

Coronavirus cancellations

■ Winter championships, start of spring sports canceled due to coronavirus

By Ronald Bond
The Observer

LA GRANDE — There will be no high school sporting events in Oregon until at least April.

Oregon’s high school winter sports season came to an abrupt end Thursday as the Oregon School Activities Association made a move similar to the NCAA and NAIA and canceled the remainder of the winter championship events. On Friday, the spring season took its own hit as the OSAA announced it is canceling all spring practices and competitions through March 31.

The news of the latest waves of cancellations comes in light of Gov. Kate Brown’s decision to cancel schools throughout the state through March 31 in an effort to stop the spread of coronavirus, or COVID-19.

“During this suspension we will evaluate the evolving public health situation with the Oregon Health Authority, the Oregon Department of Education, the OSAA Executive Board, the OSAA Sports Medicine Advisory Committee and member school administrators from throughout the state to determine when, or if, to resume the spring season,” the OSAA stated Friday morning in a brief press release.

The move to cancel the first two weeks of the spring season comes a day after the OSAA canceled the remainder of its winter sports championship events — which included the 4A state basketball tournament both La Grande and Baker were set to begin play in Thursday — and after the Cascade Collegiate Conference decision to cancel its sporting events through March 29.

Tha NAIA also canceled the remainder of its winter sports championship events, which includes the wrestling tournament the EOU women’s wrestling team was set to begin competing in Friday.

The OSAA late Wednesday had already begun making decisions to limit the possible transmission of the coronavirus when it announced it was barring fans from attending the basketball tournament



Staff photo by Ronald Bond

Optimist Field at Pioneer Park — the home of the La Grande baseball team — and the rest of the state’s high school sports venues will be vacant for at least the next two weeks. The OSAA Friday canceled spring practices and events until March 31 in conjunction with Gov. Kate Brown’s decision to close schools until that time. The move comes one day after OSAA canceled the remainder of the state’s winter championship events and after the Cascade Collegiate Conference announced a similar move to cancel contests until March 29.

games.

La Grande head coach Brian Wright said as the team began to prepare for its game against Astoria Thursday he wondered if OSAA would elect to cancel the entire tournament.

“We turned on SportsCenter (Thursday) morning, they’re talking about (how) the ACC canceled the tournament, six of the major (conferences) are canceled,” he said, and he thought, “It could happen to us.”

Wright said the coaches learned of the news at a late-morning coaches meeting.

“They were ready for us to play games,” Wright said, noting the courts were set up for the contests, “and they said the decision has been made to cancel the tournament. Obviously it’s a shock.... And some of it doesn’t sink in immediately.”

The coach said he felt the worst for the seniors on the team.

“They worked really hard this year, and it’s really sad they’re not going to get an opportunity,” he said, later adding there were “tears shed, not just by the kids but the coaches too.”

Wright said that while there was the question asked of why the games couldn’t move forward — even with the prior restriction that would have had the two teams playing in a fanless gym — that his

athletes handled it in a “mature” fashion.

“I had some pretty good conversations with the five kids in my car driving home,” he said. “It’s going to take a few days, a lot of things (to process). It’s hard to know how to deal with them. Some of these kids are concerned with what’s going to happen with the softball team. It’s a lot to take in all at once. I thought the kids were mature about it.”

Later in the day, the CCC announced it was canceling its sporting events until March 29, commissioner Rob Cashell Thursday stated in a press release from the conference. For EOU, that means its next 10 softball games and its track meets for the rest of the month are off the schedule.

“After very thoughtful consideration our Council of AD’s and Council of President’s support the suspension of CCC competitions for a period of time,” Cashell said in the press release. “The hiatus will allow us all an opportunity to assess the very fluid health crisis going on around the world and determine the best steps moving forward that are in the best interest of the health and welfare of the student-athletes on each of our campuses.”

The conference has formed a task force to monitor the situation.

Cashell told The

Observer Friday that should the spring season be resumed after the moratorium, how the CCC would handle scheduling would be based on the NAIA’s plans with spring championships and on the progression of COVID-19.

“Everything’s going to be predicated on what the NAIA comes out with,” Cashell said. “We don’t know what we’re dealing with at the national level.”

Cashell noted that the CCC is in a unique situation because for the spring season it has schools in four states and two countries — Oregon, Washington, Idaho and Montana, and British Columbia in Canada.

“A lot of different policies — a lot of different state policies,” he said, adding the conference has schools in some areas that have not yet been greatly impacted by coronavirus, and others that have been hard hit. “It’s a lot to navigate through, and that’s why it was really important for us to press pause and hopefully by doing that we’re not putting anyone at risk.”

The NAIA, in its release Thursday that announced the winter championship cancellations, stated it will monitor developments of the disease to determine what it will do for the spring championships.

OSAA then followed Friday morning with its announcement to cancel all

sporting events until March 31.

La Grande athletic director Darren Goodman was not at all surprised by the latest move by the association, and said the La Grande School District had already taken a similar step.

“Anytime you’re working with OSAA or (a) school district they want to err on the side of safety,” he said. “Our school district actually canceled before OSAA did. Our district closed everything until April 1.

