

Uphill battle: OSAA executive board meets Dec. 7

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how to proceed with the winter season.

"The fact that the student athletes can't be basically in contact with each other, until that ban is lifted the effect will basically be that there's no possibility to do those sports as they normally would be," said Buell Gonzales Jr., athletic director for the Baker School District.

Pendleton Athletic Director Mike Somnis said he's seeking one thing: clarity.

"I think clarity is what everyone is needing right now, it's just the uncertainty we are all in," Somnis said. "Are we going to play? How is this going to work? We have a plan in place on (Dec. 28th, and starting games on (Jan.) 11th, but some of the restrictions in place will allow us to get to that point."

Stanfield Athletic Director Daniel Sharp feels that the OSAA should be doing more.

"I don't think they (OSAA) are doing a whole lot with anything, I think they are taking their marching orders from the health authorities and the governor's office," Sharp said. "I think people are ready to adjust and make it happen. It's just kind of those regulations and the fear of schools hosting and being sued."

Starting in September, OSAA allowed schools to have a series of three "mini-sessions." Each monthlong session allowed practices, and some unof-



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

The Echo Cougars defeated the Elgin Huskies 49-36 in the first round of the OSAA 1A Basketball State Championship in Echo on Feb. 25, 2020.

ficial interschool contests, starting with traditional spring sports, followed by fall sports and finally winter sports. The mini-session for winter sports started Nov. 17 and continues through Dec. 18, although practices are on hold during the two-week statewide "freeze" that continues through at least Dec. 2.

Darren Goodman, athletic director at La Grande High School, said the mini-sessions have been beneficial.

"It's been good, we've been making sure we've been following safety procedures in practices," Goodman said.

His feelings were echoed

by Athena-Weston Athletic Director Shawn White.

"We've just been having practices with what's allowable," White said on Nov. 12.

Jason Crenshaw, athletic director at Joseph High School, said he and his colleagues have had to learn to adjust, and to not expect any schedule to happen without changes.

"It's hard to plan your year, we (athletic directors) have to plan ahead and it's really hard to anticipate what would happen with this pandemic," Crenshaw said. "You have to plan like it's not going to be there when you get to that point."

White said he sympathizes with athletes who

have been waiting so long to compete, and now might be deprived of a winter sports season.

"They just want to have a season, and they are obviously in the same boat as everybody else is," White said. "We are just wondering what can they do."

In the meantime, Goodman said he focuses on the activities that are allowed.

"We are going to do whatever it is that we can do; conditioning, skill work, things that you are allowed to do," he said.

Gonzales said he is preparing to move ahead with a winter sports season if the OSAA executive board makes that decision during its Dec. 7 meeting.

"We will do everything we can within the guidelines," he said. "It's been super frustrating for our kids and families to have to go through this. The district, athletic department and the coaches have done a really good job of offering opportunities for the kids."

Somnis intends to reassess the scenario at Pendleton High School as soon as the OSAA executive board has made a decision.

"Whatever comes out of that meeting, we will have to assess where we are at and where we are going to be, and what our ability to actually play not only season two and into season three and season four," Somnis said. "We will be very proactive making sure the kids have an outlet in some form or other."

Hermiston: As of now, Oregon school sports are set to start Dec. 28

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winter sports until Feb. 1, and shortened the season from eight weeks to seven. Practice for traditional winter sports was scheduled to begin Dec. 28.

The decision came two days after Washington Gov. Jay Inslee implemented statewide COVID-19 restrictions that will remain in place until Dec. 14.

"Sometimes, it's hard to keep up with everything," Hermiston athletic director Larry Usher said. "We were proactive and shut down all athletics for two weeks."

Moss said she has had her team in the gym two to three days a week since the end of September, and that several of her players trained during the summer.

"We have several girls who were playing on elite teams, and others with individual trainers," Moss said. "They have put in a lot of work. I've been impressed with their leadership. When the season comes around, they will be ready."

Usher said the Mid-Columbia Conference met last week and put together a plan to start winter sports Feb. 1. They sent their plan to the WIAA.

"We needed to be more proactive and realistic," Usher said. "With the new government shutdown, there was no way we were going to start Dec. 28."

Usher said the MCC is putting value on participation, even if that means a shortened season and a non-traditional schedule.

"It's the right thing to do right now," Usher said. "When it comes to scheduling, we will be as creative as we can. The big question is with things getting moved back to Feb. 1, if that is realistic. If so, are they going to be able to participate in high-risk sports (wrestling and basketball)."

At one time, the WIAA proposed moving fall sports to January, but that plan was quickly tabled.

"Slow pitch softball, cross-country and soccer in the snow is not productive," Usher said.

Usher said all nine member schools of the MCC are on the same page when it comes to getting student athletes back in action.

"We are concerned about the mental and physical well being of our kids," Usher said. "We feel bad for them. We want to see participation for our kids."

With the winter sports being pushed back, the other seasons also have new start dates in 2021.

The traditional fall sports (football, volleyball, cross-country, girls soccer and slow pitch softball) will begin practice March 15. Football will begin March 8.

Spring sports (baseball, softball, track, golf, tennis and boys soccer) will start April 26.

In Oregon, Gov. Brown's mandate prohibits all K-12 school sports indoors, including conditioning, training and competition. Outdoor training is still allowed, provided there is no contact of any kind, and masks must be worn at all times.

While Washington schools have pushed the start of winter sports back to Feb. 1, Oregon schools still are scheduled to begin Dec. 28, with competition to start Feb. 11.

The Oregon School Activities Association will have a board meeting Dec. 7 to discuss whether winter sports can go on as planned.

The Oregon Health Authority has prohibited full-contact sports, such as basketball and wrestling. The restrictions cannot be waived by the OSAA.

With sports seasons being moved and shortened, the 2A boys and girls state basketball tournament at the Pendleton Convention Center has been canceled.

The tournament is second only to the Pendleton Round-Up in economic impact for area businesses.

OHA: Pendleton basketball will train outdoors

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while coaches will be meeting online with athletes during the freeze.

"We moved to a virtual format where the coaches will connect with kids individually and provide direction and provide an opportunity to connect," Gonzales said. "That is going to continue as long as we are in this freeze."

In Pendleton, Somnis said indoor sports, such as basketball, will transition to outdoor training with the hope that a regular winter sports season will start Dec. 28. He said other sports might also have outdoor workouts.

The Oregon School Activities Association (OSAA) executive board is slated to meet Dec. 7 to decide whether to move ahead with that plan.

"If any coaches want to do anything outside under the curtain guidelines for outside conditioning they can, I know our tennis program intends to meet to have the kids do a little running," Somnis said. "I think



Ben Lonergan/East Oregonian, File

Pendleton's Josie Wilson (7) drives down a hit during the first set against the Ridgeview Ravens. The Ravens defeated the Pendleton Buckaroos in three sets at Pendleton High School on Oct. 24, 2019.

boys basketball may look into using the track to get a

little conditioning in." He said the unexpected

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interruption in practices was particularly disappointing because Pendleton athletes had been taking advantage of the opportunities during the mini-sessions throughout the fall.

"The last 10 weeks have been great, our weight training classes, our dance teams and our volleyball team have been able to use the gym for workouts, conditioning and practices and we haven't had a single issue," Somnis said.

Though the two-week freeze is a setback, Goodman is steadfast in pursuing the main objective — maintaining responsibility, getting back to playing sports and above all keeping everyone safe.

"We all want sports back, we all want the athletes to have those experiences, but we also have to be responsible and if the numbers are high right now then let's protect our kids," Goodman said.

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