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CIF to decide in July on California's fall high school sports schedule

BY JOE DAVIDSON
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Normally, this is the time to unwind and vacation for those who work in education.

But little seems right or balanced for so many schools in California and those connected to them, from Chula Vista in the south right on through the Sacramento Valley and up to the Oregon border.

Summer instead means continuous brainstorming on how to reopen schools and restart activities and athletics amid the coronavirus pandemic.

"Since the initial school shut down in March, this has been all consuming, no question, and

You can imagine what school superintendents, principals, coaches, teachers and so many are going through as they're trying to put together a plan to return to education, a return to campus — and by the way, getting all these questions about athletics," said Ron Nocetti, the executive director for the California Interscholastic Federation.

The CIF is the governing body for high school sports in the state. The CIF and commissions from its 10 sections dotted across the state had discussions throughout the week on sports guidelines and announced on Friday that as a

SEE HIGH SCHOOLS, 3C



PHOTO BY JEFF SANCHEZ FOR THE OREGON JOURNAL

Asust and Christian Brothers at the Holy Bowl in 2019. Both private school teams will restart practice this week, but Sacramento public school squads are still sidelined, as are most across the state. The California Interscholastic Federation and its 10 sections will make an announcement July 20 on plans to allow high schools a "reasonable time frame" to prepare for a fall season, if there is a normal fall season.

OVER

FROM PAGE 9C

HIGH SCHOOLS

governing body it is "prepared to offer alternative calendars if it is determined by July 20 that fall sports may not start as scheduled due to ongoing public health and safety concerns."

Why that date? The CIF wrote in its release that July 20 offers a "reasonable time frame" for high schools in the state to prepare for a fall season, if there is a normal fall season.

If there is a significant spike in COVID-19 numbers in the state, or even just in certain areas, the domino effect could prompt county and state health officials to pump the breaks or slam on them for a return to campus. One line of thinking is if students are allowed on campus, then high school sports should be as well.

And this line of thinking: A massive increase in cases may keep schools closed.

The CIF guidelines for now does not include a return-to-competition phase. But by July 20, Nocetti and the 10 section commissioners believe that they will have a much more clear picture if sports schedules can start on time. If they cannot, "then what are the other alternatives that we can look into?" Nocetti said, suggesting that seasons could be pushed back later into the fall or perhaps with a January start date.

He added, "We just don't know. It's fluid."

June or July, but those are dates when football drills start.

The first football program in the state to start summer drills was Wheatland High School in late May. East Nicolaus, Sutter and Yuba City high have all started drills. Same with Hillmar. Modesto City schools have green-lighted schools to start football drills on Monday.

In Sacramento, the only schools that will start Monday with a team meeting to go over safety guidelines or protocols or to start drills are private schools, none of which have a particular school district and can be allowed if deemed safe by principals and the county health department. Bradshaw Christian, Capital Christian, Christian Brothers and Jesuit coaches will have drills and constant reminders of social distancing in drills — no packs of 50 at once — and outside campus.

"For the kids, it's not just football but it's the social things of being a teenager that's important," said Christian Brothers coach John Wiley. "We're trying to give them an outlet, but these drills aren't mandatory. Some parents may not feel safe to have their kids do this. We'll remind our kids that they can't hang out when done with conditioning, to go home, wash their clothes and take a shower."

"We want to make sure we're following all the protocols and we're doing everything we can to help lower that curve, and, hopefully, we get to play this fall."

HOLDING ONTO SPORTS

One thing that is clear is that no one in education is pushing to eliminate sports. That goes counter to the beliefs of coaches, teachers, administrators and superintendents of how engagement is part of the high school experience, critical for learning, development and enjoyment.

An online petition through Facebook has generated more than 14,000 signatures and nearly 10,000 followers to "Bring Back High School Athletics to Sacramento Area and Northern California Schools." Fans, parents, alumni and students have signed that petition. Scores of others have emailed principals, superintendents, the 10 section offices, the Sacramento-based CIF office and the county health department pleading for answers or demanding a restart to seasons.

Local superintendents have also met with area coaches to discuss.

"We receive all sorts of calls and emails, and we tell them that everyone involved in high school sports is doing everything they can to make this happen for student-athletes," Nocetti said. "At the same time, our schools and school districts have to know when they can return before we can focus on narrowing down what our sports calendars are. There's so much more information everyone needs, and that's why we're waiting until July 20. We could also announce something earlier. We want to be prepared for any scenario."

CONDITIONING IN PRIVATE SCHOOLS

No sports are played on the high school calendar in

WHO MAKES THE CALL ON RESTARTING?

One misconception is that the CIF and any of its 10 sections make the call on when schools can re-open or when sports conditioning drills can start.

Those decisions are made by the school districts, something Southern Section Commissioner Rob Wigod reminded parents, coaches and athletes in a statement: "I am sure they will follow the recommendations of state and local health authorities in arriving at the decisions that are in the best interests of their students and school communities."

The Southern Section is the largest in the state with nearly 600 schools. It includes the most populated district in the state in Los Angeles Unified with 735,000 students of all grades.

The second-largest section is the Sac-Joaquin Section that stretches from the outskirts of Merced and goes as far east as Placerville, as far north as Grass Valley and Yuba City and as far west as Fairfield.

Elk Grove Unified School District, the largest district in Northern California with 64,000 students, decided Tuesday its first day of school would be in August, pushing back its typical mid-July starting day. The decision largely affects students who attend schools with year-round schedules, where students attend classes for three months and take one month off.

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JUNE 21, 2020

HIGH SCHOOLS

Summer conditioning starts, but will there be a season?

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John Wiley had not greeted his football players outside texting, emails or Zoom online video sessions since early March — before the coronavirus pandemic shuttered schools and a lot of the state.

