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Louisville, Kentucky

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SAFER SIDELINES

AN IN-DEPTH LOOK AT SUDDEN DEATH IN YOUTH SPORTS PART TWO

Athletes died while lawmakers fought

The Courier Journal traced years of inaction by legislators, school leaders when faced with deaths of high school athletes



Michele Crockett, mother of Max Gilpin, uses some water and a shirt to wipe off her son's grave on what would have been Gilpin's 26th birthday on July 19, 2019. He died after becoming overheated at football practice at Pleasure Ridge Park High School. MICHAEL CLEVENGER/COURIER JOURNAL

Stephanie Kuzydym

Louisville Courier Journal | USA TODAY NETWORK

The football players pushed on. • “We are going to run until someone quits,” their coach was heard saying. • They kept running in the intense Louisville heat, until one upper-classmen said he’d had enough. • “We have a winner,” a father heard the coach say.

Pleasure Ridge Park sophomore Max Gilpin had finished the drill, but now he was on his hands and knees.

He got up.

He fell down.

Two players dragged him toward midfield.

Someone grabbed a garden hose and sprayed him with luke-warm water. Three days later, on Aug. 23, 2008, Gilpin was dead, his young life cut short by heat stroke.

Since 1990, at least 10 Kentucky high school athletes have died during practice or conditioning.

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At Pleasure Ridge Park's first home football game on Aug. 21, 2009, a Max Gilpin flag flew above the score board with his No. 61 on it. PAM SPAULDING/COURIER JOURNAL

AT THUNDER

Different reasons brought people to downtown



People watch in Clarksville, Ind., as fireworks explode during the 2023 Thunder Over Louisville on Saturday. MATT STONE/LOUISVILLE COURIER JOURNAL

One air show spectator observes, ‘This is what America is all about’

Louisville Courier Journal
USA TODAY NETWORK

Flyovers, funnel cakes and fireworks – all signs that the countdown to the 149th Kentucky Derby has officially begun.

Thousands gathered Saturday at Waterfront Park in downtown Louisville and across the river at Ohio River Greenway Park in Clarksville, Indiana, for the Kentucky Derby Festival's 34th Thunder Over Louisville.

Early spectators, many of whom had staked out a viewing spot well before 10 a.m., were bundled up against the early morning chill as they waited for the airshow. While temperatures were around 60 degrees during the day, a steady wind made it feel colder and temperatures fell into the 40s by the time the fireworks started.

Taylor Owens and Jonathan Garcia, have lived in Indiana only for two years, and are two-for-two for making it to Thunder.

“It’s been awesome, the weather’s been a lot colder than it was the first,” Owens said as she and her fiancé Garcia bundled under blankets.

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ON THE INSIDE

More photos from the events, 6-7A



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Sidelines

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It wasn't until after the fourth, Gilpin, that state lawmakers decided to create a law requiring CPR and first aid training for high school coaches. But the law has no enforcement mechanism, and, The Courier Journal found, it's often disregarded.

Between 2009-20, four Kentucky athletes died of sudden cardiac arrest. Bills to require automated external defibrillators (AEDs) on high school sidelines twice failed to pass through the state legislature in that time.

As part of a seven-month-long investigation, The Courier Journal traced years of inaction on the part of Kentucky legislators and school leaders when faced with the death of high school athletes.

And it's the same story in state after state, from New York to Kansas to Texas — a child dies, a community is stunned, a cause of death is released, a catastrophe is deemed a tragedy. Then, it happens again.

It happened in northern Ohio in 2000 when two 15-year-old linebackers — Marcus Steele and Joshua Miller — died because of heart problems, just 14 days apart.

It happened in Florida, where two wrongful death lawsuits settled in 2020 for football players Zach Martin-Polsenberg and Hezekiah Walters, who died of heat stroke two years apart.

And in New York, when a ball hit lacrosse player Louis Acompora, 14, in the chest. He was one of four lacrosse players in a four-year span to die from the same cause. Twenty-two years would pass before all high school and college lacrosse players were required to wear chest protectors. That would happen largely because of the work of a foundation operated by Louis' parents.

"People are always looking at the value. 'OK, I have to put a defibrillator in my school and train all my teachers. How much is it going to cost? How much work is it going to take? Really, what is the likelihood of me having to use it?'" said Louis' mother, Karen Acompora.