“It’s not easy, but at the end of the day you want to do what’s best for the kids and err on the side of safety,” Goodman said. “I love sports, you love sports, but there’s more at stake here than just sports. There’s a bigger picture here than just the cancellation of a few games.”

Among the games lost by the decision are the LHS baseball team’s trip to Arizona for a set of games slated to be played in late March. Meanwhile in Union, it means the annual Spring Break Bash hosted by the Union/Cove softball team has been nixed, which is among 10 early-season games the team will miss.

“It’s very discouraging (but) I understand it,” Union/Cove head softball coach Paul Phillips said. “I feel bad for our kids, but what do we do? I’m just worried it’ll extend beyond April 1.”

NCAA tried to save March Madness

By Ralph Russo
The Associated Press

As it became apparent the NCAA basketball tournaments could not be held over three weeks because of concerns about the coronavirus, organizers scrambled to devise a plan for a 16-team event to salvage the postseason in one long weekend.

NCAA vice president of men’s basketball Dan Gavitt told AP he started to consider ways of condensing the tournament Wednesday night after the NBA announced one of its players tested positive for the virus and the league suspended its season.

The NCAA canceled its basketball tournaments and all other remaining championship events on Thursday in response to the coronavirus pandemic. That came a day after the association had announced it planned to play the games while restricting fan access.

On Saturday, Gavitt presented the idea to the men’s basketball selection committee. He said the hope was to play games starting Thursday in Atlanta. The city had been scheduled to host the Final Four on April 4 and 6.

The idea was to have the selection committee choose the top 16 teams in the country, regardless of conference, to participate. The first three rounds would have been played Thursday-Saturday, with a championship game Monday night. Gavitt said eight or nine of the 32 Division I conferences could have been represented.

Gavitt said there was some hope early Thursday that a full tournament could still be played. As that faded, the idea of holding a smaller event got “mixed interest” from committee.

“There was a real concern about not being inclusive enough, with only 16 teams,” Gavitt said. “But the other thing that was in play at that point in committee members’ minds, and we saw this play out at conference tournaments, once an NBA player was infected, I think it started to really hit home for the players, from what I’ve heard from coaches by text message and anecdotally.”

The reality set in quickly that even a shortened tournament could not be pulled off without putting people at risk and the NCAA’s biggest event of the year was canceled Thursday afternoon.

NCAA plans to extend eligibility of spring sports athletes

By Doug Feinberg
The Associated Press

NEW YORK — The NCAA is planning to extend the eligibility of athletes on spring sports teams by one year to make up for the season lost to the new coronavirus.

The details of how the extra eligibility will work are still being ironed out.

All three NCAA divisions would potentially allow another year for athletes in the 14 spring sports, which include baseball, softball, lacrosse and golf. The decision comes after the NCAA announced Thursday that its winter and spring championships would be canceled as a pre-

caution against the spread of the coronavirus.

Some, but not all, conferences have announced that their spring sports teams would not continue their regular seasons.

“I think for the spring sports athletes, its a good idea. I like the idea of some kind of a make-good there and that’s the way to do it,” Big East Commissioner Val Ackerman said Friday.

The NCAA Division I Council Coordination Committee sent an email Friday notifying schools of its intention. The proposal is expected to pass.

“Details of eligibility relief will be finalized at a later time,” the NCAA said in a statement. “Addi-

tional issues with NCAA rules must be addressed, and appropriate governance bodies will work through those in the coming days and weeks.”

The NCAA needs to figure out logistics including scholarship limits, roster size and a few other nuances.

The association also is trying to determine what — if anything — it could do for winter-sport athletes. In basketball, many of the top players will have headed to the pros already, so granting another year wouldn’t do much for them.

Florida athletic director Scott Stricklin said he plans to push for legislation that would allow seniors

to return to school and for roster exemptions that would help make it happen.

“I think any senior who had a championship opportunity taken away because of this should get another year,” he said Friday. “I don’t know if the NCAA will take that up. But you have track athletes, you have gymnasts, you have swimmers and divers, and basketball, that what they worked for all year was taken away. I think we should give those kids another year. Whether that happens or not, I don’t know.

“Yeah, we’ll have that conversation,” he said. “That makes a lot of sense and it’s the humane, fair

thing to do.”

North Carolina lacrosse attacker Katie Hoeg, who is a two-time All-American and the school’s all-time leading scorer, has a teaching and coaching job lined up after she graduates this spring. She said she will make arrangements to return for some grad courses and play lacrosse next year if she’s allowed.

“I’m choosing my passion,” Hoeg said. “I can’t imagine ending my lacrosse career the way this season is going. I was pretty hopeful this would be a possibility. I’m really excited this decision has been made. It’s such a weird circumstance. This has never happened before. It would be pretty

unfair to have our careers or have this year taken away from us. I do agree with their decision because of the circumstances.”

The Ivy League, which hasn’t allowed athletes to pursue a fifth year at their schools in the past, said it is “working with our schools to identify and consider various issues, including those related to the ongoing eligibility of senior spring student-athletes.”

The NCAA also informed schools on Friday that a recruiting dead period is now in effect through April 15, banning all on-campus visits for recruits and off-campus recruiting travel for coaches.