

HIGH SCHOOL

LHSAA tightens COVID-19 restrictions for wrestling state championships after outbreak

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The LHSAA is tightening COVID-19 restrictions for the wrestling state championship, including a zero-tolerance mask policy, after a tournament was linked to an outbreak.

The Louisiana Department of Health has linked the Louisiana Classic Wrestling Tournament, held Jan.15-16, to at least 20 positive coronavirus cases, five of which were athletes. The LHSAA issued a moratorium to the season on Tuesday, canceling all competition until the state championship next month.

Wrestling season ends: LHSAA ends regular wrestling season after tournament is linked to COVID-19 outbreak

Outbreak following tournament: COVID-19 outbreak linked to Louisiana Classic high school wrestling tournament

What's next: LHSAA wrestling seeds could be shaken by COVID-19 outbreak at Gonzales tournament

About 50 to 55 percent of wrestlers across the state are currently in quarantines or voluntarily pauses. By ending the regular season early, the LHSAA is hoping that athletes will be out of quarantine and eligible to compete at the state championship.

"The pandemic is still here," David Federico, president of the LHSAA board, said on a zoom call Wednesday. "It's not gone. Just because we moved forward, some people seem to forget about March 15 last year when all of a sudden the kids had no sports. That's what we are trying to avoid. We want these kids to have a state championship."

Eddie Bonine, the executive director of the LHSAA, said that they chose to enforce this themselves so that a higher institution would not have to. He also said the office is also looking

into speculation that some of the athletes at the Louisiana Classic may have tested positive prior to the event.

To lower the chances of another outbreak, the LHSAA is enforcing stricter restrictions at the state championships, which will be held Feb. 26-27 at Raising Cane's River Center, Baton Rouge.

About 1,800 fans will be allowed in, and the stands will be 10-15 feet away from the competition. Masks will be required, and event staff will patrol the arena to ensure compliance. Spectators will be given one warning before they will be removed from the arena. There will also be no concessions.

"No one wants to be the COVID police," Bonine said. "No one wants to get confrontational and get up in the stands. But we are going to do what we have to do."

The athletes will also be closely monitored. Wrestlers will be stationed in an exhibition hall in a designated team area when they are not competing. A staff member from their school will be tasked with enforcing masks wearing and social distancing.

The competition floor will be limited to 600 people, but Adam MacDowell, the director of wrestling operations for the LHSAA, said they hope to keep as few people as possible there. There will be ten competition mats and a separate warm-up area in the exhibition hall.

Teams will be allowed to continue practicing, and all athletes will be eligible to enter the state championships.

"In the grand scheme of things, giving these kids a state championship event and a chance to compete I think is very important," Rusty Farrar, vice president of the LHSAA board, said. "It may sting for a couple weeks, but I think in the long run this is going to be the best decision."