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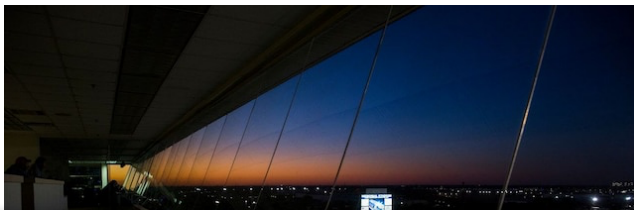
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HIGH SCHOOL SPORTS > FOOTBALL

High school sports have already been played for over a month in one state. Here's what Texas can learn from it

The first high school-sponsored game in the country since the spring happened on June 15.



Mansfield Timberview football players can be seen from the press box as they warm up before a UIL Class 5A Division I first-round playoff football game between Mansfield Timberview and Frisco Independence on Thursday, November 14, 2019 at Frisco ISD Memorial Stadium in Frisco. (Ashley Landis / Staff Photographer)

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By [Joseph Hoyt](#)
4:53 PM on Jul 31, 2020 CDT

The UIL’s fall athletic schedule for Class 1A-4A schools begins Monday.

For months, that wasn’t a guarantee, especially as other states across the country elected to punt on a normal start date and revisit the idea of playing high school sports later in the year. New Mexico, for example, isn’t planning to play high school football until next spring.

For Texas high school sports teams, it’s going to be “surreal,” as some coaches have said, playing in a new normal thanks to the spread of the coronavirus. Some have no idea what it’s actually going to look like, but one state has already done it for over a month.

Before the NBA’s bubble, before MLS’ round-robin/knockout tournament and before MLB started back, high school softball and

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baseball in Iowa began. The first varsity game since COVID-19 emerged happened on June 15 at Principal Park in Des Moines, [according to *The Des Moines Register*](#) -- a 10-0 win for Colfax-Mingo over Tri-County.

It's the same venue where the state baseball playoffs have been happening for the past week. Getting to this point, and through an entire season, was a success, said Chris Cuellar, the director of communications for the Iowa High School Athletic Association.

“We’re winding up on the same days and in the same place we wanted to,” Cuellar said, “and we’re able to try and crown a champion this week. So I consider it a success.”



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A success that came with some inevitable challenges in a state where nearly 45,000 people have tested positive for COVID-19 and 867 people have died with it.

There were 338 varsity baseball teams in Iowa when the season started. According to IHSAA data, 21 teams were impacted by COVID-19, meaning they had to suspend games or quarantine for at least 10 days during the season. Because of that, 12 teams ended their seasons early, including West Des Moines Dowling Catholic, which was the top-ranked team in the state, [according to *The Register*](#).

Cuellar said none of the positive cases associated with teams were tied to actual game play. He said those happened outside of the games, when social distance guidelines and other mitigation recommendations weren't followed as well as they could've been.

A similar story happened in softball, which is governed by the Iowa High School Girls Athletic Union.

According to WHO-TV in Des Moines, 26 of the 335 varsity teams in the state were impacted by COVID-19, leading to 11 teams ending their seasons early.

Being the first school-sponsored organization to start and complete a high school athletics season meant there were lessons learned. One major lesson: a flexible schedule. One team in the state baseball playoffs played only eight previous games due to a COVID-19 interruptions.

The IHSAA used that lesson to help craft its fall athletics schedule. Every team in the state will be eligible to make the postseason. They'll also have seven weeks to play between five-to-seven games. Missed games due to coronavirus-related reasons won't be penalized, but instead classified as "no contests," per the organization's announcement.

"We knew we had to develop a

system that could work with schools,” said Cuellar, adding that “flexibility” was the buzzword in the organization’s discussions. “If they needed to miss games, or they lost kids for a certain reasons, than that all had to factor into the playoff qualification system, as well.

“We felt like we didn’t want to punish anyone for having to miss games ... so we needed to come up with something that could work for everybody, no matter what their scheduling limitations were like.”

The UIL, in its announcement of a modified fall athletics schedule, also preached the importance of flexibility.

“While understanding situations change and there will likely be interruptions that will require flexibility and patience, we are hopeful this plan allows students to participate in the education-based activities they love in a way that prioritizes safety and mitigates risk of COVID-19 spread,” UIL Executive Director Dr. Charles Breithaupt said

in a statement.

The onus on flexibility will largely fall on District Executive Committees. Teams will be allowed to play 10 games in 11 weeks. After the district certification deadline, four teams -- like usual -- will make the postseason, which will run through January for 5A and 6A schools.

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott stated Friday that school districts, not local health officials, have the authority to decide when to start school and in-person instruction. That could create a different amount of games for different teams, depending on when they start practice. That could be the case for teams in the same district, as well.

As Iowa showed, high school athletes aren't immune to the effects of the pandemic, which means interruptions are inevitable — especially in a sport like football where social distancing isn't possible on the field. Considering that

inevitability was a major lesson learned.



FOOTBALL

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BY GREG RIDDLE
AND JOSEPH HOYT

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