

Media Management in Pandemic Stirs Need for Balance, Flexibility

By Tim Leighton on December 15, 2020

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Media coverage of high school events is an essential part of sharing the stories of triumph, the leadership opportunities through cocurricular activities and the journeys that make indelible memories.

However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, coverage has taken on a different look as safety protocols and government mandates have created guidelines that have greatly reduced in-person media attendance, as well as strict guidelines for those who do attend. In navigating the new measures, state associations have assisted member schools to implement that guidance while working with media members on flexibility.

“We haven’t had any negative feedback from the media this fall about anything, really,” said Seth Polansky, sports information coordinator of the Arizona Interscholastic Association. “This has been a very tricky topic as of late. I think at the onset we were trying to find a way to be efficient with media access. We had to recognize the mitigation strategies to help the community health, but we also needed to be accessible to the events to be covered.”

While member schools have the autonomy to tweak state association recommendations to make them stricter or more lenient, most adhere to the guidelines to promote consistency from the regular season to the postseason culminating events. In creating media guidelines that are safe, effective and promote risk mitigation of the virus spread, communicating with school administrators beforehand emerged as perhaps the most crucial part of the media planning process. That became an initial challenge, because historically, media members would often just show up at events as coverage plans changed.

In states where media members count against the state-mandated spectator limit, activities administrators and site supervisors had to know what media members were present and how to prioritize media admittance. For those situations, member schools typically enlisted the assistance of state associations.

In looking ahead to implementing continued guidance and safety procedures during the winter months, a review of measures used in the fall can help local districts and state associations in their planning.

What worked:

- Communicating with site administration prior to an event.
- Mandatory contact tracing to know what media members were present.
- Pregame communication was key to learning local protocols and specific guidelines.
- Limiting official media permitted by host site.
- Limiting press box to essential game management and adhering to occupancy ratios.
- Continual mask usage, physical distancing, no locker-room access and limited time at the venue following the conclusion of an event.
- Increased emphasis on streaming for coverage needs.

Works in progress:

- Identifying postgame interview areas.

- Postgame interviewing guidelines. Old habits are hard to break. While media on deadline are anxious to interview coaches and participants, both groups need to observe interview protocols, which includes mask usage by participants, coaches and media.
- Boom mics set up at least 10 feet away for all media in both indoor and outdoor events.
- Photography positions on or near playing areas.
- Walking through or congregating behind team benches.
- Sharing of game statistics and other postgame information.
- Working with radio partners to ensure access for all.

“The media have been flexible at events,” said Jeremy Holaday, assistant executive director of the Kansas State High School Activities Association. “They are staying where they are designated, wearing face coverings if directed to, and overall, mindful of the mitigation strategies. They understand and are grateful to be covering the event.”

Media across the country seemingly are supportive of the initiatives being implemented.

“It was interesting to see the media that followed our rules calling out contemporaries that broke the rules on social media, even taking pictures of the offenders and posting them,” Polansky said. “That was a con for those being called out, but not for us. Most of them understand and get it when it comes to protecting the teams and themselves.”

“I think the nature of the newsworthy action we have had to consider during these times has made our relationship with our news media a little tighter,” Holaday said. “We have had more press conferences in the last five months than I can remember in my nine years here. So, the media is interacting with us as individuals more and really trying to understand our operations. You could say the respect has grown. I know the media has a job to cover all sides, and I have seen several articles by our media that are very fair to each side of the story and I’ve made it a point to reach out and tell them.”

As activities move primarily indoors for the winter seasons, here are some additional guidelines for implementation consideration:

- Postgame interviews at the regular season, postseason and state tournament levels be held via Zoom.
- Limit postgame interviews to a coach and selected player.
- Consider a pool reporter to limit contact of media with coaches and participants.
- Temperatures taken of approved media members upon arrival.
- Do not provide complimentary beverages and snacks to media.
- Rosters and other game information available online.
- Digital ticketing instead of media credentials.

“Probably the biggest adjustment we made this year was going with a digital ticketing operation for all of our championships,” said Jason West, communications director of the Missouri State High School Activities Association. “This meant we had to send a digital pass or ticket to each media person that was granted a credential.”

Media guidelines will continue to evolve this school year as protocols and mandates change.

“(Our) recommendations were meant for the regular season,” Polansky said. “When it came time for the playoffs, all we had to do was adjust some of the items slightly to account for venue or what worked/didn’t work during the regular season. Before the postseason had started, media members had contacted me clamoring for updates or follow-up for the postseason. They already started contacting me about winter sports regulations (in late November). So, in our eyes, this was a success as the media really took to it.

“Looking ahead to the winter sports, we can easily take our documents and adjust it to the sports being offered. We play both fall and winter soccer, so those recommendations will stay the same. Basketball should be very similar to girls volleyball. The only sport we have to really look into is wrestling. It’s easy to say “don’t go near the mat,” but many of our wrestling tournaments take place in auxiliary gyms that are smaller, so recognizing space to interview and work will be a bit of a challenge.”