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ALERT TOP STORY

PREP SPORTS

## Summer sports during COVID-19: A closer look

Gunnar Davis

Aug 9, 2020

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**F**rom the outside, most spectators and coaches would consider this summer of baseball and softball seasons a success.

After all, 94 percent of baseball teams went unaffected by COVID-19, and 96 percent finished seasons. All cases were reportedly mild and fans were able to attend all season, according to MaxPreps.

But was it really a success?

Some say it's too early to make that call, as it hasn't been two weeks since the season ended.

### The Bad

Who knows? Maybe fans contracted the virus at the state baseball tournament last week at Principal Park, which saw close to 30,000 fans – the most since 2014. Fans were reportedly cutting zip ties off seats, meant to keep them from sitting too close, so they could sit in larger groups.



Newman Catholic fans in the stands at Principal Park during the Class 1A championship game in Des Moines.

Chris Zoeller, Globe Gazette

Not only that, the state softball tournament in Fort Dodge came under fire from media members and outside spectators alike for fans' disregard of social distancing. While the tournament used four fields instead of its usual two, stands were packed and thousands walked through the diamonds to get a glimpse of the action.

Todd Tharp, assistant director for the Iowa High School Athletic Association, says that while he thinks the season was successful overall, it's almost impossible to impose rules that everyone will follow.

“The big thing we’ve learned, too, and we’ve seen it at the professional level, is there is no such thing as a perfect ideal bubble that can keep people safe,” Tharp said. “That’s just part of the reality is that things are going to occur, just because we’re social creatures.”

According to Mason City softball coach Bob Horner, the state tournament was reflective of what was happening all season long.



The Clarksville fan section cheers after junior Cheyenne Behrends hits a home run against Collins-Maxwell during the Class 1A championship game of the Iowa State Softball Tournament in Fort Dodge.

Chris Zoeller, Globe Gazette

“When we would go to some other places, there was absolutely no social distancing in the stands,” Horner said. “I do notice that our athletic department and our administration here in Mason City, when it came to ball games, both softball and baseball, they did a great job with social distancing in the stands.”

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Mason City softball coach Bob Horner runs practice on earlier in the year.

CHRIS ZOELLER, Globe Gazette

Mason City is a part of the Central Iowa Metro League, a conference that mandated limited ticket usage and marked off bleachers. Both Mohawk baseball and softball had successful seasons avoiding COVID-19.

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But not everyone was so lucky.

The Northwood-Kensett baseball team defeated West Hancock, 12-4, in the first round of Class 1A, District 2 action on July 11. The Vikings were set for a matchup with AGWSR on July 14 for a chance to get to the substate semifinal.

On July 13, a coach had someone in his family waiting for a COVID-19 test. In order to continue the season, the person in the coach's family would have needed to get the test back before the game the next day.

They didn't.

Head coach Jeff Ferstein says he was going off guidelines set by the school district, not necessarily the IHSAA. He was more concerned about the safety of his guys than a baseball game.

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“I guess I was probably a little more cautious than I maybe needed to be, but it was the way I thought I should've handled it,” Ferstein said. “Have I had second thoughts about it? 100 percent. But I think I still would've done the same thing either way.”

Ferstein says he was proud that he took the situation seriously. He did echo Horner's thoughts and mentioned other teams maybe didn't handle things the same way.

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“I will say from my perspective, it did seem like each school took it a little bit differently,” Ferstein said. “We had some schools with more players than us on one bus, when the max was 13 people on a bus. There’s no way you would’ve traveled with both baseball and softball teams on one bus safely following the guidelines.”

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## The Good

On the flip side, Horner, along with a majority of coaches, did think the state did a solid job making sure that teams could play this season. He said there was no fool-proof plan to play summer sports and the state did the best job it could.

“I think the athletic associations gave direction and did a good job even getting us to play at all this year,” Horner said. “It took a lot of time and a lot of energy and planning to have any kind of season at all.”

Iowa was the only state in the nation that played summer sports. Tharp says the season was so successful because administrators and coaches took it seriously.

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“As far as we know, there were no players and coaches that had to go to the hospital or had to be on respirators,” Tharp said. “What we’ve been told is that there has been no transmission from player to player or opposing player from that aspect of things.”

Tharp says he hasn’t heard any negative feedback regarding test results after a large number of fans piled into Principal Park for state baseball.

“A great effort between the I-Cubs and our office of making all the potential steps we could to make it a safe experience for them,” Tharp said.

The IHSAA will use what happened this summer to its advantage in planning for football this fall. States like Minnesota and Illinois are canceling fall seasons, but not Iowa.

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“I don’t know what the odds are, if we can get through 14 weeks without any cancellation of games,” Tharp said. “We probably should go put all our money on black at the casino and call in our numbers. All we’re trying to do is give these kids an opportunity to play sports and do it as safely as it can be done.”

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And that’s what the state did this summer. It’s up to you to form your own opinion about it.

Gunnar Davis covers education and sports. Reach him via email at [Gunnar.Davis@GlobeGazette.com](mailto:Gunnar.Davis@GlobeGazette.com) or by phone **641-421-0598** .

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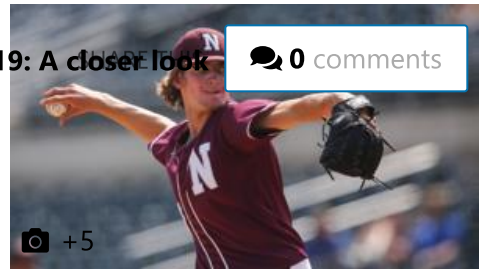
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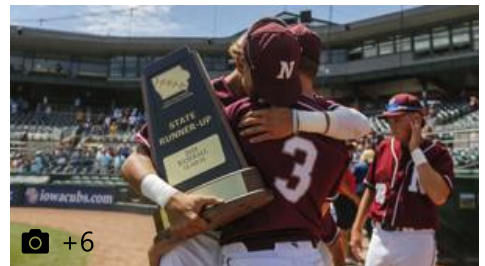
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