So imagine the glee of the Christian Brothers High School coach this week when he ran into scores of student-athletes on campus. He greeted each with a smile, though hidden by a cloth face guard, and a fist bump. The hugs in abundance will come soon enough, Wiley figures, when social distancing isn't such an ingrained part of our thinking.

Christian Brothers is following the same guidelines of summer sports conditioning as other schools across the state. Small groups of athletes in football, volleyball and cross country are working with coaches in drills, unlike seasons past where large groups packed in for such experiences.

Social distancing drills are the first signs of the effort to get students reengaged in extracurricular activities while mindful that COVID-19 remains a threat to shutter it all down again should the numbers spike up alarmingly.

For now, the sense for area coaches is universal: it's a start.

"It'd been so long since I've seen these guys," Wiley said, "that it was, 'Oooh, he got tall-



Christian Brothers High School football players, from right, Avarie Lee, Zeke Jackson, Jared Wiley and Marcus Price take a break.

er," or, 'Oooh, he got bigger.' It's just great to see everyone. To see their smiles makes it all worth it."

Wiley added, "Patience is the key word that we all must understand as we try to get back into all of this. More than sports, getting together like this is for the experience, to be a teenager, to be with friends, and to do so while being smart and safe."

THE CHALLENGES OF DISTANCING

The challenge is profound — social distancing in a sport such as football, where that is not entirely possible. But distancing is happening now in summer drills where footballs, helmets and pads remain stored away

until official practices start later in the summer. Summer drills are designed to get athletes in shape, to be together — running, sprints, bear crawls and discussion.

No area schools are allowing their athletes to dress in locker rooms. There are no in-class skull sessions. All drills and meetings are outdoors. Students and coaches are encouraged to shower at home immediately after practice, to wash hands regularly, to wear masks. The other norm: check-in stations outside the playing fields that include jugs of hand sanitizer, masks, sign-in paperwork and a temperature check.

At Christian Brothers on Thursday, there were more grins than frowns under the

unrelenting late-afternoon sun on a hot surface. Players were glad to pour sweat on the school's sparkling new turf within a spectacular home stadium.

"It's great to be out here with the guys," said Nate Smith, a CB linebacker and a 4.6 student who says his dream school is "MIT to study aerospace."

Smith added, "We're eager to train, to do it the right way. We can do our part by being smart. Before this week, a lot of us were sad and lonely without a chance to be together. We're excited to have a season."

SEASON OF HOPE

But will there be a season? There will be if the COVID-19 concerns ease, meaning a decline in positive-test numbers. There won't any seasons in any city or towns if there are a concerning number of positive tests from football rosters or even on a campus. Coronavirus is a highly contagious disease.

Said Pleasant Grove football coach Matt Costa, "If we get a football season, it won't matter who wins or loses, it'll be a victory to even have a season. We really don't know if we'll actually be able to play games. For now, coaches just want to get their kids in shape, to get together. I know I miss our guys, I just want to be around my dudes. Not being around kids is mentally taxing for a lot of us."

SEE CONDITIONING, 21

OVER



Christian Brothers High School head football coach John Wiley, left, motivates his players to sprint during socially distanced summer conditioning drills Thursday on the school's new turf.

DAVID MASCHERONE @maschero

FROM PAGE 1C

CONDITIONING

Said CB athletic director Dale Milton, "We all agree that to thrive, kids have to be active, and not just sports but music, theater, dance, rallies."

CONTROL THE CONTROLLABLES

The 50th Holy Bowl between rivals Christian Brothers and Jesuit is set for September at Hughes Stadium, where a packed stadium of some 20,000 would be expected if this were any normal season. If you think of the Holy Bowl over the decades, the prevailing thoughts are of the spirited crowds, people young and old comparing lettermen's jackets and previous scores.

But no one is thinking that far ahead. The focus is on today and tomorrow.

"Control the controllables," is how Jesuit coach Marlon Blanton put it while watching his Raiders in workouts.

"That's one of the things sports teaches you — control what you can control. Everyone wants to belong to something. It's impor-

tant to all of them."

As Milton of CB puts it, "We have to do baby steps. Start with crawling, then walking then running. We have to all be smart and safe about this."

SPORTSMANSHIP AT ITS BEST

Natomas Unified School District Superintendent Chris Evans has been a driving force in uniting area coaches and administrators in this cause, and he has been outspoken about the value of high school sports.

Evans worked the phones, emails and Zoom meetings to share ideas, hopes and concerns.

"It was super collaborative," Evans said. "We all worked with a lot of great folks, working together. We old coaches, we have those competitive juices still, and this was a perfect example of sportsmanship and being on the same page. It was sportsmanship at its best."

By the end of this month, all area school districts expect to have



Christian Brothers football players do a jumping drill across the width of field.

some sort of plan in place for summer conditioning, a slow return to campuses in an era when everyone is used to fast-forward action. Elk Grove Unified programs on Monday will have a session with coaches in regards to protocols. El Dorado County schools on Monday have a Zoom meeting with coaches to go over plans with the idea of starting drills Tuesday.

The California Interscholastic Federation, the governing body for prep sports, will announce by July 20 what its fall sports calendar will look like. The CIF does not influence state schools on

when and how to do summer drills.

Summer drills are in place with the idea of limitations.

"We as coaches and administrators have to make sure that we don't let the student-athletes do too much too soon," Jesuit athletic director Hank Weinberger said. "We have to be smart about all of this. The second you put a football into the action, it speeds up. We're not there yet."

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OVER



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Christian Brothers football players break for hydration and recovery – as seen past a check-in table set up with hand sanitizer, gloves and masks.