



XAVIER MASCAREÑAS [xmascarenas@sacbee.com](mailto:xmascarenas@sacbee.com)

Christian Brothers High School football head coach John Wiley, left, motivates his players to sprint during planned socially-distanced summer conditioning drills, minus a football, June 18 on the Sacramento school's new turf.

# Regional coaches vent on stalled football season

BY JOE DAVIDSON

jdavidson@sacbee.com

Imagine having a football workout without the benefit of a ball.

This scenario is playing out for high school football teams across the state. For some, the ball is there, but in spirit only, to be admired and envied, or to be used in a reduced role. That's like bowling without a ball. Just stare at those pins, hands on hips, tapping your cool bowling shoes, and hope those pins topple.

If not for COVID-19, California coaches would this weekend be preparing for the final week of the regular season. Other states are already in the postseason. This state is still in a wait-and-hope scenario, an agonizing pause pattern in an effort to prepare or hold off the coronavirus pandemic.

The California Interscholastic Federation pushed the sports calendar to January to buy time. Schools within Sacramento County remain closed until January while those in neighboring Placer and El Dorado



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Christian Brothers High School football players, under the direction of head coach John Wiley, jump across the width of their new turf field while doing mixed, socially-distanced summer conditioning drills June 18 in Sacramento.

counties have opened with hybrid models.

For now, coaches are mired in routine that doesn't seem routine or normal at all. They meet with their student-athletes online through Zoom meetings, then they conduct modified football workouts with pods and hand sanitizer and the urging of wearing masks when drills conclude.

It's a team sport like no other, only the mandate is "Steer clear of each other." Being safe and wise is understandable, but it doesn't make it any less frustrating, especially knowing that some youth football, basketball and baseball events are playing out in the region, or that some are leaving the state to do so.

"It's like Groundhog Day, every single day," said Inder-

kum coach Casey Taylor, speaking for scores of coaches. "Players tell me they're excited to get out of the house, to get away from a computer screen to be with teammates, to work out, to feel normal. Kids want to live their lives. They need to live their lives."

Taylor added, "But we still can't have a football. I mean, we have one, but our quarterbacks are throwing the ball into a soccer net, then cleaning it off, and they can only use their own ball. It's ridiculous. We don't have a lot of answers."

Taylor reminded that he understands that the question is still rooted in safety.

"No one wants anyone to get sick or die from this virus, and it's terrible what's happened," he said. "I don't want to downplay that at all. But I have a better chance of dying in a car accident on my way to practice than from dying from this virus. Coaches want their kids to have a good experience, and it's our job to do what's best for them."

## CIF UPDATE AND CONCERNS OF TESTING COSTS

CIF Executive Director Ron Nocetti said he feels for players, coaches, parents and fans.

He is all of those himself, at one time or another. He has coached, has had kids play sports and he is a fan. Nocetti is urging patience and understanding.

"We have been and continue to meet with the California Department of Public Health about high school sports returning," Nocetti said. "We are hopeful that the numbers will trend in the right direction, extremely hopeful."

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## FOOTBALL

When a season does start, how might schools test for the virus? Who would pay for it? These are topics still being discussed at the CIF and local high school levels. No one has concrete answers.

Something to consider: Numbers. In divisions I, II and III at the collegiate sports level, there are about 1,100 schools and some 450,000 total student-athletes. In California alone, there are 800,000 student-athletes at all levels over 1,605 schools, and there are some 65,000 coaches and 60,000 officials.

Can they all be tested?

Roble coach Chris Horner conducts workouts without equipment.

He has 14 players per pod with no overlap of players or coaches into other pods. This is the norm for most everyone.

"I feel we've done a pretty good job thinking outside the box with how to install an offense and defense right now with the restrictions and guidelines that we need to follow," Horner said. "As a coach, I'm concerned about the weight lifting we are unable to do."

He added, "We just need to get back to some sense of normalcy. Kids are making the best of the situation and hope that there will be an end to it. Just make it to January when school's back in session. Just two more months! Educationally, emotionally, mentally and physically, the kids are suffering right now."



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Christian Brothers High School football players break for hydration and recovery as seen past a check-in table set up with hand sanitizer, gloves, masks and more during their planned socially-distanced summer conditioning drills June 18 at the Sacramento school.

## 'MENTAL HEALTH IS AT AN ALL-TIME LOW'

In Auburn, Placer coach Joey Montoya is trying to run drills in pods, to maintain morale, to answer questions on what this all means and what looms.

He knows how important sports are to kids, having grown the son and grandson of coaches at this school. Montoya burns to compete but he especially worries about the toll on his players. Will there even be a season, coach?

"I've been back and forth about football happening at all in January," Montoya said. "One week, I think it's 50-50 at best, and then other weeks, I'm cautiously optimistic. I truly hope and beg that we are able to have a season. I know there will be roadblocks and hurdles but these kids need this.