"If you're not affected by something, then you're like, 'It's not going to happen here. It's not going to happen to me.' I think that's what takes a long time."

'My son's life was not saved': Parents work for change

Sometimes, death spurs legislation. It often begins with parent advocacy.

In Pennsylvania, it began with Rachel and John Moyer, who spoke out in 2001 after their son, Greg, collapsed during a high school basketball game and died. That led lawmakers to pass a bill that began putting AEDs in Pennsylvania schools.

Laurie Giordano testified to Florida state legislators in 2017, the year her son, Zach, died of heat stroke on the football field. It resulted in a new law requiring cold water immersion tubs — for quickly cooling down an overheated player — on high school sidelines.

Julie West testified in front of Indiana legislators about her son Jake's death in 2022. She did so, again, in February for the 2023 version of the failed bill.

"I'm here today because my son's life was not saved when he collapsed on the school's football field on Sept. 25, 2013, because an AED was not readily available. It was in the coach's office," West told lawmakers during the February hearing in Indianapolis.

As proposed, Indiana's bill would have required schools to create venue-specific emergency action plans and add AEDs to every sideline. Now, though, as amended, the bill would do neither.

While state athletic associations are often in favor of increased protections on high school sidelines, Indiana High School Athletic Association commissioner Paul Neidig told legislators "the devil's in the details."

Law passed after Louisville boy's death often ignored

It's been 15 years since Max Gilpin's death and the resulting law that required CPR and first-aid training for coaches in Kentucky.



Michele Crockett, mother of Max Gilpin, visits at the grave of her son. It would have been Max Gilpin's 26th birthday on July 19, 2019, and she brought balloons as she does every year. He died in 2008. MICHAEL CLEVINGER/COURIER JOURNAL



A picture of Max Gilpin on his 15th birthday. PROVIDED BY MAX GILPIN'S FAMILY

There is no penalty for a coach not having an up-to-date CPR certification in the state of Kentucky.

"It's one thing to have a policy, it's a second thing to have it implemented.... What motivation does the school have to follow the rules if there's no oversight?" asked Doug Casa, director of athletic training education at the University of Connecticut.

'The boy who died of football'

When Max Gilpin arrived at the hospital after collapsing on the football field at Louisville's Pleasure Ridge High School, his core temperature was 107 degrees.

The gold standard of care for heat stroke is to lower the body's core temperature below 104 degrees as quickly as possible, by submerging a person's core in a cold tub of water and ice.

"The evidence indicates if we can get their temp under 104 within 30 minutes, they're going to survive the heat stroke — and not just survive it, they're going to survive it without long-term complications," said Casa, who has found more than 2,400 heat stroke cases that did not result in death after body temperature was brought below 104 within 30 minutes.

That didn't happen for Max. His organs began to fail. His blood pressure dropped. He died three days later.

Under KHSAA rules, water breaks are required every 30 minutes when the heat index, which factors in the humidity level, is 95 degrees or above.

The day Max collapsed, it was at 94.

Pleasure Ridge Park football coach Jason Stinson later stated in a deposition that because the heat index was under 95, water breaks were a recommendation and optional, but he said he never denied players water.

Following Max's death, the KHSAA didn't change its heat index policy in regard to water breaks.

To this day, unless the heat index is 95 degrees or greater, water breaks are optional.

Max's parents declined interview requests for this story. Stinson's defense attorney did not return a request for comment.

Max's death brought national attention to high school athlete safety. He was dubbed "The boy who died of football" in a Sports Illustrated story.

A grand jury indicted Stinson on a reckless homicide charge. The then-commonwealth attorney Dave Stengel called it "putting football on trial."

"Football coaches are right up there with the Father, Son and Holy Ghost," Stengel told Sports Illustrated and later reiterated to The Courier Journal.

T-shirts in support of Stinson were sold at the school. Players marched in the streets of Louisville. They held signs.

A jury acquitted Stinson of all charges. He had his record expunged.

It was the first time a coach was crim-

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Are you concerned about the safety of your child's sidelines?

The Courier Journal, in partnership with Spalding University, is holding a special event that will include sports safety resources and solutions.

