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After 'brutal' season amid pandemic, prep football coaches and players 'can just exhale'

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Just days before his Male High School football team was set to play for a state championship, head coach Chris Wolfe was experiencing a mix of excitement and relief.

Yes, Wolfe was thrilled to have his Bulldogs back in the Class 6A state championship game for the third straight season. But after a grueling 2020 campaign filled with Zoom meetings and practice pods and temperature checks and cancellations, Wolfe could see a silver lining in the season coming to an end.

“It’s going to be like we can just exhale,” he said. “That’s a term, when you talk to coaches, they know what you’re talking about this year. You’re living every day (walking) on eggshells, and it’s brutal.”

Kentucky’s 2020 high school football season came to an end Dec. 18-19 with six state championship games played at the University of Kentucky’s Kroger Field in Lexington.

The finals were the culmination of a season played during the COVID-19 pandemic, a season some believed shouldn’t have been played at all because of safety concerns.

“It’s a great sense of pride because of all the people that said it would never happen,” said Julian Tackett, commissioner of the Kentucky High School Athletic Association. “The easy thing to do would have been to give up and say we’re not playing. The hard thing was to find a path, and I’m glad we did the hard thing.”

In July, the KHSAA announced a three-week delay in the start of the season, postponing openers from Aug. 21 to Sept. 11. Jefferson County Public Schools delayed their season openers to Sept. 18.

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With the number of COVID-19 cases on the rise, JCPS canceled all of its games during the final two weeks of the regular season on Oct. 30 and Nov. 6.

On Nov. 7, the KHSAA announced it would delay the start of the playoffs one week to Nov. 20. That announcement pushed the end of the five-week playoff format to the weekend before Christmas.

In the end, 29 of the 191 teams (15.2%) who qualified for the playoffs backed out. Twenty-three of those came in the first round, three in the second round and three in the third round. The KHSAA did not penalize teams for withdrawing from the playoffs and did not announce publicly whether teams withdrew for COVID-19-related reasons or other issues.

“It was a fact of life that this kind of thing was going to happen,” Tackett said.

Fairdale, with a 7-0 record, was forced to withdraw just one day before its third-round playoff game against Owensboro after one of its players tested positive for COVID-19.

Reached by phone just minutes after the announcement, Bulldogs coach Louis Dover was in tears.

“There will never be a Fairdale team that’s gone through as much as we’ve had to,” Dover said. “Every opponent we faced on the field, we defeated with limited practice, with limited meeting time, with limited workouts and with all of these extra conditions.”

Dover noted his team rarely used its own locker room in an attempt to socially distance. A giant fan constantly ran in the locker room in an attempt to circulate the air.

“It’s luck, 100%,” Dover said of the difference between teams having a positive test or not. “As much as we can do as coaches in managing our team, we don’t go home with them. And that’s where it happens. It happens going home, going to the grocery (store). ... You can’t tell people how to live. You encourage them. We all made sacrifices.”

Male senior running back Jaylin Bross said the uncertainty made him appreciate the little things, even practices.

“Sometimes you dreaded going to practice; this year, I can’t say that I’ve ever felt that way,” Bross said. “It’s been proven on multiple accounts that it can be taken from you at any minute, any second. You never see it coming. So we took every practice like it could be our last practice.”

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For Manual coach Scott Carmony, the pandemic meant a limited season that included a two-week quarantine after a positive COVID-19 test within the program.

When the Crimson hosted rival St. Xavier in the second round of the playoffs Nov. 27, they had played just one game since Oct. 1. Manual fell to St. X 10-6 on a 38-yard Hail Mary with 16.2 seconds remaining.

“We would have normally worked on defending that a couple of different ways but just never had time,” said Carmony, whose team finished with a 3-2 record. “And we were never in those situations throughout the year. That’s what happens when you have a body of work that’s just four games.”

The pandemic also brought an interruption to the Old Rivalry game between Male and Manual. Except for a four-year span from 1915-1918 when the schools consolidated, Male and Manual had met on the football field every year since 1893.

But not in 2020.

“It feels better to win that game than to win the state championship,” Bross admitted. “I know I’m playing for the alumni before me. It’s not just a game for us, not just Male-Manual. You’re playing for the guys who played in that game before you. It’s like the Army-Navy game for us. It was definitely disappointing not to play in that game this year.”

St. X coach Kevin Wallace changed his program’s weekly routine in an attempt to limit exposure. In previous years, Saturdays were spent watching film and lifting weights. This year, Saturday’s film-watching was done via online Zoom meetings. On Mondays, the team practiced just one hour and remained socially distanced the entire time.

Wallace’s program had the unique situation in early October of preparing for three different opponents — Manual, Boyle County and DeSales — during one week. The Tigers ultimately played DeSales on Oct. 9 and won 28-7.

Wallace admitted some of the changes brought about in 2020 were for the better and might be used in future seasons.

“The only negative on Saturdays is you don’t get your kids in a training room, and we normally lifted on Saturdays,” he said. “You’re missing those things. But the Zoom meetings after

practice, I think that's been pretty good and worked pretty well for us. I think our kids would rather do things from home rather than staying there until 7 o'clock."

Through it all, many persevered.

Related: Trinity football shuts out Male to secure another state title in Kentucky Class 6A final

Trinity won its 27th state title — beating Male 28-0 in the Class 6A final — after being quarantined for two weeks in early November after a positive COVID-19 test within the program.

Shamrocks coach Bob Beatty said playing through the pandemic taught valuable life lessons.

"It's hard to prepare all week and then all of a sudden, guess what, somebody's positive on their side and you don't have a game," Beatty said. "You look in the mirror and say, 'Why did I work that hard?' But we didn't make excuses. There was no complaining, and you deal with it. Welcome to life. The pandemic is hard, football is hard, life is hard. ...

"That will get them through life because there's no excuses in life. You either get it done, or you don't."

In its 100th season of football, Paintsville won its first state championship, beating Kentucky Country Day 38-7 in the Class A final.

The Tigers had two games canceled during the regular season because of the pandemic.

"Everyone in the state battled through this and in the country battled through COVID," Paintsville coach Joe Chirico said. "We're just fortunate enough to get to play a game that we love and be a part of it. The kids were resilient, all of the kids in the state of Kentucky. You didn't know if you were going to play this week or that week. Our guys stayed strong and kept fighting and kept digging every week."

More: Paintsville rolls past Kentucky Country Day for first Class A state football championship

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