

KHSAA lightning policy is strong, but what happens when it's ignored?

Game officials must watch for penalties -- and lightning, too

The Male High School stadium lights flooded the field.

The marching band blasted notes as cheerleaders shouted and fans clapped.

The football officials fixated on the play unfolding on the field, watching to ensure the rules were followed.

Did they notice that lightning flash? Or hear that thunder?

The Kentucky High School Athletic Association [has a lightning policy](#) that governs all outdoor games and practices for high school sports across the commonwealth.

It's considered a gold-standard policy, backed by research, science and medical expertise.

One of the premier lightning policy experts in the country, Eastern Carolina University professor and athletic trainer Katie Flanagan, wrote the policy.

"Safety is my jam," Flanagan told The Courier Journal.

The lightning policy, which Flanagan first wrote in 2000 and last amended in 2021, has since been adopted by the National Federation of High Schools (NFHS), the NCAA, even the Olympics.

"It's pretty simple," she said. "You don't have to have \$15,000 of equipment. It's 'You see lightning? You hear thunder? You're out of there.'"

But a policy, gold standard or not, is only as good as its implementation — and that's where Flanagan and another lightning expert say the problem lies, jeopardizing [the safety of Kentucky high school athletes](#) and spectators.

Doing 'two major jobs'

Ryan Dawson walked behind the sideline official to again warn him of lightning in the area.

It was just the second week of the season, and so far that night, the athletic trainer for Male High School had activated the school's heat policy, pushing the game's kickoff back to 8 p.m. because of high temperatures, and its lightning policy following flashes in the area during warm-ups.

Lightning returned [shortly after kickoff](#).

Nearly a dozen high school football games in the area were halted before play ever began.

But not the anticipated rematch of last season's Class 6A state semifinal between Ballard and Male. It played nearly an entire quarter.

"It was already surrounding us," Dawson said. "I made comments to our team excessively loud that I didn't feel like it was safe for any of us to be out there."

The call to suspend play, though, was no longer in the athletic trainer's hands.

Prior to the game, suspension of play because of lighting is up to the school, per the second section of the KHSAA's lightning policy.

Once a game begins, though, the policy shifts that call to the game officials.

Members of the National Lightning Safety Council, a group of lightning experts who work to educate on safety surrounding lightning, reviewed the KHSAA's lightning policy. Flanagan and Chris Vagasky, a meteorologist, are both on that council.

The shift to having the officials, who are in charge of ensuring rules are followed on the field of play, also be in charge of monitoring the weather, is where, they say, the policy breaks down.

"Whenever you have someone that's that busy, you can't possibly expect them to do two major jobs," Flanagan said.

Vagasky said the policy is similar to Major League Baseball, which puts the responsibility on the umpire crew chief to make a weather call once the first pitch is thrown.

"They have a lot of responsibilities, and then they're throwing in, 'Oh, keep an eye on the weather,' on top of that?" Vagasky said.

"Somebody who has been trained to know how to interpret radar or

look at lightning data and make decisions based on that is a much better idea than somebody whose focus is supposed to be on the game.

"That's why you don't usually see delays happen until it's pouring down rain because, really, the first time the person in charge is aware they need to delay is when they start getting rained on."

That's also why the NCAA has placed that responsibility on athletic trainers, considered the health care providers of the sidelines. The NCAA's policy gives athletic trainers the "[unchallengeable, autonomous authority](#)" to make the call regarding the health and safety matters of an athlete.

"It's just odd to have (it be) a referee," Flanagan said.

Of the nearly 290 KHSAA member schools, about 100 of them don't have an athletic trainer, which means the athletic director or other administrator can serve as the pre-game weather watcher.

The KHSAA's sports medicine advisory committee, which helped create the lightning policy, does not include an athletic trainer.

Colleges such as the University of Louisville have a designated weather monitor, whose sole job is to watch the skies.

Vagasky said it's not just about monitoring the weather, but also knowing how long it will take people to empty a stadium to get to a designated indoor safe area.

During the Ballard-Male game, fans experienced a downpour with lightning overhead as they ran to their cars or inside Male's gym.

"I couldn't find it, but I'd love to see what sort of training (the officials) get to take kids off the field," Flanagan said.

Contacted by The Courier Journal, Don Hudson of the Kentuckiana Football Association, who assigns officials to games throughout Jefferson County, said he was "unavailable for comment. I would defer you to the KHSAA for specifics regarding the lightning policy and its intended implementation as it relates to schools and officials."

The Courier Journal turned to KHSAA Commissioner Julian Tackett.

"It's convoluted," Tackett said. "They are independent contractors, who are supervised, technically, by an assigning secretary — who we are in on the hiring of — but the schools actually interview and select (the assigners)."

