

OHSAA Questions and Answers on Return to Play

Q. Why did the OHSAA stay with its original plan for having fall sports begin practices on August 1 and now begin the seasons as planned?

A. The OHSAA recently surveyed its member school superintendents, principals and athletic administrators, and 1,088 of 1,519 respondents wanted sports to begin in the fall and 611 of those respondents wanted sports to start on time. So, despite some school districts deciding to postpone, suspend or halt extra-curricular activities, including sports, to start the school year, most of our 815 high schools are still able and eager to begin their seasons. We certainly understand concerns from school districts who are receiving recommendations from local health departments contrary to our decision to move forward. The OHSAA is moving forward because we want kids to have an opportunity to participate, and the Governor's Office is providing that opportunity and a chance. The risk factor is something on which each family has to decide, and each local school district has to make decisions based on all the information they have been presented, including what their local health department recommends. The decision for sports is virtually the same as the decision on whether schools choose to fully open their districts for classes from the standpoint that both present risks. We certainly understand the difficult situation this puts a local school district in. But again, we want kids to have the opportunity, the opportunity is something that the Governor's Office is providing, so parents and school districts have to decide whether that opportunity is the best choice for them, while, again, knowing that there are risks.

Q. What else went into the decision to move forward with the seasons?

Consistent with the mission of the OHSAA and the principles that guide our interscholastic sports programs, the OHSAA believes our student-athletes need us right now. The American Academy of Pediatrics even emphasized that there are major health, social and educational risks to keeping children at home. More than anything, they need the positive benefits of being on a team. COVID-19 has left them with a void, and there is no doubt that being a part of a team can bring a community together and give our students structure.

We also realize that COVID-19 has had a greater impact in some parts of the state than others. However, in knowing the importance of getting our student-athletes back on the courts and playing fields, the OHSAA believes it should not be an obstacle to those schools and student-athletes who are able to safely and responsibly begin play.

Q. Explain more about the health and safety concerns for our student-athletes? Why would you deviate from what they are doing by many at the collegiate level, including the Big Ten and Mid-American Conferences, and other state high school associations?

A. First, it's important to remember that our student-athletes have been practicing and training with others for weeks and even months, and it has gone well. So, we believe they deserve the chance to move forward. The high school space is also different than the collegiate space in that we're not housing our students in dormitories; are not bringing in student-athletes from all over the country and even the world; are not mixing them with students on campus who come from all over the U.S. and across the globe, and our student-athletes are not traveling to contests all over the Midwest and East Coast. In fact, our students can even be viewed as being in their own school 'bubble' so to speak. So when our teams meet, it's essentially one school 'bubble' facing another.

Secondly, we also believe our student-athletes, coaches and school administrators – in education-based programs – are suited to be the best advocates for safety, strongly promoting and following mandates and recommendations to wear facial coverings, stay socially distanced and so forth. Our coaches, especially, are role models to so many of our student-athletes, so hopefully our student-athletes will follow their lead and guidance, especially when they talk to students about what to consider away from school.

And, as we've said before, our kids need school and also need extra-curricular activities. It's naïve to believe they will stay home and do nothing if they do not have that opportunity.

At the same time, it is evident that much remains unknown about COVID-19, including how the virus affects children and how it acts differently with young people, but decisions to move forward are based on the best available data. There is no doubt that participation opens up the concern that student-athletes could be at risk for either contracting and/or spreading COVID-19. There is no way around that. The question becomes, then, can sports be played within a manageable and acceptable risk. In working together with the Governor's Office, the Ohio Department of Health and our Board of Directors, and as we have said, we believe that it ultimately becomes a family decision to determine if participation is an acceptable risk, and families also need to be cognizant of preexisting conditions. We will continue to monitor the data, work with the Governor's Office and Department of Health and continue to work to provide competition in the safest manner.

Q. If the OHSAA did not move forward with sports now or postponed the seasons, what other concerns exist?

A. If the OHSAA does not offer sports now, there is little doubt that non-school programs would continue to fill the void for our student-athletes. The OHSAA staff and Board believe that our schools are the best, most reliable providers of these programs in an environment that implements best practices for dealing with COVID-19 restrictions. Most non-school programs do not focus on the "education-based" aspect of athletics in the same manner as our member schools.

Additionally, not providing school-based programs can also lead to socioeconomic concerns when it comes to our student-athletes. Many of the non-school programs require significantly more costs to participate than school-based programs, so it would be extremely difficult to see many of our students on the sidelines because they could not afford to participate.

Q. Who was involved in the decision to move forward beginning August 1 and starting the seasons on time?

A. As already stated, the OHSAA Executive Director's Office has been working closely with the Governor's Office and Ohio Department of Health to help make these decisions. Just as in sports, we have demonstrated good teamwork in order to get to this point. Ultimately, it was the Board of Directors, in conjunction with the staff, the Governor's Office and Ohio Department of Health, that made the decision. The Executive Director's staff also has conferred with the executive staff at the National Federation of State High School Associations; executive directors at other state high school athletics/activities associations; members of our Joint Advisory Committee on Sports Medicine, and members of the Governor's Sports Leagues Advisory Group. As mentioned, we also took a survey on July 27 through July 29 of our member schools administrators that included superintendents, principals and athletic administrators, and the highest number from those who responded to the OHSAA member school survey preferred we begin all sports programs as they are currently planned and scheduled for fall 2020.

As approved by the OHSAA Board of Directors, August 1 has been the official start date of practice that our member schools have been working toward all summer. As the majority of our member schools were still able to begin practice that day, we did move forward with holding to that target date and, now that the Governor's Office has given our schools the opportunity to begin school vs. school competition in contact sports, we're staying with our original target dates there, too.

