



Published January 6th, 2021

Status of high school sports remains in flux

By Jon Kingdon

The California Interscholastic Federation announced on July 29 that for the 2020-21 school year, due to the coronavirus, there would be a modified season of sport schedules for the 10 CIF sections, 1,705 schools and over 800,000 athletes. The "fall" season was to begin team practices on Dec. 14 and the spring season on Feb. 22. With the COVID-19 numbers increasing so rapidly, the state of California and the CIF announced that the school's athletic teams would not be able to begin practicing until Jan. 25 at the earliest.

The changes, forced on the athletic programs and businesses, are based on the colored tiers set by the state: Purple, the most restrictive to Red and Orange to Yellow, the least restrictive. Cross Country is one of the few sports that would be allowed in the purple tier. Football and other close contact sports would only be permitted in the orange tier. Gov. Gavin Newsom also stated that the state will roll back or move forward within these tiers after each week.

It was not until mid-December that the state and the CIF updated their guidelines based on the colored tiers. "All that happened right before our winter break," said Campolindo's Athletic Director Raymond Meadows. "The consensus was that here was a rough guideline of a plan to follow and they postponed all competitions until Jan. 25."

Everyone is waiting on tenterhooks to find out the state's new directives on high school sports, which were to be released on Jan. 4 (after press time). Acalanes High School's athletic director Randy Takahashi is looking forward to getting some direction. "The shelter in place stalled a lot of plans," he said. "There are a lot of meetings that will be happening next week so the state and the CIF will get more guidance on what we're looking at. We have been told that whatever the counties have in place is going to be trumped by whatever the state has in place."

When practices were scheduled to begin in December, there was a concern that there would be major logistical issues with so many sports overlapping. Since starting dates have been moved to late January, it has made things that much more difficult. With so many things being held in abeyance, it was Tim Kruger, Las Lomas' athletic director who summed up succinctly in an email to the league's other athletic directors the frustration they are all going through: "There is so much to do and there is nothing to do."

Because we're all still waiting, it's daunting to look at how we are going to have the opportunity to do things," said Meadows. "All our coaches and the administrators are flexible and on the same page in that we are going to do whatever it takes to work things out. Things may look drastically different when we do get back. It may mean limiting practice times or cutting practice times and just having to do things a little bit differently than what we did in the past. That is going to be the case for everybody."

What's most frustrating is that they are all flying blind. "It's all been really challenging, just not knowing," Takahashi said. "We're so used to having a start date and an end date and knowing when the playoffs were going to happen. There is just so much that is in flux that it's hard for those in charge to put out information as well."

According to Takahashi, it's going to be the virus numbers in January and February that may tell the story as to where things are going: "During Christmas and New Year's people are still going to be out and about. We know that is going to happen so we may see a jump in the virus numbers mid-January from what the numbers are. As a rule, people tend to stay at home in January and February. That might help the situation, but it is yet to be seen."

What needs to be determined is how late a start date can be established for each of the sports. It's possible that some spring sports can start earlier in terms of the color tiers. If things were only that easy, Meadows said. "There are weather considerations that need to be taken into account. The question then becomes, how do we arrange things if we keep pushing these start dates back further and still fit it all in within the calendar year?"

Many of the high schools around the state are facing financial pressures. With the booster programs for each of the Lamorinda high schools, it is not as urgent a situation as it is for many of the other high schools.

"Financially we are in pretty good shape since we don't rely on gate money as much as other schools," Takahashi said. "We have a very strong booster program that is very helpful. We're going to have to revisit our budgets based on what changes are made to the seasons so that we will have a good plan in place. Our coaches know that we will need to streamline things because some families may not have the resources to pay for things such as equipment and other items this year so we want to be sensitive to that too. We never want to put families in a position where they're having to make sacrifices at home or feeling guilty about not being able to do so."

It has already been established that there will be no state level playoffs this year. As to whether there will be North Coast Sectional tournaments, that is still to be determined. It's simply a matter of keeping the eye on the prize as everyone waits to hear the state's new directives.

"Nobody wants to cancel any sports, which is the message that we have been given by North Coast and CIF," Meadows said. "It's been a struggle for everyone but we're trying to stay positive and I keep telling everyone that there is a light at the end of the tunnel. We are doing our best to try and figure out ways to give our student-athletes something that will resemble a season."

Takahashi has taken the same approach: "The emphasis really is going to be on getting kids participating so that even if the seasons get shortened any more, our goal will still be to give our kids the opportunity to play."

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