

# Mass. has a decision to make about high school sports. Here's what other Northeast states are doing

By [Nathaniel Weitzer](#) Globe Correspondent, Updated August 13, 2020, 6:43 p.m.



Bishop Feehan players celebrate a game-winning goal against Brookline in November of last year. Some states will allow all sports – including soccer – to resume with increased safety measures. Barry Chin/Globe Staff

As the Massachusetts Interscholastic Athletics Association (MIAA) continues to adjust its plan for fall sports based on guidance from state offices, let's take a look at how other states in the Northeast are approaching the challenges of holding interscholastic athletic competitions during the ongoing coronavirus pandemic.

On Wednesday, the Connecticut Interscholastic Athletic Association (CIAC) Board of Control approved a plan to play fall sports with safety precautions in place. But on Thursday, the state's public health commissioner recommended that high school officials move their football and volleyball seasons from the fall to the spring to help contain the spread of the coronavirus. "Full-contact football is unique among the fall interscholastic sports in our state in its level of risk to student-athletes for the person-to-person spread of infectious respiratory droplets," Acting Commissioner Deirdre Gifford wrote in a letter to the CIAC.

Practices will begin in "cohorts" of 15 or fewer students starting on Aug. 27, with football practices beginning on Aug. 17. All sports will transition to full team and full contact practices on Sept. 11.

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Regular-season schedules can begin on Sept. 24 and will be limited to 12 games per sport – six games for football – with a maximum of two games per week for non-football sports. The CIAC said fan attendance will be dictated by individual school districts, but the association is recommending that fans not be allowed.

The CIAC plans to collaborate with league commissioners, athletic directors, and coaches to create a tournament experience for all teams during the last two weeks of the fall season (Nov. 2-15 and Oct. 31-Nov. 8 for cross country).

Individual sport committees developed modifications to increase social distancing and safety measures. The CIAC is recommending the

establishment of a COVID-19 advisory committee for each school, which would meet regularly before the season, reinforcing the association's stance that the "plan is a fluid document and will be updated as more data, health metrics, and sport specific information becomes available."

## **Rhode Island**

The situation in Rhode Island remains in flux with members of the Rhode Island Interscholastic League (RIIL) scheduled to meet with representatives from the Governor's office Thursday. According to RIIL executive director Mike Lundy, the season has been delayed from Aug. 17 to Sept. 14 in accordance with state orders to delay school openings until Sept. 13.

With the state in Phase 3 of its reopening plan, Lundy asserts that non-contact sports would be the only fall sports allowed under current guidelines.

"If the season started today, we would have only a couple of options as far as what we could offer in team sports within the guidelines, i.e. cross-country and tennis," said Lundy.

"It's a difficult situation because schools are trying to get open, and we're trying to get a plan for our athletic directors."

Lundy said that if the association is not able to play all fall sports, the RIIL will move to a "four-season plan" that would call for non-contact sports to be played this fall, winter sports to begin in early January, contact fall sports to begin in March, and spring sports to begin sometime in April.

## **New Hampshire**

On July 3, New Hampshire's reopening committee released guidelines for youth athletics that allowed individual schools and districts to make their own decisions.

"We're playing all sports this coming fall with schools obviously deciding what's best for their community," said Jeffrey Collins, the executive director of the New Hampshire Interscholastic Athletic Association (NHIAA).

Practices for fall sports would have begun on Aug. 10, but the NHIAA has pushed the start date to Sept. 8, with Sept. 10 slated as the start of competition in low-risk sports such as golf and bass fishing. Moderate-risk sports can schedule games starting Sept. 18 and football games can begin Sept. 25. Although classified as low risk, cross-country competitions are slated to start Sept. 18 to give student-athletes time for conditioning.

According to Collins, the plan is to hold a postseason for all sports in an "open format," removing many of the scheduling requirements usually required for teams to qualify for a state tournament. The NHIAA plans to make decisions on postseason play in September, but will not extend its fall season past its typical end date, which is prior to or during the week of Thanksgiving.

## **Vermont**

In Vermont, soccer and field hockey will have a full schedule, but practices will begin no earlier than Sept. 8, and competitions approximately two weeks later.

Based on guidelines released by the Governor's office on Aug. 10, the Vermont Principals Association (VPA) will not sanction tackle football this fall or push the sport to the spring, but will allow schools to play 7-on-7 with limited contact.

Volleyball teams are allowed to practice and hold intrasquad scrimmages indoors, but all games must be held outdoors. Cross-country invitationals must be modified to include staggered starts and other social distancing measures. The VPA is requiring face coverings for all sports and requiring every school to craft a plan in the event of a positive COVID-19 test within their athletic program.

Bob Johnson, the associate executive director of the VPA, said, "We are planning for postseasons [in fall sports], but we don't have all the details down yet."

Typically, postseason tournaments in Vermont end by early November.

## **Maine**

The Maine Principals Association (MPA) pushed the start of fall sports season back three weeks from Aug. 17 to Sept. 8 and has reduced the amount of regular-season games for each sport.

Football teams will play a six-game schedule within a seven-week span, instead of the typical nine-game regular-season schedule.

Soccer, field hockey, and volleyball teams usually play 14 regular-season games, but are limited to 10 this year. Those sports are not required to meet the usual minimum of eight regular season games. Many schools are planning a regionalized schedule to limit travel. There are no revisions to cross-country and golf schedules, according

to the latest MPA release.

The MPA outlined a four-phase approach for student-athletes to prepare for their seasons under strict safety protocols.

No postseason plans have been announced, but if the state holds a postseason it would likely be an open format.

## **New York**

The status of fall sports remains up in the air in New York with seasons tentatively slated to start on Sept. 21, postponed from Aug. 24.

Robert Zayas, the executive director of the New York State Public High School Athletic Association (NYSPHSAA), said the association hopes to meet with state officials soon to receive official authorization allowing for interscholastic sports.

If the Governor's office denies authorization, the association has several contingency plans, including one to begin winter sports in early January, start fall sports around March 1, and spring sports in mid-April.

With approximately 198,000 student-athletes slated to participate in fall sports, Zayas and his team have been preparing for all scenarios since early June, crafting as many as six different proposals for a fall season that complies with state guidelines.

One proposal would call for spring sports, which are primarily outdoors, to be played this fall, creating a higher likelihood that football and other fall sports could be played this spring.

"I have a really hard time thinking about cancelling any season at this point," said Zayas.

"My goal is that we preserve all three seasons for those student-athletes who participate. The greatest variable or hurdle, is that we don't know when we're going to be able to start. To give a school district three or two weeks notice to have spring sports in the fall is challenging."

## **New Jersey**

The New Jersey State Interscholastic Athletic Association (NJSIAA) announced a "Return to Play" plan on July 10 that calls for a delayed fall season.

On Aug. 12, New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy provided an update on schools reopening allowing for an all-remote option, and the NJSIAA tweeted a statement that day clarifying that all schools "including those offering only virtual instruction – will have the option of participating in interscholastic athletics."

The association's model calls for all sports to begin practices on Sept. 14 following a two-week period in which virtual contact is permitted between coaches and student-athletes. Girls tennis competitions would begin Sept. 28, football games on Oct. 2, and all other sports can schedule games starting Oct. 1.

While the NJSIAA has multiple contingency models prepared, the plan is for all fall sports (excluding tennis) to have a postseason that would conclude no later than Nov. 22. The only events sanctioned after that date are traditional Thanksgiving football games.