"Their mental health is at an all-time low. Grades are lower district wide than they ever have been in the history of the district. I believe that we can safely have a season and keep kids safe. I am a person who leans way on the side of being cautious, too. I wear a mask in my house! Honestly, I think we can do this. We just need a chance. Kids truly need sports. They are desperate for something positive as this has been a devastating time of their lives."

In Orangevale, Casa

## COACHES WONDER ABOUT MIXED MESSAGES

At Folsom, Bulldogs coach Paul Doherty expanded his big-picture thinking on the topic.

"I have strong opinions and feelings on school closures in general," he said. "So much attention recently has been brought to social injustice in our society, systematic racism, etc. Much of that attention has been brought on athlete platforms and through sports. The young population — 17 and under — that suffer the most with this current COVID reality are the very ones our local leaders and politicians are advocating for on the opposite fronts of social justice and equality."

Doherty added, "Having taught on all ends of the spectrum in Oak Park at Sacramento High, at Whitney in Rocklin and now Folsom, I see the struggles every student-athlete is facing. It's hard for everyone, adults included. I have two young children at home struggling without friends, social interaction, recess, outlets, all of that. The value high school football can have

for young adolescents during their formative years far outweighs the risks we are taking extreme measures to limit, mitigate and oftentimes eliminate with basic social distancing and hygiene protocols for COVID-19."

As for workouts, Doherty said the Bulldogs are in pods but with no ball.

"My fear," he said, "is a rushed phase of actual preparation will lead to a rise in injuries, and coincidentally injuries to student athletes with less means to properly prepare with traditional strength and conditioning processes."

## COACHES FEAR STUDENTS WHO 'CHECK OUT'

In El Dorado Hills, Eric Cavaliere coaches the defending Sac-Joaquin Section Division I champion Oak Ridge Trojans.

They led The Bee's preseason Top 50 team rankings. His campus has a hybrid model of in-person learning. Players are in the school's massive weight room four days a week, with masks, with distancing. Oak Ridge is able to use a football and a blocking sled, while distancing.

"Of course, there is reason to have doubts about our upcoming season," Cavaliere said. "I never would have guessed we'd still be here seven months ago when this all started. Football is being played in other states safely and with success. There is no reason we can't have the same here. My doubts lie with the people making these decisions, and their reasons for doing so."

Like many of his coaching peers, Cavaliere grew up playing sports. It meant something to him in the 1970s and '80s and it means a ton to him as a coach leading young men.

"The impact of playing sports goes beyond the playing fields," Cavaliere said. "These kids need these experiences to develop as young people, to help shape their futures. Without sports, who knows where we would all be right now. I am also fearful that without sports many students will 'check out' of school entirely, leading to academic failure and behavior problems on campus."

"Kids know they are missing once-in-a-lifetime opportunities, and I am sure some will react in a very negative manner. A school without sports will create an unfamiliar culture on a campus that may not be entirely positive. Hopefully, the decision makers of the world know

## 'HOW ARE WE GOING TO BE PLAYING FOOTBALL?'

In the southern part of Sacramento County, at Sheldon High, Chris Nixon supervises pods of 10 players with one coach, everyone six feet apart, no equipment, no ball until next week, a weight room with 14 players and two coaches and "lots of disinfecting."

"The realist in me wonders how we are going to be playing football in a month and a half from now, but as a coach, I'm hopeful knowing anything can happen," Nixon said. "It seems odd to me that CIF scheduled the full-contact sport as the first sport up when the other states making it a 'spring sport' chose February and March to start."

Nixon worries about players and opportunities.

"I really feel for the seniors," he said. "Football isn't like the other sports. The experience is strictly school-based. You can't just hop on a travel ball team. For most seniors, it's the last time they'll play the sport. For those seniors aspiring to play college ball, they'll be part of a log jam because college players get an extra year of eligibility. Not so for high school kids."

"There are far bigger things going on in the world, but I do feel for the seniors and any kid who

## 'TIRED OF THE VIRUS. TIRED OF ZOOM ...'

In Elk Grove, Pleasant Grove coach Matt Costa stands as a jovial sort by nature with a pained expression.

"I'm doing my best job daily to put on a happy face in Zoom classes and then in live workouts," he said. "As a teacher and a coach, I haven't been this discouraged across the board in my life, and I know I am not alone."

Costa said he is irked by what has happened and how it got to this point.

"The narrative changes daily from the people at the state government level," he said. "The fact that people have little to no empathy anymore and are willing to say the first thing that comes into their brain like some drunken bragger is getting old. I'm tired of the political discourse. Tired of the virus. Tired of teaching on Zoom. Tired of not being allowed to use a ball. Tired of people thinking that mental health is somehow not as important as physical health."

"Frankly, I am tired. If we play a game, it will be a victory. I am going to prepare like we are going to play. If we don't, it's the lack of empathy across all 50 states that led to this. If we don't play, all of us are at fault."

Joe Davidson:  
916-321-1280,  
@SacBee\_Lead