

BAKER HIGH'S ESPORTS TEAM STILL IN MOTION DESPITE CORONAVIRUS

For one sport, social distancing is a snap

By Corey Kirk
ckirk@bakercityherald.com

In a matter of just a few weeks, ball fields emptied, the track is desolate, and the tennis courts are silent.

Virtually, though, the Baker Bulldogs are strategizing in teams, building structures on Minecraft and surviving a battle royal on Fortnite. In a time where the coronavirus pandemic has halted all things sports, the Baker High Esports team continues to compete and play.

"It's been a learning experience but it's been a lot of fun," said Chris Wittich, who coaches the Baker High School team that started last fall and competes in online video games.

"Most kids didn't realize this is something they could do in high school," Wittich said. "We were get-

ting interest all over the place."

To charter the team, Wittich had to create a relationship with the High School Esports League. Working with over 3,000 different schools across North America and Asia, the league's help was pivotal in the development of the BHS program, providing the proper equipment to begin playing.

"They were really helpful in getting us set up," Wittich said. "We signed up through their website, and they helped talk us through everything."

Building the BHS team came easy for Wittich. As soon as he posted for sign-ups last fall, close to 60 students inquired about joining.

"He (Mr. Wittich) described the aspects of the whole club such as weekly games, practices at the school, and the whole tryout process," BHS senior Anthony Cowan

said. "It definitely piqued my interest."

Some may question how Esports fits in the world of sports, but although it doesn't require the same physical preparation as, say, wrestling or basketball, Esports is a mental challenge.

"Esports is a sport that takes a different approach, yet it still has many of the key aspects that other sports provide such as teamwork, strategy, and mental adaptability," Cowan said.

Though there are thousands of games to choose from, the Bulldogs have focused on several that highlight their strength, including Rainbow Six Siege and Counter Strike Go.

Three players placed in the playoffs for Minecraft this winter. Ian Dinger advanced to the quarterfinals, Zachary Wise to the

pre-quarters and Jordan Smith to the preliminary round.

"It was really encouraging, and it was a lot of fun," Wittich said.

As the entire sports world came to a screeching halt after coronavirus began to spread in February and March, Esports was able to transition. Players can compete from home, although the lack of equipment has made that a challenge.

"At the school, we were provided with a setup that allowed the games to run flawlessly, but at home that is not entirely the case," Cowan said. "Some people may not have Wi-Fi connections strong enough to allow gameplay, or their PC may not be adequate enough to run the game as smoothly as other setups."

Now faced in these new times of being socially distant, Wittich

knows he will be challenged as a coach, but he wants to encourage players to remain positive as they continue to improve.

"I can't really observe play anymore," Wittich said. "The players have to step up and be self-directed."

He's also pondering whether the Esports team will compete in more than just the winter season.

"Not sure we are going to go all three seasons during the school year," Wittich said. "We are definitely taking summer off"

He's encouraged about the prospect for adding to the team's roster in the future.

"I'd like to continue to grow the program, and we've had a lot of excitement from junior high kids," Wittich said. "We got a lot of interest in Esports and people hearing that it was available."

Fans need to consider the possibility: No sports in 2020

By Tim Dahlberg
AP Sports Columnist

The unthinkable, at least for sports fans, already has happened.

The games, as we know them, are shut down. We'll never know if San Diego State was a Final Four contender or if Tiger Woods would have defended his green jacket at the Masters.

There was no opening day in baseball. The odds are increasingly good there will be no Stanley Cup Final or NBA champion in the year 2020.

And now it's time to consider the unimaginable, at least when it comes to fun and games as we once knew them.

That means no college football this fall. No Super Bowl next February.

No sports at all as long as the new coronavirus keeps killing people across the country.

Presumably, the commissioners of this country's major sports leagues already know that. They understand the kind of things — immediate widespread testing tops the list — that would have to happen to allow play to begin again.

If not, a brief review of what the chief medical officer of the NFL told Barry Wilner of The Associated Press is in order.

Read between the lines — actually, just read the lines — and the prospects of an NFL season later this year seem bleak, no matter how much the president of the United States would like to see sports come back quickly.

"We have got to get a much better handle on the actual spread of this virus and how many new cases there are," said Dr. Allen Sills, a neurosurgeon who has been with the NFL since 2017. "How it

is transmitted and how we can mitigate it. We have to get to the point that when someone is tested as positive to the virus that does not mean an immediate quarantine. If that is the case, you can't think about opening up a team sport."

That is not how President Donald Trump sees it. He convened a conference call of major sports leaders on Saturday to give them a pep talk on sports coming back and indicated he would like to see it happen by September which, not coincidentally, is the scheduled start of the NFL season.

"I want fans back in the arenas," Trump said later in a briefing at the White House. "I think it's ... whenever we're ready. As soon as we can, obviously. And the fans want to be back, too. They want to see basketball and baseball and football and hockey. They

want to see their sports."

On that, most everyone can agree, no matter their political persuasion. Sports offers a pleasant diversion in ordinary life, and it becomes even more important during a time of crisis.

It's why baseball continued during World War II. It's why the NFL played two days after President John F. Kennedy was assassinated and why both Major League Baseball and the NFL rushed to get back on the field in the wake of the terrorist attacks of 9/11.

The new coronavirus, though, is as sneaky as it is deadly. Even experts have a hard time figuring out the different ways it spreads and how to protect against it.

And no amount of banging on the bully pulpit is going to stop it from coming to a stadium or arena nearest you.

Imagine going to a NFL game in September. Do they scan your forehead when they scan your ticket? Will you

have to present evidence of a negative virus test? Do you really want to sit next to a stranger and worry for three hours about what he or she might be carrying?

The beer lines would be scary and waiting to use the urinal even more frightening.

Indeed, the logistics of simply holding a game would be staggering. And playing in one might be a risk that even NFL players won't want to take.

Everyone from players to the ball boy in a locker room would have to be tested, that's a given. But the tests would have to be plentiful and they would have to be instantaneous. Everyone would need to be tested at least once a week, at minimum, and even that might not be enough.

And if someone tests positive, then what? Do you cancel the game? The season? Does an entire team go into quarantine just as the playoffs near?

And what if the governor of one state won't allow games

even as the governor of another does?

There's too much that isn't known to even take the risk. And in California, where three NFL teams play and a new \$5 billion stadium is nearing completion in Los Angeles, Gov. Gavin Newsom is already on the record as expressing skepticism the season will open on time.

"I'm not anticipating that happening in this state," Newsom said.

A statement like that would have been unthinkable just a month or so ago. But as the death count rises, the idea of an NFL season this year will seem even more fanciful a month from now.

The virus will make the timeline, as Dr. Anthony Fauci, the U.S. government's foremost infection disease expert, has been saying to anyone who will listen.

Unfortunately, it's becoming increasingly clear that timeline won't include any more games this year.



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