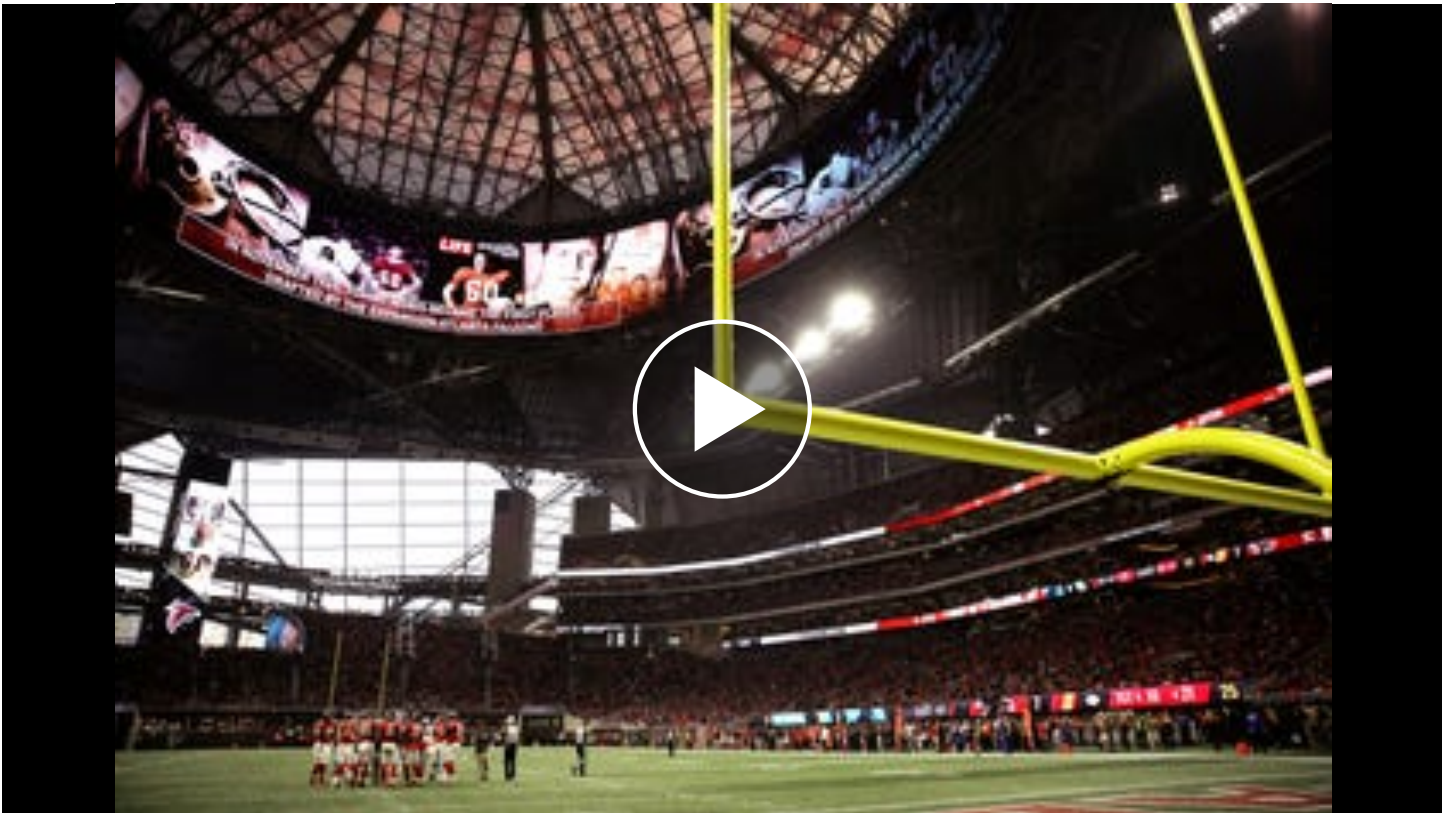


A California teen is moving to Iowa to play high school football this fall. Here's why he won't be alone.



