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Has the IHSAA and its basketball fans followed COVID-19 protocols? Here's what we've seen

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Indiana Gov. Eric Holcomb deemed high school basketball and other extracurricular sports and activities as among “our most sacred events” and “our heritage.” True to his words, the Indiana High School Athletic Association marched forward with fall and winter sports, and will do so with spring sports soon, without delay.

Like the NBA, NFL, college sports and other leagues, plenty of high schools faced postponements and cancellation of games. Even if teams weren't struck by COVID-19, they were often affected because their opponents' program had to be shut down via protocols.

So with COVID-19 still prevalent in our region, have we as a community done the very best job in providing a safe environment for “our most sacred events” to take place and adhere to all the protocols?

The answer can't be an absolute yes.

Girls basketball semistate games at Jeffersonville High School on Feb. 20 was a recent example which showed hundreds of fans not social distancing or properly wearing masks, particularly on the first floor of the gym.

“They were at 25% capacity. If you don't block where people can space people out, that 25% is all going to sit on top of each other,” Clark County health officer Dr. Eric Yazel said. “That's just the nature of fans.”

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Several announcements were made throughout the two games that day to remind people of the COVID-19 protocols, though nothing changed. Greater Clark County Schools Superintendent Mark Laughner said 500 tickets were sold to each of the four teams that played.

“What takes place when you’re a host site for IHSAA, you have a pre-game meeting, usually two or three days in advance,” Laughner said. “Our athletic director at Jeff High went over our policies and protocols for COVID for the game with the administrative team and athletic directors at all four schools and told them that they need to make sure they’re enforcing those policies, procedures and policies at the game for their crowd, for their student section and for the parents. Unfortunately, a couple schools didn’t do what they should have done.”

An IHSAA spokesperson said, “it is expected to be a joint effort between the host school and the administrators of the participating schools” when it comes to crowd control.

Quite frankly, the finger-pointing can be endless. But the reality is, we’re all at fault here.

It’s not like COVID-19 protocols at high school sporting events were met with perfection since November, or the fall season for that matter. What happened at the two games at Jeffersonville in the semistate was not just an anomaly. It occurred in other playoff rounds and regular-season games at various sites.

Plenty of over-energetic fans and student sections pulled down their masks — or just didn’t wear one — to loudly voice their displeasure with game officials. School staff would walk around the facility without a mask and talk with students, who also weren’t wearing one, although signs at the door clearly states masks are required to be worn in the building. Even if caution tape was put on a row of stands to get fans to socially distance, some would ignore and still sit in that row with the tape so they can be close to people they know.

As a sports reporter covering high school games, I’ve tried to sit in the stands to be closer and more immersed to the action sometimes, maybe even pick up some sounds from the bench or the court. There were several times when I moved because I felt uncomfortable by people near me not following the protocols.

Now, of course, it’s difficult for athletic directors and a handful of school officials to be monitoring the crowd at every moment.

At the girls state finals at Bankers Life Fieldhouse, seats were taped off and ushers in each section made sure people were following the protocols. Families and friends were blocked off from entering the court. The reason one of the state final games was held on Friday, instead of all four games being played on one Saturday as usual, was to give ample time between games for a thorough cleaning.

Recap: Silver Creek girls basketball wins first IHSAA state title in program history

But hindsight is 20/20. Schools involved in the semistate games that day probably would have handled things differently. Laughner sure thinks so.

“In hindsight, the one thing I think we probably could have done is to stop the game and say this game’s not going to continue until you’re socially distanced,” he said.

Yazel said that’s a tough act to pull off, but may be necessary if we want to safely continue “our heritage” of high school basketball.

“If you’re ultimately the one who’s in charge of the facility and you don’t see following of the guidelines, walk up there and put the ball on your hip and say I’m going to stand here until everybody moves to where they’re supposed to and put their masks on,” he said. “That’s a tough thing for people to do and I understand that, but at the end of the day, that’s the thing we need to do — not move forward if things look questionable. We’ve had those discussions. Lesson learned.”

