

High school sports' return seems more likely after 'immaculate' moment this week

State seems to now agree that sports can be done safely, working on details with coaches

[Brian Patterson](#) February 6, 2021 at 8:24 a.m.

Some important details need to be worked out, and only a fool would believe that COVID-19's bag of dirty tricks is empty, but don't let that overshadow the huge gains made this week by those leading the charge to get high school sports started again in California.

This week was a game-changer, as the advantage clearly shifted from one side of the battlefield ... we mean issue, to the other.

A series of developments and comments led to this pivotal shift in the 11-month clash of HS Sports vs. The Pandemic — or vs. The State, as some see it.

For many athletes, coaches and fans, doubt is out — let optimism reign.

It may take a week or two, but it seems very likely now that California officials are going to clear the way — as much as they can — for there to be a high school football season this school year, as well as seasons for all of the other sports. (Insert here the standard disclaimer about an "act of COVID-19" nullifying this arrangement.)

True, there wasn't an announcement from any high school sports

officials that proclaimed the battle won. There was nothing from state health officials about them agreeing that sports can be done safely, so they'll be scaling back their guidelines to make it easier for high school sports to be played in this pandemic setting.

But there were clues and strong hints, stretched out over the past several days, that seemed to reveal where things are headed: Changes are going to be made to the California Department of Public Health guidelines, and that will open the way for all sports to have a more reasonable chance to have a season. (We'll delve deeper into the words "more reasonable chance" a bit later.)

Why the shift this week? And what were the clues?

The biggest of the bunch was a stunning [announcement by the National Federation of State High School Associations \(NFHS\)](#) on Tuesday morning that essentially wiped out California's argument that it was too dangerous to let high school sports be played during this pandemic.

That argument was why California kept high school and youth sports shut down since March while nearly every other state allowed at least some sports to begin their seasons in the fall or winter. To be fair, California's COVID-19 situation was much worse than most other states, so extreme caution was warranted.

But the NFHS, whose original guidelines and tiered system are what California referenced when forming its own guidelines and tiered system, punched a hole in that argument when it released revised guidelines. The NFHS got rid of its tiered system after consulting with the Center for Disease Control and analyzing published and

unpublished data.

And perhaps most significantly, the NFHS stated that proven cases of direct COVID-19 transmission during athletics “remain relatively rare.”

That was the turning point — the [“Immaculate Reception”](#) moment of this saga, when defeat was turned into victory, and now we’re all watching as Franco Harris scampers into the end zone.

Kudos to the grass-roots parents groups for their efforts — holding rallies and waging social media campaigns — to pressure the state to change its stance. But it was the NFHS — and its collection of data and medical resources — that seemed to break through the wall put up by Gov. Gavin Newsom and Dr. Mark Ghaly, the state’s Secretary of Health and Human Services.

Data did the trick.

After that came days with back-to-back meetings between a group of football coaches, who have tirelessly advocated for football and all sports to be allowed to compete as soon as possible, and a few top state officials, including Ghaly.

No longer was the debate about whether sports could be played safely this year. That was put to rest, according to Torrey Pines football coach Ron Gladnick, who, along with Patrick Walsh of San Mateo Serra and Justin Alumbaugh of Concord De La Salle, has met with state officials numerous times in recent weeks.

[In an interview with a San Diego TV station](#), Gladnick said Ghaly acknowledged “the data looks good” for sports to return, and now the group is working on a “game plan” for each sport — dealing with

competition issues and “everything that goes on around the competition.”

Given that Gladnick, who could be described as the sledgehammer in this effort to break down the state’s defenses, is suddenly so noticeably optimistic — he said he’s hopeful that “very, very soon” there could be “a conclusion” — we’re going to assume that football is not being left out of the plan.

The state’s COVID-19 numbers have been trending in the right direction lately for health officials to relax some restrictions. That is a plus for high school sports.

There is also growing concern about the well-being of the student-athletes, especially emotionally. Several health officials have said recently that “things are breaking down” and that it is an important time to do something for the teens who have been mostly isolated for nearly a year, kept out of classrooms and away from most sports activities.

That’s another factor, perhaps, in this complicated equation.

So let’s assume that the state is going to alter its guidelines, perhaps switch to a simpler system that is based on a county staying out of the “high” or “extreme danger” range for COVID-19, something that would warrant a stay-at-home order from a state or county. The state reserves the right to step in at any moment if there are outbreaks or widespread disregard of its rules. And trust us, the CDPH is going to insist on some very rigorous safeguards that will be challenging for schools and coaches to meet. But it will be an opening — instead of a closed door.

And then we have sports back?

Believe it or not, the CDPH and Gov. Newsom are just the tip of the iceberg here. They will sign off on changes to the state guidelines. And they will hand things over to the counties. And the counties will have their say on the matter, and then hand things off to the school districts and other governing entities for the schools.

Some counties and school districts are likely to be more cautious than others. Some districts will say that sports and school-related activities can't begin until students are back on campuses instead of doing online learning from home.

(That's why we say most sports have a "more reasonable chance" of having a season — but it's not guaranteed.)

Those will be the next wave of arguments, along with the battles over whether or not fans will be allowed to attend games. (Our prediction: the state will hold firm on this one, and fans are going to be upset when only a handful can attend outdoor events and they are perhaps shut out entirely for indoor contests. But, hey, it's about the kids, right?)

So more battles are on the horizon.

At least now, football has a real chance to have a season, even with the clock ticking. (Teams could practice for all of March and still play five games in April, if CIF-SS moves the end of the season back two weeks as the L.A. City Section has done.)

And basketball has a real chance. The current tiered system has basketball in the most difficult tier to reach — yellow for minimal risk. If the state follows what the NFHS has done, basketball could be played indoors — where it belongs — [as long as the players wear masks at all times](#). It's been done in other states, and it has seemed to help limit the

spread of COVID-19, which is more likely to happen with indoor sports.

Some things aren't changing: Wear a mask. Stay 6 feet apart. Limit your interactions with people from outside your home.

Athletes should be aware that their biggest risk of contracting COVID-19 won't happen during a game — it will happen on a team bus, in a meeting, a team dinner or in the locker room. Those are the danger areas.

And everyone should remember this: When Franco Harris caught that pass to give the Steelers an incredible win in the 1972 playoffs, they lost the next week to the Miami Dolphins — yes, the team that went undefeated that season.

It's no time to let your guard down, to give the opponent a chance to come back.

And maybe this week was a sign that COVID-19 isn't the '72 Dolphins — it's not unbeatable.