Panelists will include KHSAA commissioner Julian Tackett, Matthew Mangine Sr., co-founder of the Matthew Mangine Jr. "One Shot" Foundation, Dr. Alma Mattocks, Program Director for the Spalding University Master of Science in Athletic Training Program, and Rep. Kim Moser, who worked on recent Kentucky sports safety legislation. The free event will be held from 6 to 7:30 p.m. Wednesday, May 17, at Spalding University College Center Ballroom, 812 S. 2nd S. Doors open at 5:30 p.m. Free parking is available in the lot next door. Registration is required: <https://usatn.enmotive.com/events/safer-sidelines-2023>

Safer Sidelines

- Sunday:** Protections for high school athletes are being ignored. Kids are dying as a result

- Today:** While lawmakers haggled over cost of safety, young athletes died across US

- Tuesday:** Most Kentucky schools don't follow emergency planning law, leaving athletes at risk

- Wednesday:** Solutions for youth sports safety: How one state used data to make a difference

The Courier Journal found that law is often disregarded.

There is no way of knowing if all coaches statewide are CPR trained, beyond asking the individual districts for their status.

So, The Courier Journal requested CPR certifications from all 233 public Kentucky High School Athletic Association member schools. Of the 122 public high schools that responded, The Courier Journal found:

- 155 certifications were expired, with one as far back as 2016;

- At least one coach in 71 schools had expired certifications;

- 170 coaches renewed certification within 10 days after The Courier Journal sent its open records request for this da-

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School districts can input coaches' CPR certifications into a KHSAA system to track completion and expiration. The system is built to alert athletic directors and coaches when certifications come up for renewal.

But there is no KHSAA requirement to maintain records in the system, meaning the KHSAA has no way of knowing if coaching certifications expire.

"We give them the tools to self-monitor it," said Julian Tackett, the KHSAA commissioner. "But we are not the coach's employer, so we have no jurisdiction to tell them, 'You shall.'

"... It is 100% — not 95 — 100% the school district."

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PRP coach Jason Stinson prayed with the team before a game against Ballard on Sept. 5, 2008. MICHAEL HAYMAN/COURIER JOURNAL

Sidelines

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inally charged in the death of a high school athlete, but it wasn't the first time a high school football player died of heat stroke in Kentucky.

Before Max, Ryan Owens died in Henderson County in 2006. Before Ryan, Jeremy Brown died at Louisville Southern in 2004.

After Max, in 2009, Timothy Williams died of heat stroke while playing football at Fort Campbell.

Athlete safety bills defeated or watered down

Rep. Joni Jenkins, D-Shively, sat about six miles from the field where Max collapsed. She was having dinner with her dad, the former mayor of Shively, and brother as they discussed the news of the local boy who died of heat and what changes could be made.

"Somebody ought to do something," her dad said.

"Yeah, somebody oughta," she responded.

"Well, why don't you?" her dad asked.

During Kentucky's first regular legislative session following Max's death, Jenkins introduced legislation to make sidelines safer with House Bill 383.

It required automated external defibrillators (AEDs) on sidelines and cold tubs if the temperature was 94 degrees or higher.

The bill passed unanimously through the House Education committee and went to the Senate Education committee where Sen. Alice Forgy Kerr, R-Lexington, added an amendment that required high school coaches to complete a sports safety course, which included CPR certification.

The KHSAA already required coaches to take a training course, but the new mandate would require an online course taught by Kentucky-licensed medical professionals.

But then, the Senate Education Committee voted to alter the bill, removing AEDs and cold tubs, and instead requiring the KHSAA and state board of education to "study" them.

The bill passed 31 days after its introduction, in March 2009 — with no mention of AEDs or cold tubs.