TOMMY BIRCH | DES MOINES REGISTER | 2 hours ago



SportsPulse: While some football teams have said they will host no fans at all this fall others appear to be holding out some hope. We discuss the likely reality that football will be played this fall without any fans in attendance.

USA TODAY

About three weeks before the California Interscholastic Federation moved its high school fall sports to 2021, Landon Nelson and his family started preparing for the worst.



Nelson, a defensive back, needed a strong senior season to add film for his collection to college coaches. So his parents pitched the unusual idea to pack his bags.

If football wouldn't be played in the fall in California, why not move to a place where it would?

As it happened, Nelson's sister, Alexis, was going to be moving to Ames to attend Iowa State University. Nelson and his father, Cory, logged onto a computer and searched "Iowa high school football." West Des Moines Valley was one of the first to pop up.

"So, we looked through," Landon Nelson said. "We went on their website. We looked at their football team. We looked at last year's roster, their record, their coaching staff, their facilities. And after we looked through all those things, we were like, 'Wow, this school is legit.'"

Kaaum



The school looked so promising that when the CIF officially made its fall sports decision, Nelson and his family made the drastic decision to move to Iowa. They hired a moving company, packed their things and started planning for a new life so Landon could get the senior season on the gridiron he needed.

“I’m extremely thankful to have the parents I have,” Landon Nelson said. “Ever since I was younger, they’ve always been like, ‘If you want to do something, we’ll back you up 100%.’ When they offered to do this, I was like, ‘Wow, that’s not easy to do.’ A lot of parents would be like, ‘I know you love it a lot but, that’s just unrealistic.’ But my parents really went all-out and helped me with this moving decision.”

Nelson won’t be the only athlete making this sort of choice, and football likely won’t be the only sport. With a handful of states across the country already opting to go without football this fall because of the ongoing coronavirus pandemic, Iowa could become a refuge for athletes with nowhere to play at home.

That possibility increased further Wednesday, when the Illinois High School Association moved its football season to next spring. Shortly afterward, an athlete from the Chicagoland area tweeted out his plans to play this fall at Dowling Catholic.



“I’ve already seen and heard from a lot of kids in Illinois who are trying to line up other plans,” said Allen Trieu, who covers Midwest football recruiting of 247Sports. “So I expect it to be very prevalent for players in the state to at least look into (moving to Iowa).”

[SAFETY: Iowa High School Athletic Association releases 2020 football guidelines](#)

Defensive back Landon Nelson is moving to Iowa to play football.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ALEXIS NELSON.

In the Quad Cities, an Iowa coach is already hearing from Illinois families

Bettendorf football coach Aaron Wiley has already started to hear from families across the Illinois border.

Bettendorf, which is located in eastern Iowa along the Mississippi River, would be a logical landing spot for Illinois athletes. But the concept still surprised Wiley, who at first didn't know what to tell families and instead directed them to school officials.

"It's a weird situation," Wiley said.

Wiley's biggest question: Could an athlete move to another state, just to play a sport, and in the middle of a pandemic?



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Wiley didn't know. But he's having to find out after the Illinois news this week. With Iowa currently planning to conduct a full fall sports schedule, the inquiries and moves are likely to continue.

It's something for which Iowa officials are preparing. Tom Keating, the executive director of the Iowa High School Athletic Association, said that according to Iowa administrative code, students are ineligible for sports for 90 days unless the family makes a bona fide move to the district. That means establishing residency, which Nelson and his family are doing.

Keating said others may join in.

"I don't know that any of us are shocked ... about what they're going to do with fall sports if those decisions impact kids that maybe were hoping to play and either will not play or will be delayed to another season to play," he said. "They're going to look at options. Since we, right now, are planning to play fall sports on schedule, we become one of those options."

MORE: A state-by-state look at fall football plans

It's what drew Domenic Virelli, an offensive lineman and long snapper from LaGrange Park, Illinois.

Virelli hopes to have a collegiate career, and he started planning for a possible move earlier when he saw summer camps in Illinois get canceled. He understood the possibility of a fall cancellation or move to the spring.



