

# School District looking at non-sanctioned events after serious injury

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A Leesburg defender, right, and a Mount Dora receiver fight for the ball at a 7-on-7 passing league tournament hosted by the Fellowship of Christian Athletes in 2018. [PAUL RYAN / CORRESPONDENT]

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Jonah Zerblas

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A Leesburg defender, right, and a Mount Dora receiver fight for the ball at a 7-on-7 passing league tournament hosted by the Fellowship of Christian Athletes in 2018. [PAUL RYAN / CORRESPONDENT]

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Jonah Zerblas

**By**

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No changes have been proposed to Lake County Schools policies that govern unsanctioned activities on area campuses despite a serious injury suffered during a football game not sponsored by or affiliated with the district's athletic program.

However, Communications Officer Sherri Owens said last week that the district's Risk Management team is reviewing current policy to determine if any changes need to be made.

The review came after a local student-athlete suffered a skull fracture which required surgery during a 7-on-7 football game at Mount Dora High School. The game was considered an unsanctioned event, even though both teams were coached by district employees, who are also head coaches at their schools, because the sport is not regulated by the Florida High School Athletic Association.

"Any outside group can rent Lake County facilities if they are available," Owens said in an email. "Outside groups are required to complete a facility use agreement with the district. They are also required to provide proof of insurance and pay facility rental fees.

"School-affiliated or district-affiliated teams must coordinate with an assistant principal at the school(s) to schedule use of the facilities."

Lake Minneola freshman defensive back Jonah Zerblas reportedly tripped during a scrimmage game on March 28 against Mount Dora and hit his head on an opposing player's knee. According to reports, the skull fracture caused "life-threatening swelling" and a blood clot on his brain.

When he suffered the injury, Zerblas was not wearing protective headgear, according to Lake Minneola football coach Walter Banks. Even though the use of headgear is not mandatory at these minimal-contact events, it was available at the field.

Lake County Schools Athletic Director Don Hogan said the district is still investigating the circumstances around the injury. The district does not sponsor or sanction 7-on-7 football leagues. As a result, Hogan said it does not have a written policy covering the use of protective headgear.

Some states, such as Texas, require the use of headgear in all 7-on-7 football leagues.

Zerblas' injury occurred during one of numerous non-sanctioned activities that are held each year on district property. Hogan said the district receives inquiries from countless organizations every year, all of which must complete the necessary paperwork and fulfill all requirements mandated by established policy, including providing proof of insurance.

"We approve requests from outside organizations, including track and field, Pop Warner (football), AAU basketball, Special Olympics, baton twirlers, scouting groups, theater groups and churches, to name a few," said Hogan.

Additionally, he said college student-athletes who live in the area and wish to use district facilities when they return home from college are required to go through the same approval process as teams and organizations not affiliated with the district.

Likewise, student-athletes participating in FHSAA-sanctioned sports are required to show proof of insurance, as are organizers of non-sanctioned events.

"If they do not already have insurance," said Hogan, "parents can purchase student accident insurance through School Insurance of Florida. Plus, all FHSAA participating districts are required to carry a catastrophic student accident policy."

Owens said no district sporting events have been cancelled as a result of Zerblas' injury and no future 7-on-7 games are scheduled to be

played on district property.

However, the annual Corey Rolle Lake-Sumter Senior All-Star basketball game, originally scheduled for Thursday at Mount Dora, was put on hold late last week. On Tuesday, it was announced the game would be played on April 11 at Wildwood.

Often referred to as a "passing leagues," 7-on-7 football consists of seven players on the offensive and defensive sides of the line of scrimmage. Teams are usually made up of a quarterback, running back and receivers on the offensive side of the ball, and linebackers and defensive backs on defense.

Most fields are 40 yards in length and games last about 20 minutes.

Rules are designed for the game to be largely non-contact and tackling is forbidden. Plays end when ball carriers are touched in a pre-determined manner, such as two hands below the waist.

Passing leagues have grown in popularity in recent years, with many coaches using them as part of an offseason conditioning program.

A GoFundMe page was established by Adrian Bustamante, a family friend of the Zerblas', to raise money to help with the costs of Jonah's recovery. By Thursday afternoon, more than \$7,500 had been raised toward a goal of \$10,000.

To donate, go to Jonah's GoFundMe page: <https://bit.ly/2UogjuW>

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