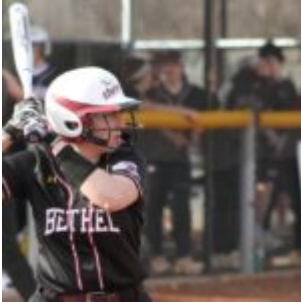


Local college athletes watch as seasons canceled due to COVID-19



Bethel College junior Emalee Overbay was off to a great start to her softball season with the Threshers before she saw her season canceled thanks to the COVID-19 virus.

Before the Kansas High School Activities Association announced it would be canceling the spring sports season Wednesday, colleges and their athletes were already days in to a horrible realization.

Both the NCAA and NAIA canceled all spring sports and their postseasons last week due to the spread of the COVID-19 virus that has left the entire country scrambling for an ounce of normalcy.

Louisburg High School graduates Emalee Overbay and Isabelle Holtzen are still trying to find it.

Overbay, Holtzen and college athletes across the country were shocked when they were informed their seasons that they had prepared for months for, was taken away in the

matter of minutes.

Although Holtzen and Overbay are considered underclassmen, and still have the opportunity to compete next season, the loss of the next two months of competition has been hard to swallow.

It was a life no one saw coming.

All was going well for Holtzen, who is a sophomore pole vaulter at the University of Northern Iowa. She competed in the indoor season over the winter and achieved some personal bests in the process.

Holtzen finished her indoor campaign on top as she took third at the Missouri Valley Conference meet with clearance of 3.63 meters (close to 12 feet). That placing earned her all-conference honors for the first time in her career.

"Indoor season this year was honestly a bit of a challenge for me," Holtzen said. "Early on in the year, I was able to PR, but then kinda fell into a slump about halfway through. It was extraordinarily frustrating as I was dealing with a bit of an injury and wasn't performing as well as I wanted. Luckily, I have amazing teammates, coaches and family that helped me figure it out. I was very excited to be able to receive all-conference honors, especially since it ended up being my last meet of the year."



Northern Iowa sophomore Isabelle Holtzen had just competed her indoor track season with all-conference honors before she found out her outdoor campaign was shut down.

The thought of canceling the season hadn't even crossed Holtzen's mind as she found herself at practice just days later getting ready for a team meeting to talk about the upcoming outdoor season. It was there where she heard the news.

"It truly was a surreal moment, looking around at my fellow athletes and seeing the disbelief, disappointment and sadness in everyone's eyes," she said. "No one could believe that it was real. It was so sad to see the seniors realize that they would never get to put their uniform on and compete for UNI again."

The same could be said for Overbay.

She had already kicked off her

softball season for the Bethel Threshers and was off to a promising start herself. Overbay had put up some good numbers and was recently named as the Kansas Collegiate Athletic Conference Player of the Week.

All that optimism quickly went away when the team was informed on a Friday morning that their season was over.

"None of it felt real, it still doesn't," Overbay said. "I never would have guessed that my season would have been cut short, or soon evaporated completely. When the news came out there other schools/colleges were shutting down, I was confused. I guess I didn't understand how serious the issue was. I was still very disconnected from the problem, assuming that nothing like that would happen to us.

"The news flooded me with emotion as there goes the possibility of playing my junior year. What was I going to do with softball, something that has been so consistent in my life, confusion as to why all this was happening, why are people canceling our sports, and I couldn't help but to think what was going to happen to my seniors. I met up with the three seniors after the announcement and we all cried together."

To help athletes try to get through the difficult time, the NCAA

approved an extra year of eligibility for those spring sports athletes that are affected.

As nice of an option as that was, going back for an extra year of school to compete in a sport that doesn't provide a full scholarship in many cases might not make sense for those involved.

"A lot of seniors already have jobs lined up and cannot afford to go to school for another year," Holtzen said. "While for some this extra year offers some relief, with my current plan I will not be able to utilize that year because I plan to graduate in four years."

The NAIA did much of the same the NCAA did, but like those athletes, it doesn't make much sense for them to attend college for another year when it isn't in their plans.

"This is great for the people who didn't have plans for the following year," Overbay said. "Looking at it through a seniors' perspective, it is hard to put one's life on hold, to put money towards another year of tuition when they could be finding a job, and starting a new chapter of their lives."

"A lot of this is just so inconvenient. I'm not sure what the girls are going to do, I'm not sure of what I myself will do. It's all such a confusing time. All I can do is have faith that God has a plan."

It has been difficult adjustment for athletes all across the country and is something no one could have planned for.

Instead, they find themselves trying to make the best of a bad, unfortunate situation.

“My teammates and I have definitely been leaning on each other to get through this,” Holtzen said. “Our blood, sweat and tears go into competing and hopefully getting a PR to earn a spot on the podium. To have that goal ripped away from us this year was heartbreaking.

“It really brought into focus to never take a minute for granted because you never know when it will be the last time you compete. Life is like a track meet – full of obstacles. This is just another bar to get over.”