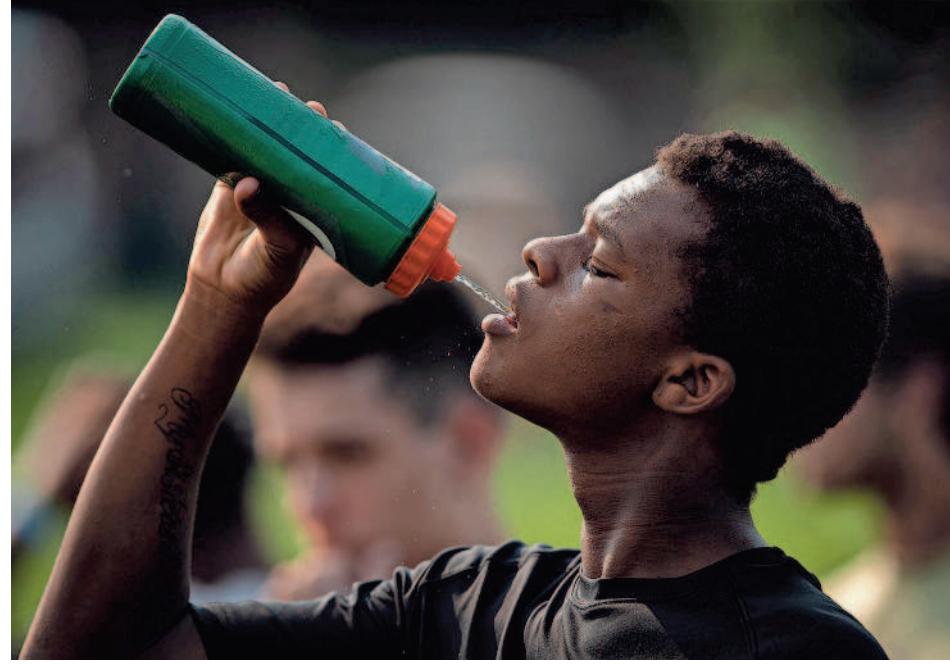
What happened?

"Funding," KHSAA commissioner Tackett explained, and "the cooling tub piece made sense to most of us, but there was a group on the cardio side that (said a) student athlete on a 100-degree day immediately going into ice was not a good idea."

The Courier Journal found no record of an athlete who has been submerged in cold water who has died from shock.

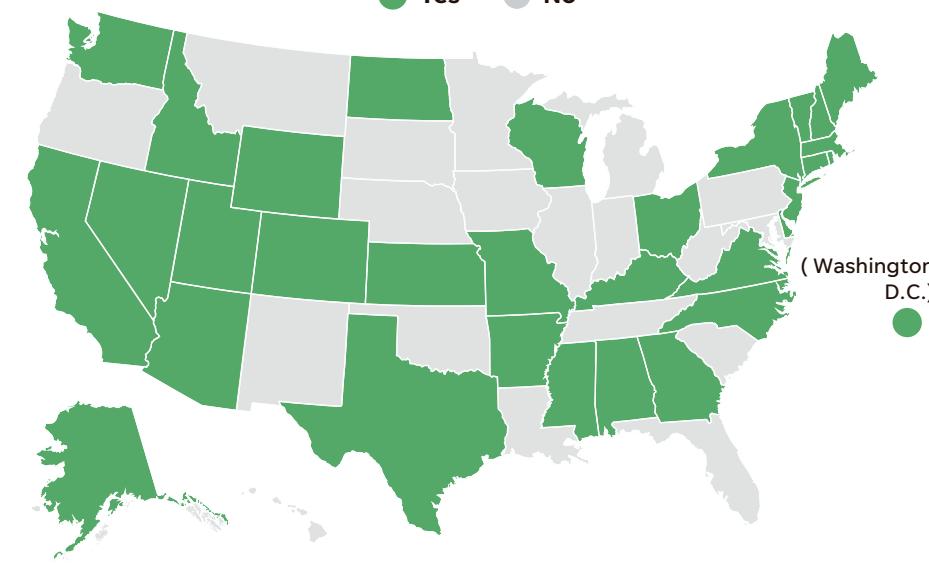
Years before Max collapsed, the National Athletic Trainers Association recommended cold water immersion in a 2002 position statement. The American College of Sports Medicine followed with the recommendation in 2007.

