

OHSAA Questions and Answers on Return to Play (July 31, 2020)

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

A. The OHSAA recently surveyed its member schools and more than 40 percent of the membership wanted the seasons to move forward as originally planned. So, despite some school districts deciding to 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 will compete in the sports that the Governor permits schools to compete in this fall until the Governor, Ohio Department of Health or the OHSAA Board of Directors say otherwise. 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.

The OHSAA's plan to move forward with the scheduled start of fall sports will coincide with what the Ohio Department of Health and the Ohio Governor's Office has determined can be done safely. There are requirements and recommendations contained in the OHSAA's return to play documents that are consistent with the science that has led to these decisions. 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. Who was involved in the decision to move forward beginning August 1?

A. The OHSAA Executive Director's Office has been working closely with the Governor's Office and Ohio Department of Health to help make this decision. 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. Also, we took a survey on July 27 through July 29 of our member schools administrators that included superintendents, principals and athletic administrators. As we mentioned, 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 can still begin practice that day, we plan to move forward with holding to that target date. Our return to play document was reviewed by staff, the OHSAA's Joint Advisory Committee on Sports Medicine, the OHSAA Board of Directors, the Governor's Office and the Ohio Department of Health.

Q. What about the health and safety concerns for our student-athletes?

A. It is evident that much remains unknown about COVID-19, including how the virus affects children. 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, we believe that it is a family decision to determine if participation is an

acceptable risk. This requires everyone to do their part. We will continue to monitor the data, work with the Governor's Office and Department of Health and ensure that we are providing competition in the safest manner.

Q. What about those school districts or schools that have decided to either postpone the start of their sports seasons or not offer sports in the fall based on the recommendations of their local or county health departments? If you are an Association promoting the values of education-based athletics, aren't you concerned that you are leaving a lot of Ohio's students behind?

A. While some school districts have delayed sports to start the school year, our hope is that they resume sports sometime in the fall and start playing during the season. In addition, the majority of our 815 high schools still can participate, so we owe it to those schools to move forward. It certainly is a tough decision to move forward. Local schools still have the discretion to make their own decisions based on what is best for their students and their communities, but we do not want to stop providing education-based athletics opportunities for those students who are still able to participate.

Q. Why would the OHSAA not delay the start of the season to see if the number of COVID-19 cases subside?

A. That was an option which was thoroughly discussed. The fact of the matter is that a majority of our student-athletes have either been competing on non-school teams or training and conditioning for the past several months. So they have already been participating in sports, and the goal of participating with their teammates at their schools has been on their minds for a long time. So with the current good weather, most of our events being outside, the potential for inclement weather and/or other illnesses developing as we get later into the fall combined with the fact that our students are more than ready to wear their school jerseys while participating with their friends, we believe there is significance in providing structure right now in a time when so much is uncertain.

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

A. If the Ohio High School Athletic Association 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. 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. Why are there now requirements in place for schools to follow if they want their teams' seasons to continue?

A. The Governor's Office has requested that the OHSAA develop requirements for schools to follow during contests. In order for our student-athletes to learn the lifelong lessons and receive the social, emotional and physical benefits that the privilege of participating in interscholastic athletics programs provide, our schools need to be accountable and follow the requirements. By not following the requirements, we are putting our student-athletes at risk of not only contracting and/or spreading COVID-19 but also at risk of losing the season for themselves, their families, their teammates, their schools and their communities.

The requirements are many of the same ones that have been put in place by the Governor's Office for some time. We have simply elevated some of the recommendations that schools were provided in the *OHSAA Return to Play Recommendations* document to requirements. These requirements are protocols that many of our schools already put into place while their students were on-campus during the summer for conditioning.

Q. Why are there consequences in place for schools who violate the requirements?

A. The OHSAA already has consequences – or penalties – in place when schools are not in compliance with various regulations. In this case, and simply put, the Governor's Office believes schools should be accountable for non-compliance of the requirements put in place in order for our interscholastic activities to occur. COVID-19 cases will increase if we are unwilling to follow the guidelines that have been recommended and/or required to slow contracting and spreading the virus. So again, if we believe interscholastic athletics provide the best and most valuable form of competition for our student-athletes, then there must be consequences for not following the mandates.

Q. What's in store down the road? Is the OHSAA prepared to make modifications or changes if we have to delay or 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 will likely not be a traditional sports year, either. 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 delays or 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.