

Effects of COVID-19 on Middle School Athletics and Activities

By Nate Perry on December 18, 2020

hst

The past five issues of High School Today have addressed the coronavirus' effects on high school athletics and activities from a variety of vantage points – the grief over lost events, families on the move in search of specific opportunities, students and school personnel maximizing available programs and virtual platforms being used to save performing arts festivals, to name a few.

The reality is the pandemic has touched all levels of sports and performing arts, and while media coverage has made that impact known within the collegiate and professional ranks, others – especially those below high school – have not seen anywhere near the same attention.

Despite their tendency to be overlooked, the importance of middle school programs cannot be overstated. In many cases, they present children with some of their very first opportunities to develop lasting interests and serve as a valuable introduction to the same lessons and lifelong values associated with high school participation.

“We’re talking about kids who are undergoing massive physical, social and emotional changes,” said Julie Cochran, NFHS director of sports and liaison to the NFHS Middle School Committee. “Building, cultivating and sustaining relationships isn’t a guarantee in all learning environments, but in extracurricular and cocurricular activities, where kids are a part of a group or team, it develops communication and socialization skills, teaches proper behavior in cooperative environments, provides incentives for attending school – the list goes on and on. It’s crucial in these developing adolescent years to make sure they’re getting these experiences.”

From a state association perspective, no middle school-affiliated organization has endured greater suffering at the hands of the pandemic than the Illinois Elementary School Association (IESA), the only entity in the United States devoted solely to middle school athletics and activities.

Over the course of its 90-plus-year history, the IESA has grown to include nine athletics programs (2 boys only, 2 girls only, 5 boys and girls) and crowns a whopping 46 state champions based on size classifications in each sport. Its first two activities offerings – music and literary (now speech) – were added in 1934 and have since been followed by cheer, chess and scholastic bowl. Membership, which took until 1946 to reach 100 schools, now boasts more than 950.

“Locally, I think the longevity of our association has brought about loyalty from our membership, and they take a lot of pride in being able to offer activities to their students, who can participate and represent their communities,” said Nicole Schaeftbauer, associate executive director of the IESA. “That has really sustained the strength of our activities and contributed to the growth of new members.”

Unlike high school associations that can bring in supplemental revenue through corporate sponsorships and an enhanced media presence, the financial health of the IESA is largely dependent on the commerce generated at its state

championship events. In early March of 2020, the IESA had just finished its boys basketball state championships and state chess event, and was in the midst of its state series for wrestling and volleyball.

And then, Thursday, March 12, happened, beginning a nightmarish stretch without a championship event that has now lasted almost 10 months.

“It’s been devastating, and it’s continued to be that way,” said IESA Executive Director Steve Endsley. “Financially, it has almost crippled us. The day we canceled wrestling and volleyball (state tournaments), I remember saying, ‘we’ll be alright.’ ‘As long as we get to hold our state track and field meet in the spring, we’ll survive the fact that we didn’t get to have wrestling and volleyball.’”

But, unfortunately, the 2020 IESA Track State Meet – quite possibly the nation’s largest middle school sporting event with 5,000 to 6,000 participants and up to 20,000 fans over two weekends in May – did not happen. And the loss equated to far more than dollars and cents.

“All of us take great pride in what we have done to really make it the ‘crown jewel’ of our organization,” Endsley said. “And as much work as it is, we love holding it as a staff. We know kids are getting great experiences and schools are seeing the benefits of it.

It really hurt us not seeing the kids get that chance to participate in our state meet in front of that many people.”

The IESA also lost its bowling championships last spring along with its state events for scholastic bowl and music, and could not hold its state series for baseball, softball, cross country or golf this past fall.

“The cold hard truth is that any of our activities that are going to cost us money to provide, we have to take a real hard look and ask ourselves if it’s something we can do,” Endsley said. “We might be able to have a regional-level basketball or volleyball tournament where we tell the schools, ‘you want this, so you’re going to have to pay the officials and buy the awards.’ Moving forward, those are the types of things we’ll have to do because it removes the expense from us.”

The fall season did produce something of a bright side, however. Although still without state championships, IESA schools were able to conduct regular seasons for all of their fall sports and hold speech contests, and they were able to participate in regional- and sectional-level postseason play.

“We had 40 to 50 schools drop out of baseball and softball and about 180 schools chose not to participate in cross country, but there were plenty of schools that were able to maintain a season,” Endsley said. “We were glad we were able to do that. People were giddy over the fact that we got to have a regular season and then at least got to have regionals.”

With Illinois following some of the strictest guidelines in the nation in terms of activities restrictions, the IESA boys and girls basketball and volleyball seasons slated to begin in mid-January are still very much in question. Endsley said that if necessary, he would explore moving those sports to the spring as he has already done with wrestling, but also noted it would be the organization’s final option before outright cancellations.

Thankfully, the repercussions of the pandemic have not been as severe for other associations involved at the middle school level.

Richard McWhirter, assistant executive director of the Tennessee Secondary School Athletic Association (TSSAA), is also the head of the Tennessee Middle School Athletic Association (TMSAA), which was started in 1998 as a separate division of TSSAA and began sponsoring its first state championships for cross country and track and field in 2015.

Due to more relaxed COVID-19 stipulations in Tennessee, the TMSAA was able to run its Cross Country State Championships almost exactly as they would appear in any other year – with dutiful mitigation protocols, of course.

“Cross country was very successful,” said McWhirter. “We got all of our sectional meets in and had a state championship, and it was no different than the year before other than wearing masks, no gatherings at the starting lines, and a modified setup for awards.”

