body. It’s a lifelong sport that you can play anywhere.”

And for people like Saint Joseph senior Noah Dobinski, boys volleyball can go from a sport he was initially hesitant to join to one that gives him the ability to express himself both physically and emotionally.

“[It’s] competitiveness and the ability to be with people you like,” Dobinski said. “We focus a lot on building ourselves around each other. We’re always trying to be together no matter what happens.”

The Huskies are led by head coach Dani Gaff, who played women’s volleyball collegiately at California State University, just about 61 miles away from her hometown outside of San Bernadino. She noticed the boys volleyball culture in Indiana was not nearly as strong as her native west coast, but Gaff has been glad to see it gradually grow in popularity during her short time in the Midwest.

Indiana has been something of a girls volleyball institution for decades, with club organizations like Munciana and Northern Indiana Volleyball Association (NIVA) giving girls the opportunity to start their careers far before high school and continue to play during the offseason once they reach high school. Now, NIVA offers boys volleyball teams, further fostering growth in its second year as an IHSAA-sanctioned sport.

“We’re seeing a really great demonstration of athleticism and a high level of it,” Gaff said. “It’s been awesome ... I love the sport so much, and being able to see the boys take to it and fall in love with it has been really great.”

The Huskies, Kingsmen and Wildcats all share a sectional, a nine-team field hosted by Northridge beginning Tuesday, May 12. Joining the field is Washington, South Bend Adams, NorthWood, Elkhart and Warsaw.

The hope is that boys volleyball continues to grow into a space where all schools under the IHSAA banner can field a team to compete in the state tournament. For now, these teams are just glad to be recognized and supported.

Not long ago, that wasn't the case.

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