Q. What makes interscholastic athletics programs different than non-school programs?

A. We are education-based athletics, which are intended to foster a sense of community and belonging as well as to teach teamwork, citizenship and discipline and provide a unique form of structured competition created

and maintained by the OHSAA through its member schools. Our coaches, many of whom are teachers with year of professional training and experience, are the people who are best positioned to lead our student-athletes.

It is also well-documented that students who compete in interscholastic athletics have better educational outcomes; our programs are a valuable part of the high school experience; our programs promote positive development and provide opportunities to learn life skills and values not typically taught in the classroom, and that active students have healthier behavior, leading to better physical and mental health. Additionally, this is a critical time in the lives and development of our student-athletes, whether this is the last time they suit up for their team or if they are hoping to go on to play in college.

Q. What's in store down the road? Is the OHSAA prepared to make modifications or changes if we have to postpone our seasons?

A. Most definitely. This is a time to think outside the box and figure out how we can provide the most opportunities for our student-athletes. If data changes and the Governor's Office makes changes to our current plan, we have the flexibility that would allow us to look at implementing other models for our seasons. This will not be a traditional school year and it is proving to be an untraditional sports year, too. The OHSAA Executive Director's Office has been sharing ideas with other state high school athletics associations across the country and has several models in mind to review with the Board of Directors should we run into any types of postponements of our seasons. We are prepared to chart a new course of action to do whatever it takes to provide our student-athletes the opportunity to participate in our programs.

Ohio Governor Mike DeWine and Lt. Governor Jon Husted from the August 11 and August 18 News Conferences

Gov. DeWine on moving forward with high school sports in general:

"Our teachers and coaches are role models. It's not only important what our students do in school and in practice or games, but it's important what they do the rest of the day. Our coaches and our teachers have a great opportunity to help our young people understand that, the choices they make at 9:00 at night or 10:00 at night or some other time on the weekend when they're not practicing or not with their coach. Those life choices they're going to make this year are more important than they've ever been before. And the choices they make may determine if their team is going to be able to continue to play that sport. So everybody on that team is literally in it together. If one gets sick, maybe many will get sick. Staying away from situations where you may get sick or (making sure you are) doing the best you can in wearing that mask when you're out, keeping the social distancing and doing the other things that we have been talking about . . . coaches have a great ability to get that message across in a way sometimes that even parents don't have a way."

Gov. DeWine on the Big Ten cancelling its fall sports seasons but high schools are moving forward:

"I know it's a disappointment for Buckeye Nation (that the football season was postponed) and, more importantly, a disappointment for those young men who play football at Ohio State. As a fan I'm disappointed. But this was a decision that was made by the Big Ten and the schools, so we have to respect that decision. No decision (that we make) is ever made in a vacuum and all information is important to get. As we look at this, the Lt. Governor and I talk to a lot of people in regard to decisions about high school sports. The basic facts do not change because of what the Big Ten has decided to do. Like I've said, you can't make these decisions in a vacuum. The parents can't, the schools can't, our administration can't. I think you have to look at what other things that student would be doing (if they did not have high school sports), what discipline can be gained from being in a sport . . . there's self-discipline, discipline for the team and part of that discipline this year for teams

that play is going to be ‘let’s have a season, let’s have a full season, and what we do – not just on the playing field or on the practice field – but what we do as team members in our spare time and when we’re home or are out is going to determine what chance we have to have that particular season.’ It goes in the nexus of what people are certainly talking about.”

Gov. DeWine on Ohio high school sports moving forward:

“It’s really about how we can provide the best advice to how sports in Ohio are conducted. We know that just as going back to school in person does increase the risk of spread, we know that sports do as well, particularly contact sports. On the other hand, we’ve seen that sports matter and make a difference. Sports provide discipline, brings order and structure in the lives of the student-athletes, and it certainly brings joy to those athletes and their families. We also know that each young person who is not in sports is going to be doing something else with their time. This (new Health Director’s Order) simply allows sports to move forward.

“The health orders, when you look at them, there are no big surprises. Our hope is that the desire to have a season will inspire our young people, our student-athletes, 24/7, to be as careful as they can. I also hope that our coaches will use this as an opportunity to focus on helping these young people to understand what really is at stake. They’re going to have to do everything they can to keep COVID out of their team so it gives them the best chance that they can to play their sport. We’re empowering our young people, we’re empowering the parents and we’re empowering the schools to take all the evidence, all the information to make the best judgement call for the children.

“Sports is about a lot of things, but one thing it is . . . is about hope. It doesn’t matter what sport it is. Hope springs eternal when you start. Hope itself is not a plan, is not a strategy. We all should have hope, but we all should have a plan. So we would ask those who are making the decision to play to look at the plan we have and try the best that you can to execute it.”

Lt. Gov. Husted on Ohio high school sports moving forward:

“I know when we worked on this from the very beginning, the coaches and student-athletes said ‘give us a chance.’ Today they have that chance and have that opportunity. But much like the sport you play, your success is going to be based on how well you execute the game plan. Athletes, coaches and families are going to have to demonstrate the discipline to follow the rules so they can protect themselves and their teammates to control, if not stop, the spread of the virus. We hope this announcement will represent hundreds of thousands of people who will have an extra incentive to get this right.

“Everyone involved must be accountable. The accountability and the nature of how we’re taking this seriously is super important. We know that with the virus, there is no right decision. The risk tolerance and your own personal circumstances and your limited alternatives are important in your decision-making. Go into this with your eyes wide open. For you athletes out there, here is a chance to play the sports you love and the opportunity to show that you have the discipline to make it work. We’re all excited for the opportunity you have to do it the right way.”