McWhirter said that other than the middle schools within Shelby County Schools in the Memphis area, which made the district-wide decision to not play any fall sports, participation in this year’s state cross country meet was only down about five percent from the 2019 event, which numbered about 900 total competitors.

Also aiding the TMSAA’s 420-plus member schools is the fact that the organization only offers state championships in three other sports – basketball (boys and girls) and its baseball and softball championships, which will be contested for the first time in 2021. Since sports like football, soccer and volleyball don’t have official state tournaments, schools are afforded the flexibility to play in any part of the academic year.

The TMSAA was fortunate to complete most of its basketball state championships before the pandemic hit this past year, and McWhirter is optimistic that the adopted plan for mitigation will allow them to be completed successfully again in 2021.

“We will have a one-third capacity mandate for all TMSAA games, and instead of having each of our three classes (Class A, AA and AAA) play four games at one gym on Friday night like we typically would, we’re going to have two games at two gyms and spread them out by about two hours so we can clear them out and clean them.”

While many other associations are putting a hold on any new sport offerings, the TMSAA is tentatively moving forward with its inaugural baseball and softball championships since so much of the tournament infrastructure is already in place.

With a couple significant adjustments, the Ohio High School Athletic Association (OHSAA) was once again able to complete its annual 7th and 8th Grade Cross Country Invitational, the lone state championship the association offers for middle schools.

With an Ohio Health Director Sports Order limiting sporting events to 1,500 spectators, the OHSAA decided to move its junior high cross country meet – and a couple of high school state championships – to Fortress Obetz, a multi-purpose

sports venue located southeast of Columbus. The main reason for the change was the facility's 8,000-seat grandstand, which provided ample space for the maximum number of onlookers to maintain social distancing.

Typically consisting of two race formats, open and scored, the OHSAA decided to eliminate the open races – which feature unlimited entries from each school – to cap the number of racers at this year's state meet. Instead, schools were permitted a total of 30 runners per gender in the scored races, a substantial increase from the number allowed in a normal year (10).

The result was a total of 110 participating schools – the most in the last four years – and 1,192 runners (658 boys, 534 girls).

"It's possible the number of schools that participated increased because our schools and student-athletes were more than excited and anxious to have a participation opportunity," said Bob Goldring, senior director of operations at the OHSAA. "They may have had confidence that an event sponsored by the OHSAA would be conducted as safely as possible, and some may have just had the desire to compete at a new venue."

Although his school – Hilliard Weaver Middle School (HWMS) in Hilliard, Ohio – did not compete in the OHSAA's state cross country meet, assistant athletic director Jay Cauley has seen COVID-19's effects on middle schools from the ground level.

One of the primary obstacles, in his experience, has been transportation, even with parental concerns keeping a substantial number of kids away from the playing fields and courts.

"Probably the most apprehensive point that came up was with getting on buses to go to away games," said Cauley. "Both parents and kids were worried about it. We have limitations on our busing – 22 kids on a bus, one per seat, and everyone has to be masked. That became an issue when you look at a seventh-grade volleyball team and an eighth-grade volleyball team and both teams carry 15 players. Now, that trip requires two buses."

While the other two middle schools in HWMS's district lost their entire volleyball seasons due to COVID outbreaks, the Wildcats teams miraculously made it out of the fall season with only one lost contest and an odd two-week period where a team was left without a coach who was quarantined due to close contact with a COVID-positive individual.

"We were fortunate in the fall. We really were," Cauley said. "Early in the season we dealt with a few different minor things, but as far as competition and not having to juggle too many games, we were pretty good."

The winter season, however, has started off with a turn for the worse. In November, Hilliard Weaver's home county, Franklin County, became the first in Ohio to reach a "purple" distinction, which signifies the highest mark on the state's infection rate code. As a result, schools in the district must now refrain from competition until December 20, and may only practice in "pods" of nine students for one hour at a time.

"We're in a totally different boat," said Cauley of the winter season. "We've had positive cases already. We're down one middle school team and two high school teams right now, but we're doing our best. We realize it might end up being

limited or shortened, but we still want to at least give them something.”

Thanks to the efforts of the Ohio Music Education Association (OMEA) and Dr. James Weaver, NFHS director of performing arts and sports, hundreds of middle school performing arts programs in Ohio were saved from what would have been a potential yearlong shutdown.

Based on recommendations from medical personnel at the reputable Cleveland Clinic, the Ohio Governor’s Office had declared that performing arts activities could not be safely administered during the pandemic.

Understanding the impact that a year with no performing arts could have on programs’ future well-being, Weaver devised a proposal to establish a Performing Arts Medical Advisory Committee (PAMAC) within the OMEA that could lift the restrictions on performing arts programs in Ohio middle schools and high schools.

Led by its state treasurer, Michael Kelly, the OMEA assembled a PAMAC that included eight medical professionals from around the state. Armed with recommendations from the NFHS Aerosol Study and the “Return to Music Guidelines” – a joint initiative of the NFHS and the National Association for Music Education – the Committee proved performing arts activities could be safely conducted in Ohio schools with proper mitigation techniques, which not only allowed students to get back to the activities they love but helped avert potential numbers crises down the road.

“The middle school level really does make or break the rest of the programs,” said Weaver. “And if we have a year off from performing arts in middle schools, you’ll lose the students’ interest in a heartbeat, and it will do irreparable damage for the next four years at the high school level.”