Asked about training for sports officials regarding how to call a game because of lightning, Tackett said: "We don't rely on fancy-dancy devices. High school level is about sight and sound. Do you see it? Do you hear it?"

Regarding the handoff from a school representative, such as an athletic trainer, to the game officials once play begins, Tackett said everyone working a game has multiple duties and things are done "collaboratively."

"It's the official's job to decide when to suspend play but it's everybody's job to think about safety, and that includes lightning...

"When that athletic director or game administrator doesn't do their job and get people out (of danger), it's just as much their problem as it is an official. The officials are concerned with players, teams and field

participants. They might have the responsibility for 200 people right next to them, and then the athletic director is still managing the facility itself. It's not a handoff. It's just the jurisdiction of when we can stop the game. We've had athletic directors step up and say, 'Stop the game.'

'When thunder roars, go indoors'

More than a dozen games in Jefferson County and the surrounding area were canceled during Week 2 because of the severe weather — and weather experts say the game between Ballard and Male should have been one of them.

Vagasky is a lightning safety specialist with the [National Lightning Safety Council](#). The council exists because, in the 1970s and '80s, hundreds of people died from lightning each year.

"(Now), lightning kills only about 20 to 25 people a year," Vagasky said. "It's still too many, but it's a big reduction because of education."

That includes the saying, 'When thunder roars, go indoors,' or the 30-minute weather rule, which states if you see lightning or hear thunder, a 30-minute suspension timer starts.

"Most people are struck by lightning when it's dry out," Vagasky said. "Because it's not raining at the stadium, they think that they're safe. But lightning can strike 10 to 15 miles away from the core of a thunderstorm, so you might be dry, but you're still at risk of lightning coming out of that cloud and striking you."

A self-proclaimed "weather Yoda," Vagasky used the National Lightning Detection Network to review what lightning events occurred between 6:31 and 10:48 p.m. on Aug. 25 within a 10-mile radius around Male's

stadium.

There were 5,794 instances of lightning.

That number includes in-cloud pulses and cloud-to-ground strikes, all of which are discharges of electricity.

"When lightning comes out of the sky, it's coming from the cloud to the ground at 200,000 miles per hour. You're not going to look up, see the lightning and get out of the way of it," Vagasky said.

But by the time the game was called with 57 seconds remaining in the first quarter, the National Weather Service had issued a severe thunderstorm warning, and the height of the storm was already on top of the stadium.

"The weather service is issuing these so people take action to protect themselves. So, to completely disregard that and continue play during a thunderstorm warning, whether professional or amateur, it boggles my mind that people wouldn't take that seriously and delay a game and get people to shelter," Vagasky said.

At no point during the game were there 30 minutes between lightning detections, he said.

'Faith and trust in the officials to do what's right'

Jefferson County Public Schools district athletic director April Brooks was driving to the Male-Ballard game when it was canceled.

"Officials are right there on the field throughout the game. Typically,

they are the ones who are going to call it — officials who are trained to be able to do their jobs and be able to handle it," Brooks said.

"Obviously, if there's a spectator or anybody that says they see lightning, we take that very seriously."

Dawson, the Male athletic trainer, told The Courier Journal there were so many lightning strikes in the area during the first quarter of the game, he "was getting constant notifications" from Weather Bug's Spark app on his phone.

[A local TV reporter tweeted a photo and video](#) that showed lightning flashing while players got in position for a play.

When asked about the video, Tackett, the KHSAA's commissioner, said: "I don't have any way to authenticate that. I wasn't there."

Brooks said: "From the investigation we did here, we didn't see anybody that saw lightning prior to when the game was called."

The Courier Journal requested a copy of the game footage through an open records filing, but JCPS declined to provide it, saying the footage was protected under copyright.

"I wasn't there to see what time it was called and what the weather was like when it was called, so I don't want to speak to something I didn't see," she said. "I don't know if it was called at the right time or later because I wasn't there to determine that, but I do have faith and trust in the officials to do what's right for the kids."

Less than a mile away, the Kentucky State Fair had alerted [fairgoers to lightning in the area at 6:35 p.m.](#), shutting down all outdoor events the rest of the evening.

In 2011, during the Indiana State Fair, a storm barreled through the fairgrounds during a Sugarland concert, breaking the stage apart. Nearly 100 fans were injured and seven were killed. In 2014, 19 total defendants, including the country duo and the concert promoter, [settled for nearly \\$50 million in a class-action lawsuit](#).

"Things started changing, especially with respect to state fairs," Vagasky said. "'Oh, we need to be paying attention to the weather.'

"Part of the problem, I think, is that nothing changes until there's an event that forces something to change. That may be the case at high school events. Until somebody is struck by lightning at a high school football game, people won't take things, necessarily, as seriously as they should."

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