If COVID-19 isn’t transmitted at these games, a sigh of relief can be taken. But imagine this hypothetical situation: several members of a high school boys basketball team attended their girls basketball team’s playoff games to show support for their fellow school athletes. An individual unrelated to the programs, who has COVID-19 but never got tested because he or she was asymptomatic, unknowingly spreads the virus at one of the girls’ games and one of the boys’ members start showing symptoms a week later.

By then, he would have had several practices with the team, and COVID-19 spreads to his coaches and teammates. That boys team would have to opt out of the IHSAA playoffs, effectively ending their season and chances at the state title. I don’t think the school’s residents and fans would like that much.

“My worst nightmare would be if we find out we get a positive case with a team going to the state championship the week of the game,” Yazel said. “It would be devastating. I don’t know how the state athletic association would handle that but it would be pretty unfortunate.”

It should be noted that Indiana has been seeing positive signs about COVID-19 spread in the state.

Read: Lovings-Watts is Jeffersonville’s top player in more ways than one heading into sectionals

From Oct. 5 to Feb. 12, the Indiana State Department of Health reported at least 1,000 Hoosiers tested positive for COVID-19 every day. On Nov. 12, 10 days after the girls' basketball season had started and 11 days before boys' basketball and boys' swimming seasons had begun, 8,451 Hoosiers tested positive for COVID-19. Floyd and Clark counties reported 177 cases combined that day.

ISDH also reported that from Oct. 4 to Feb. 15, there were more than 1,000 PUI (Persons Under Investigation) COVID-19 patients in a hospital bed every day.

Locally, both Floyd and Clark counties, like many other counties in the state, were in the red zone on Jan. 16, based on a formula of the number of new cases per 100,000 residents, the positivity rate and the recent change in that rate.

Currently, both counties moved down to 1.5 score (yellow zone) in mid-February. Clark and Floyd combined to report 190 cases total in the last seven days of February.

“It’s Indiana high school basketball. There’s a lot of pressure to keep the teams up and running,” Yazel said. “I was afraid maybe they tried to hide symptoms or something. But our teams have stayed in communication with athletic directors and they’ve done a great job of staying in touch with things. Considering the balk of the basketball season was in such peak time for COVID cases, I think they’ve done an amazing job.”

But when Yazel saw some pictures of not-socially distanced fans at the semistate, he reacted, “Yeah, that’s not ideal. ... That’s certainly not the way we wanted the crowd distributed so we’ve had some conversations with them.”

More: Undefeated Central girls basketball team out of LIT after positive COVID-19 test

The first resident from Floyd or Clark County tested positive for COVID-19 on March 15, 2020. The health department then revealed that he had attended the boys basketball sectional final at Seymour High School. I covered that game. Not knowing much about the virus at the time, I was scared. What if I came in contact with that individual? A month later, he died.

In Indianapolis, five people died after attending the boys basketball sectionals.

Sure, we know much more about COVID-19 than when the pandemic started a year ago. Some have even gotten accustomed to the new normal. But I’m sure we’d all like to go back to pre-

COVID-19 era when thousands of people packed a high school gym to watch playoff basketball and support our schools.

Boys basketball playoffs begin this week. Yazel would like to see better adherence to the protocols in those events.

“Don’t just depend on the powers whether it be restaurant or sporting event. Don’t just depend on them to enforce the distancing. Police yourself and say 'There’s too many people around here and I have some lung issues and I need to move away from people,’” he said. “It’s a community effort. We want to make sure everybody takes personal responsibility.

“The other thing we stress is it’s not just about you, it’s about those around you. You may say 'I’m young, healthy and don’t have any medical problems.' The guy sitting next to you may be totally different and you can’t always tell by looking at someone. Police yourself. Leaders of events have that responsibility. We as the health department have that responsibility. We’ve all got to work together as a community to make sure we’re doing things the right way.”

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