So Virelli, who had lived in Iowa when he was younger and who has an uncle living in Des Moines, prepared for a possible move. His dad, Mike, found Dowling Catholic football coach Tom Wilson on Twitter and sent him a message. The two chatted about the school and the seven-time defending state champion program.

Virelli came to Iowa last weekend to visit the school and meet with Wilson.

If football wasn't played in 2020 in Illinois, he wanted to be ready. As soon as the Illinois announcement dropped, Virelli announced his plans to play for the Maroons.



Domenic Virelli
@domenic_virelli



Unfortunately no FB in Illinois this fall... So you can find me on a football field in Iowa this fall playing for the Maroons of Dowling Catholic. @EDGYTIM @Jlemming18 @PrepRedzoneIL @PrepRedzoneIA @DeepDishFB @CoachBigPete @Bryan_Ault @Clint_Cosgrove @JoshHelmholdt @AllenTrieu

Due to the restrictions in place in Illinois and the inability to attend school full time in

the inability to attend school full-time, in-
person and compete in football this fall I will
be attending school and playing football at
Dowling Catholic HS in West Des Moines,
Iowa this fall. I'm disappointed that I will not
be able to finish what I started with my
Nazareth Academy family, on and off the
field. It's been a dream situation to play for a
legendary coach in Tim Racki and his first
class staff, side-by-side with some of the
top talent in the nation, and reach the state
title game all 3 seasons at Nazareth; it truly
is a dyNAZty. With that said, I look forward
to attending school in person full time at

Virelli texted his Nazareth Academy teammates to let them know.

"I just wanted to let them all know that this is not about you guys as a team; this is kind of what I have to do, because this a huge year for recruiting for me," Virelli said. "And it's best for me."

How important is this move? He said he and his dad plan on getting a Des Moines apartment.

The rest of his family will make the interstate drive for game weekends. It's a sacrifice, but Virelli believes it offers him the best chance to earn an college scholarship.



Virelli's also been playing football since he was 5. The thought of not having a senior season tore him apart.

"It's been my passion forever," he said.





Valley fans cheer during their football game at Valley Stadium on Friday, Sept. 6, 2019 in Des Moines. Valley would go on to defeat Dowling Catholic 29-22.

BRIAN POWERS/THE REGISTER

'We support our kids 100% in all that they want to do'

No one in Nelson's family has been to Iowa.

Because of the pandemic, his sister made the decision to enroll at Iowa State without visiting Ames. Nelson, who grew up in Maui and moved to California when he was younger, didn't know much about the Hawkeye State.

"What I first expected was just a bunch of cornfields just everywhere," Nelson said. "... But then i started looking at the West Des Moines area and I'm like, 'Yeah, there are cornfields in Iowa, but West Des Moines is a lot more like a city than I thought it would be.'"

His father says the move works for the family. The Nelsons liked the idea of the more affordable living Iowa offers, and it allows the family to remain close to Alexis.



Nelson's mother, Janella, who works for an adoption agency, can work remotely.

Nelson said they've already found an apartment near Valley. The move was so sudden that Nelson and his dad started making the drive this week to central Iowa.

"We always support our kids 100% in all that they want to do," Cory Nelson said.

Plans can change, but in Iowa, Keating said the goal is for fall sports to take place. Nelson has already put himself in a good position.

Others will have to follow the same route if they want to play. Virelli said he's already heard from some players in Illinois who could be headed west.

"There's a lot of guys in my boat," Virelli said.

The moves have already brought a mixture of emotions on social media. Wiley worried about the moves becoming recruiting battles among high school coaches. Trieu, who said he could see the same problem playing out, is torn.



"On the surface, it doesn't seem to be a great thing to have kids need to be picking up and moving and families moving and adjusting to new schools, and all that just to really try to earn a football scholarship," Trieu said. "But, if those stories turn out successful — if those kids do play themselves into offers — at the end of the day, they did what they had to do during an obviously odd time to make it happen."

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