Meanwhile, later in the fall of 2009, after the bill's passage, high school freshman Waseeq Shahid went into cardiac arrest during basketball tryouts,

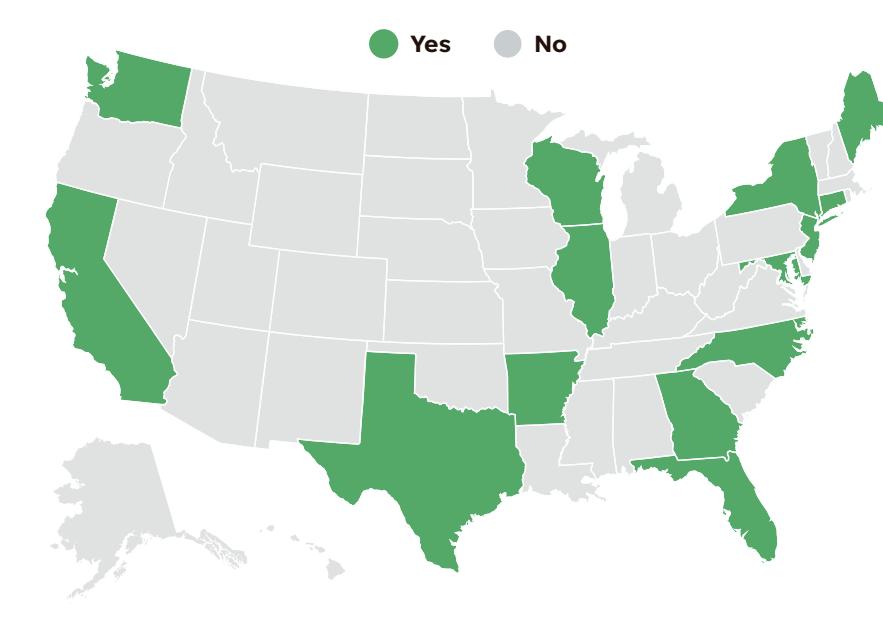


Players take a break for water as the Atherton High School football team practiced on July 21, 2021. ALTON STRUPP/COURIER JOURNAL

States that require CPR/AED and first-aid training for all coaches



States that require AEDs at each athletic venue



SOURCE Korey Stringer Institute
JENNIFER BORRESEN/USA TODAY

just three miles from the doors of the Kentucky statehouse.

Coaches administered CPR and called paramedics. No AED was used.

At that point, Shahid became the fifth athlete in five years to die in the state.

Three weeks after his death, on Nov. 9, 2009, the KHSAA shared the findings of the study group it had tasked to work on the problem, following the directive of House Bill 383. The group gave a presentation to legislators.

Rep. Derrick Graham, D-Frankfort, who worked on the bill with Jenkins, mentioned Shahid and the early version of the bill that had included an AED requirement.

"I would hope somewhere down the line that within this cycle of revision, that we won't have to pass legislation, that your organization will initiate and institute a policy..." Graham told the KHSAA.

He spoke of the cost being "little or nothing of about \$1,000."

"That sounds for some schools like a lot," Graham, said, "but (for) the life of a child, that's nothing."

The legislature would go on to tweak the law, revising it in 2012 to include guidelines for concussions and add venue-specific emergency action plans, which spell out what to do in an athletic emergency. The requirements for AEDs or cold tubs were again left out of those revisions.

In 2016, a bill regarding CPR training went as far as clarifying that AEDs are not required in schools, but are "encouraged."

In 2017 and 2018, Rep. Kim Moser, R-Taylor Mill, filed House Bills 252 and 278, respectively — both of which would require AEDs in schools.

Both were shot down as "unfunded mandates" by fellow lawmakers, meaning the government would require schools to put something in place without giving them the appropriate funds to follow the law.

This happened again in March, when fellow lawmakers watered down a bill backed by Moser that would have required AEDs in schools and on sidelines. It passed, but, like before, only recommends AEDs be placed in all middle and high schools, as funds become available.

Casa called Kentucky's latest law "total window dressing."

"When you do the math, any good AED lasts 10 years on average. If it's \$1,500, that's \$150 per year. And then you add batteries and pads to replace, so you're looking at maybe \$250 total in a 10-year stretch, not up front cost," Casa said.

"To think that there is no high school in America that couldn't afford that. That's one less helmet. It's a few less jerseys. It's something tiny. It's something very small. That's not an acceptable argument."

This project was produced in partnership with the USC Annenberg Center for Health Journalism's 2022 Data Fellowship.

Reach Stephanie Kuzydym at skuzydym@courier-journal.com. Follow her for updates to Safer Sidelines on Twitter at @stephkuzy.