

BULLDOGS

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Sand said his players were glad to return to practice in the new year. “They were excited to get back into the gym, get things going and kind of get back into routine,” Sand said. “They’ve been out of the gym for so long, and they’ve had so many things taken away from them because of the circumstances.”

The Bulldogs’ return to the court was short-lived.

Oregon Gov. Kate Brown announced on Tuesday that Baker County will return to the extreme-risk category on Friday, Jan. 15. Indoor sports, including practices, will be prohibited again at least through Jan. 28.

Games to come this winter?

Whether the recent basketball practices mark the start of a process that culminates with Baker athletes competing against their counterparts from other schools remains uncertain.

On Dec. 7 the executive board of the Oregon School Activities Association (OSAA), which oversees prep sports in the state, canceled its plan to start winter sports — basketball, wrestling and swimming — on Dec. 28.

Instead, the OSAA board pushed back the start of high school sports to Feb. 22, 2021.

Under the current proposal, traditional fall sports — football, volleyball, soccer and cross-country — would start first. Their seven-week season would start with practices on Feb. 22, and the first games March 1.



Kathy Orr/Baker City Herald File Photo

Baker’s Jozie Ramos in action against La Grande in a February 2020 game.

Traditional fall sports would be followed by traditional spring sports, from April 5 through May 24, and the year would conclude with traditional winter sports from May 10 to June 27.

With regular practices possibly starting in little more than a month, Gonzales is optimistic that Baker County can drop back to a lower level that allows practices starting Jan. 29. (Risk level designations are on a two-week basis.)

“I just hope we stay under the extreme, so our facilities could stay open,” Gonzales said. “It’s just such a crazy time.”

In the meantime, Gonzales said he talks frequently with BHS coaches. “Just making sure they are ready for the season, making sure the coaches have all of their certifications done,” Gonzales said.

In addition to preparing for prac-

tices, Gonzales said he and his fellow athletic directors have had discussions about scheduling games later this winter and continuing into the spring.

“On our end, the more administrative end, with local ADs trying to narrow down dates and how we can make travel work,” Gonzales said. “There’s just a lot of questions, and there seems to be more questions than answers, so the further we dig, it seems like the more questions we have. It’s just going to take time.”

“We’re ready, once we start to get to know the guidance, we’re ready to go. It’s just such a complicated issue, but it’s starting to take shape,” Gonzales said. “It’s the typical normal conversation that you have from the beginning of the year, just getting your ducks in a row, making sure of all the stuff you need for the season, that you get those ordered.”

Gonzales has posted tentative schedules for BHS teams on the OSAA’s website, www.osaa.org. Whether those competitions happen as scheduled remains to be seen.

Baker’s football team, for instance, is slated to play five games, on five consecutive Fridays, starting with a game at Vale on March 5, followed by home games against Burns on March 12 and Ontario on March 19, a game at La Grande on March 26, and a home game against Nyssa on April 2.

“I think if football can continue, can start or can play, I think that will give a lot more hope to these kids that other sports will start and finish their season,” Jones said.

The volleyball team has 10 matches tentatively scheduled, the first on March 1 at home against Burns.

Baker’s girls and boys cross-country

teams could compete in six meets, the first on March 3 at Vale. Baker’s home invitational meet is tentatively scheduled for March 10.

Tentative schedules for other Baker teams are posted on the OSAA website at <https://www.osaa.org/schools/17>

Peter Weber, OSAA’s executive director, told The (Bend) Bulletin last week that although March 1 remains the tentative first day for athletic competitions, shortening the proposed seasons, along with cancellations, remain possible.

“I think you get to the point where you can only condense something so much,” Weber said. “I don’t know that we are there; if we aren’t, then we are really close.”

Sports complement academics

Although Gonzales focuses on athletics, he believes academics are the highest priority. He hopes BHS students, who have been attending in-person classes one day per week since Nov. 9, can return to their classrooms two days per week when the second semester begins Jan. 25.

“We need to be in-person school, in order to be in-person school our numbers have to be at a certain spot out of the extreme, so just maintain that focus and be patient,” Gonzales said.

He sees sports as complementary to classes, giving students a well-rounded experience.

“The goal is to provide student-athletes (chances) to learn life lessons, and skills that could help them, (and) in order to do that we have to be in-person,” Gonzales said. “Every

day you just have to stay consistent, you have to stay positive and you have to continue to move in the direction to make choices that are going to get you there.”

“We are continuing to look down the line, when the weather turns we will definitely be ready to go outside, as soon as we hit (Feb. 22) I know we will be able to play volleyball right off the bat, whether or not we will be allowed to play football has yet to be seen, we have things in the works to help them (football players) to get recognition and have some sort of experience that could be positive.”

Because football, basketball and wrestling are considered full contact sports, they are more likely to be restricted due to COVID-19 concerns.

With the pandemic passing its 10-month point, Gonzales said he continues to strive to take advantage of every opportunity to have BHS students participate.

“I know that everybody just wants to see our kids compete, have fun, create those memories and those experiences that they’ll cherish,” Gonzales said.

Sand, whose 2019 team remains the reigning Class 4A champions, agrees.

“You can agree with it or not agree with it on how to handle the circumstances of the situation that was handed to us, but I know the community is behind us, and that is the biggest part, families get behind each other, teammates get behind each other,” Sand said. “That is what’s going to get us through the other side of this.”

EXTREME

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Business was brisk last weekend, and Brown said he had nine to 10 employees working.

With the county returning to the extreme-risk category, and restaurants limited to takeout, Brown said he’ll need just three or four workers.

“It’s incredibly frustrating,” Brown said of the biweekly shifts from limited indoor dining to takeout. “We are

not in control of our future.”

As a county with a population between 15,000 and 30,000 (Baker County has about 16,800 residents), Baker is in the extreme-risk category if it exceeds either of two measurements:

- a test positivity rate of 10% or higher during a two-week measuring period
- 60 or more new cases over the two-week measuring period

The county’s risk level, for Jan. 15-28, is based on COVID-19 figures from Dec.

27 through Jan. 9.

Baker County Commissioner Mark Bennett said on Tuesday afternoon, Jan. 12, that state officials pegged the county’s total of new cases during the period at 64, while the county had a tally of 62.

Either figure exceeds the threshold of 59 new cases.

The county’s test positivity rate of 12% also put the county in the extreme category.

Bennett said he told state officials that the Baker County Health Department’s

case investigations and contact tracing have not shown that restaurants and bars are a significant source, if at all, of infections. But so far state officials have not agreed to allow county officials to set restriction levels based on local conditions.

The difference in restrictions between the high- and extreme-risk levels applies largely to restaurants, bars, fitness centers and gyms,

theaters and museums.

Restaurants and bars

- Extreme risk: Indoor dining prohibited; outdoor dining allowed with a maximum of 50 people, six people, from no more than two households, per table. Required closure at 11 p.m.
- High risk: Indoor dining allowed, with a limit of 25% of capacity or 50 people, including customers and staff,

whichever is fewer.

Indoor fitness centers, theaters and museums

- Extreme risk: Prohibited
- High risk: Maximum of 25% of capacity or 50 total people, whichever is fewer

Long-term care facilities

- Extreme risk: Outside visits only
- High risk: Visits allowed, including indoors

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