
HIGH-SCHOOL

State wrestling tournament to move forward with no spectators, Executive Committee says

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In a 7-6 vote, a motion to allow spectators for Saturday's individual state wrestling tournament was defeated by the South Carolina High School League's Executive Committee on Tuesday.

The event, scheduled for Saturday at Dreher High School, was the subject of a Tuesday morning meeting, as some members sought to find a way to include spectator attendance in plans for the tournament.

There were no spectators allowed at last week's Upper and Lower State finals, something that some Executive Committee members said they'd been unaware of. Tuesday's meeting sought a solution that would allow that to change for the state finals. Committee member Dr. Darryl Owings, superintendent of Spartanburg County School District 6, proposed splitting the event among four sites, one for each wrestling classification, and to allow four tickets per wrestler, with spectators allowed to enter and exit each site in order to watch their wrestler compete, giving way to other spectators as wrestling in weight classes progressed.

"I just think we need to bend over backwards and do whatever needs to be done to make this happen," Owings said.

SCHSL staff, however, said the prospect of changing the single-site tournament to one with multiple sites was daunting, particularly with state basketball championships beginning Wednesday at USC-Aiken and running through Saturday evening.

"I don't see how we can get it done this Saturday if it's not the way we have it planned," SCHSL Commissioner Jerome Singleton said. "I don't see how our staff can get it done this week (in the event of a move). Our entire plan was to get it done this week at this venue (Dreher). It would be very challenging for us. We're focusing on basketball, because we already had a plan in place for wrestling."

As the meeting continued, committee members were alternately in touch with schools willing to host as well as with the South Carolina Wrestling Coaches Association, which expressed a willingness to help find host schools and to staff and administrate the tournament.

“Coaches pull off tournaments all the time,” Owings said. “I’m sure they’re willing to help any way they can to allow these parents to see their children wrestle, many of them for the last time.”

Compounding logistical problems for the committee were COVID concerns, which are the reason for the ban on spectators. Many members noted that infection rate numbers in November, when the policy was put into place, are virtually the same as they are currently.

Timing was also an issue, with members noting that the decision on spectators was made months ago.

“This isn’t something that should have been unforeseen,” committee member Kyle Boczkowski said.

At least one local coach said he wished the committee’s decision had been different.

“I think the efforts of the fans who want to be present to contact these people and express that there is an issue is great,” Byrnes coach Russ Howard said. “That shows their support. My heart goes out to the parents, especially the parents of seniors, who might be wrestling in their last matches. If some forethought had been put into place prior to the last week or so, I think something could have been worked out.”

Howard also thinks the matches could easily have been split, and the Coaches Association could have been an ideal choice to direct the tournament.

“When you look back a few years ago, before the event was at Anderson, the SCHSL said it was too expensive to host at single sites on college campuses. They split it up, and each classification had a tournament at a single high school. It’s not like it hasn’t been done this way before. It was all together, then it was separated, and now it’s put back together. And running the tournament has been contracted out for the past few years, and before that the individual schools have run it. That’s what the association does. We run individual tournaments all the time.”