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With high school football activities suspended, Dallas-area players are turning to third-party groups to stay active

Athletes have sought outside help such as private trainers and participating in 7-on-7 tournaments

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Players from the Team Grind Black from Dallas huddle with coach Derrick Williams after beating the Iconic team in the Pylon 7-on-7 tournament at the A+D1 field on Aug. 1, 2020 in Carrollton. Grind won against Iconic, 35-28. (Juan Figueroa /

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By [Callie Caplan](#)
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In the past week, DeSoto football players have been in constant contact.

That’s normal this time of year, just before the Texas high school season’s traditional early August start.

But this week, as the coronavirus pandemic continues to surge throughout the country, their conversations centered around organizing a group to compete Saturday in a local 7-on-7 tournament, the closest they’ll get to full-team competition until at least late September.

“We just want to have some fun,” DeSoto receiver Jaedon Wilson said, “and go out and play.”

The University Interscholastic League last week announced **it will**

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delay the fall sports season for Class 6A and 5A teams by five weeks -- with formal practice to start Sept. 7, rather than Monday.

As high school coaches have navigated conflicts with local government orders, school district decisions and scheduling logistics, a conundrum has surfaced.

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Specifically for football teams, which face fewer club programs and third-party overlap than other sports, players have sought out-of-school alternatives to stay active and coaches have been discouraged about limited control and access.

High school-based athletics in Texas might be on pause in some

classifications, but athletes won't stop playing.

"If we can just let our kids come back and work out with us during the school week, at least we know what we're giving our kids," DeSoto coach Claude Mathis said. "They don't have to go workout anywhere else because they've already worked out with us and they're safe and we're doing the right things."


What the UIL might've hoped was a simple plan -- allowing Class 6A and 5A teams to hold workouts Aug. 3 and start practice Sept. 7, while teams in Class 4A and below start on-time with full practices Aug. 3 -- has created anything but a cohesive outlook for North Texas schools. (TAPPS and SPC private schools also won't start competitive matches until September.)

Dallas and Tarrant counties earlier this month issued orders postponing in-person instruction, including extracurricular activities, until September.

But Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton in a letter Tuesday said school districts, rather than local health authorities, should decide on campus reopenings. Texas Gov. Greg Abbott on Friday **issued a joint statement with other Republican leaders** to say “the authority to decide when the school year will begin lies with the local school boards.”

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In response to Paxton’s decision, a handful of North Texas school districts -- and sports teams -- **will**

bypass original limitations and
at least begin conditioning
workouts Monday.

After Abbott's statement, many are still uncertain, balancing recommendations from health officials with pressure to keep pace with other schools and teams.

Oftentimes in football, select 7-on-7 teams and private trainers -- typically for offseason competition and skill training and independent of high school programs -- are contentious topics.



The offense team for Buzz Gang waits to play against Team Grind Red during the Pylon 7-on-7 tournament at the A+D1 field on Aug. 1, 2020 in Carrollton. Grind tied against Buzz, 14-14. (Juan Figueroa / Staff Photographer)

Most UIL sports, such as volleyball, basketball, soccer, baseball and softball, have long co-existed with an

offseason club model. Football is unique in that the school season is most vital to college recruiting and high school coaches wield significant influence for individual development and team-oriented focus.

Third-party groups challenge that control.

But local coaches -- wanting to ensure their players are in shape come September but having little or no ability to currently work with them in-person -- have softened their stance.

Mathis has helped families find affordable workout options. But with twin sons, Caimon and Crimson, who are rising sophomores on DeSoto's team, Mathis also understands the bind the pandemic has presented.

Caimon, also a strong basketball player, has stopped playing on the AAU circuit, and the twins have strayed from large group sports because their mom, Lori, is a cancer survivor at higher risk for COVID-19

complications.

According to Exposure Basketball Events, an organizing and advertising service, 22 girls and boys basketball tournaments and showcases were scheduled across Texas from Friday to Sunday this weekend.

When Duncanville's summer workouts were still in session in July, coach Reginald Samples often chastised players for congregating with others outside his sessions, increasing their likelihood of contracting COVID-19 and spreading it to Duncanville's participants.

But now Samples doesn't dissuade players from seeking outside help. He's had several parents of top recruits call recently with updates on the gyms, trainers and select 7-on-7 teams their kids have joined.

"The only thing you can do is warn the kids of what's safe and what's not safe," Samples said, "and then let them make their own choices."

Players have also taken initiative.

Quarterback Garrett Nussmeier was instrumental in organizing a group of Flower Mound Marcus teammates that played -- free of coach involvement -- in a Pylon 7-on-7 tournament in the Dallas area in July.

Pylon, a national 7-on-7 tournament circuit, typically hosts only private teams. But Marcus and DeSoto, with teams composed just of their high school's players, competed against other select groups in Pylon's tournament Saturday in Carrollton.

Several coaches have lauded Pylon's tournaments in the Dallas area this summer.

Baron Flenory, the organization's founder, said Pylon has been audited and approved at three events during the pandemic -- by police officers in the Dallas area and by a health official in Las Vegas.

Pylon requires masks in close contact and distancing among spectators and

has at times asked non-compliant attendees to leave. Flenory said “to our knowledge” no participants have contracted COVID-19 at Pylon events.

The select 7-on-7 tournament circuit usually ends at Memorial Day, but because of the suspension of high school football across the country -- including into 2021 in several states - - Pylon will schedule events through the fall with Las Vegas and New Jersey stops upcoming.

Pylon also changed its age limit so rising seniors can continue to play until their high school seasons start.

That at least 10 of the 16 teams in Pylon’s tournament Saturday were from the Dallas and Houston areas meant about 150 Texas high school football players were competing despite the UIL’s upper-classification delay.

“We wanted to give these kids an opportunity to get that exposure,” Flenory said. “It gets them back active. It gets them doing things and being ready when it is time for them

to go back to school.”

Not every non-high school initiative has maintained similar thoroughness.

Players and attendees **at a mid-June softball tournament in Allen largely ignored health and safety recommendations.**

Dallas County Judge Clay Jenkins in late June called for the suspension of all youth sports as local counts for COVID-19 cases, hospitalizations and deaths increased.

Jay Zeller, athletic director at Robinson ISD just south of Waco, last week criticized a post on Twitter showing youth baseball players crowded in a dugout.

While the UIL allowed summer strength and skill workouts through June and July, Zeller said Robinson followed the organization’s guidelines for screening and sanitization “and then some.”

When Waco-McLennan County

health officials last week ordered campuses to close until September, temporarily suspending athletics, Zeller was disappointed to tell his coaches their sessions were shut down despite following best practices.

He became more frustrated that evening, on his way to pick up food, when he drove past the same fields and saw club teams and spectators following few distancing measures while continuing to play.

“My issue was not that they were there,” Zeller said. “It was [that] they’re on our fields and we’re not able to do it. ... Help me understand. Give me some medical rationale about how our situation is different than clubs’.”