

PIAA winter sports seasons to shut down one day after official opening day

Just as the winter sports season was set to begin Friday, Pennsylvania high school sports will come to a sudden standstill again.

Gov. Tom Wolf's new mitigation rules Thursday ensure that no high school sports teams will compete or practice from Saturday until Jan. 4. His announcement about the three-week suspension of extracurricular activities came as Pennsylvania continues to see COVID-19 cases surge statewide.

Sports teams in boys and girls basketball, boys and girls swimming and wrestling were preparing for the official opening of the season Friday. Hockey players also will have to step off the ice, but their seasons started earlier in the fall. (Hockey is not a PIAA sport.)



The McDowell boys basketball team practices while wearing masks Wednesday at Paul Goll Gymnasium. The Trojans were set to play two games against rival Cathedral Prep over the weekend, but Saturday's game is off and the status of Friday's game was uncertain Thursday evening.

JACK HANRAHAN/ERIE TIMES-NEWS

Several Erie County basketball teams had games scheduled for this weekend, including home-and-home matchups between rivals Cathedral Prep and McDowell on Friday and Saturday. The status of Friday's game at McDowell's Paul Goll Gymnasium was not immediately known as McDowell officials discussed Friday's game Thursday

evening.

Four other boys basketball games involving District 10 teams were scheduled for Friday, while five games involving D-10 girls basketball games were scheduled. The status of most of those games also was not immediately clear. The Greenville boys game at Saegertown is still on as scheduled.

One tournament that will still take place Friday is the four-team Neshannock boys basketball tourney. Mercyhurst Prep, Shenango, Moniteau and Neshannock will play varsity doubleheaders to get both games in.

"I acknowledge that there are varying sensitivities regarding COVID. However, we have been following CDC, Health Department, and our own administration's guidelines. We wear masks as directed. The boys have made sacrifices for the past month to keep the team safe," said Mercyhurst Prep coach Sean Baer. "I've told the team just to make the most of every opportunity when we step on the floor because we don't know when it could be taken away. Playing twice in one night is a unique opportunity to do just that."

Mercyhurst Prep will play Shenango at 6 p.m. in the middle school gym at the same time Moniteau plays Neshannock in the high school gym. The losers of the two games play for third place in the middle school gym at 7:45 p.m. at the same time the two winners play for the tournament title at 7:45 p.m. in the high school gym. All four teams were asked to bring both sets of uniforms for the two games.

Wrestling also was set to get underway Saturday with some of the top teams in D-10 at the Fort LeBoeuf Duals, but those matches are now

off. The Bison were set to host General McLane, Corry, Saegertown and Reynolds, plus Ellwood City from the WPIAL. Fort LeBoeuf coach Steve Waite could not be reached for comment.

Wolf's announcement came just one day after the Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic Association gave the thumbs up to the winter season in a virtual meeting Wednesday.

During the PIAA meeting, the Pennsylvania Principals Association requested that the start of the winter sports seasons be delayed during the COVID surge. The PIAA Board of Directors rejected that request, as the board had a similar request before the fall seasons. The governor cited the Pennsylvania Principals Association's plea in his guidance on his website Thursday.

PIAA executive director Bob Lombardi said he favored giving schools "flexibility" in their schedules by starting the season on time but moving back the deadlines for the postseason.

"We have not seen any data to say by Jan. 1 would be better than Dec. 11 (as a start date)," Lombardi said Wednesday. "I think extracurriculars are part of the educational day and carry very high value.

McDowell High School boys basketball coach Kevin O'Connor runs practice Wednesday at McDowell's Paul Goll Gymnasium. Gov. Tom Wolf's new mitigation rules Thursday ensure that no high school sports teams will compete or practice from Saturday until Jan. 4.

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"I think everyone is concerned about health and safety as illustrated by the health and safety plans that every school adopts."

Lombardi also said Wednesday that the PIAA had not corresponded with Wolf's office regarding any coming restrictions that would put high school sports on hold.

District 10 also met earlier Thursday in preparation for the start of the seasons.

The fall season was successfully completed, but many teams and school districts experienced postponements, cancellations and forfeits along the way.

If high school and youth sports are allowed to resume on Jan. 4, it's likely competitions won't begin right away. PIAA rules require teams to have 15 practices in before they begin games, and the organization passed new measures regarding how long teams must practice if shut down due to COVID on Wednesday.

Any time a team is sidelined for 14 days, the team must practice at least four times before competing. Winter sports teams had been practicing since Nov. 20.

The Erie High boys basketball team stopped practice on Thursday to watch Gov. Wolf's news conference.

Just one week after a roller-coaster Erie School Board meeting gave the Royals the approval to play winter sports, the athletes were told to go home and wait for three weeks.

"We were set to practice from 4-6 p.m. and during pre-practice we turned on the video. Obviously, the guys are pretty down that we can't keep going," said Erie coach Tom Koval. "We got together as a team and talked about staying positive. We emphasized this is just a

postponement and not a cancelation. We have hope of going forward in January, but I just feel so bad for these kids."

Prep athletic director Bill Flanagan expressed disappointment but was realistic.

"We are disappointed by today's news as I truly believe our coaches and student-athletes have done everything asked of them to stay safe in taking all necessary precautions to mitigate against the spread of this virus," Flanagan said in an email. "That said, we also recognize how many people are currently sick and in hospitals around our community. We continue to pray for those impacted by COVID-19, and would like to continue to thank the doctors, nurses and health care professionals who are on the front lines attempting to keep all of us safe. We are so very proud of these true heroes."

"I don't know if there was an athletic director in the state that didn't see it coming and it's unfortunate," said North East athletic director Pat Fordyce. "I think the group of us in Erie County were mostly hoping for a push back because of how things are going. We scheduled events in December, but the reality is more than half of those were going to get postponed anyway."

Wolf's suspension of high school sports is reminiscent of the spring seasons, when the governor and Pennsylvania Department of Health delayed in-person school and sports several times before eventually forcing the sports seasons to be canceled completely.

Matt Allibone of the York Daily Record contributed to this report.

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McDowell's Mason Beck puts up a shot during practice Wednesday at McDowell's Paul Goll Gymnasium.

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