

KSHSAA votes to start winter sports on time, will not allow spectators



The 2020-21 winter sports season may have a little different look than in the past, but there is one thing that will remain the same – the student athletes will be out competing.

During the Kansas High School Activities Association Board of Directors meeting Tuesday, the board voted in favor to have winter sports continue as scheduled by a 53-22 decision. The meeting was in response to the Executive Board's proposal last week to delay winter sport till Jan. 15.

Instead, schools around the state will be able to kick off their seasons in early December, and then after a moratorium for Christmas Break, can resume competition on Jan. 8. The basketball, wrestling and swim teams will also be able to have a full schedule of events, barring cancellations due to the spread of COVID-19.

"I'm extremely happy and relieved on how KSHSAA voted regarding winter sports being able to happen," Louisburg senior Megan Foote said. "Sports are extremely important to students as it not only helps with physical health, but also provides a release for mental health. Athletes can depend on sports to be an outlet for the troubling feelings they may have. As someone who struggles with mental health, I can vouch for how important sports are. Sports provide some of the best

memories and times a kid can have and I believe they're essential in today's world."

During the meeting, eight different people – from parents to physicians – spoke on behalf of letting competition resume and two of those were Louisburg parents Craig Holtzen and Jenny Diederich.

Holtzen, whose son Cade is a senior on the Wildcat wrestling team, gave opening remarks in which he tried to convey the importance of extracurricular activities, even during COVID-19 times.

"There is no evidence to suggest that kids are either super-spreaders or very susceptible to this virus to begin with," Holtzen said during the meeting. "I would dare go far enough to say that kids are practicing better virus protocol when they are in school or activities than when they are locked down.

"Fall activities were largely successful because of our ability to be flexible and adaptive to the many changing things that happened over that season."

The vote to let them play was a sigh of relief to many players and coaches around the state, who were already in the process of prepping for their season.

"This is great news for our kids," Louisburg boys basketball coach Ty Pfannenstiel said. "Our students and athletes have been so resilient this year with all the new protocols, so I'm happy for them to get their opportunity because they've been through a lot. There was a lot of concern among our kids, so I'm sure they're relieved now that the uncertainty has been resolved. We are definitely not out of the woods yet when it comes to setbacks, so we have to continue to do our part to stay safe and healthy throughout this season."

Following the decision by the executive board last week to

delay the start of winter sports, Diederich started a Facebook group called "Rally the Troops to Fight for Winter School Sports."

The page attracted more than 4,000 followers and advocated for parents and players to email and call the board of directors to let them know how important the winter season was for all of them. It seemed to work as the measure to allow them to play passed easily.

"Yesterday was a victory," Diederich said. "It was exactly what we were fighting for – a full season with 20 games that starts on time. I am as passionate as they come and would love to be in the stands but my main goal was to get my daughter and her teammates on the court. With all the uncertainty they need something to focus on and to look forward to. It is just as important mentally as it is physically. I was proud to be part of a group of families across the state that fought for all our student athletes and scholars. I think it taught our kids to use their voice."

Although many of the teams were already gearing up for the season, there has always been a cloud hanging over the programs whether the season was going to happen or not. Now, those players and coaches can resume with more confidence.

"I'm very grateful for the chance to get the kids back on the mat," Louisburg wrestling coach Bobby Bovaird said. "All year I've been wondering about the unknowns, whether we'll get a season or not. But we've been practicing for a week and a half, and things are feeling more like normal than they have all year."

"This season, we've got the theme 'Relentless,' and that's the mindset we're trying to implement. Things like the KSHSAA ruling, the potential to get quarantined, and more are the obstacles in the way of our success. We've got to be relentless and work together to find ways around them."

The meeting was bittersweet for most parents as the board of directors voted that the athletic events will be held without spectators on both the high school and middle school levels. The measure passed by a 50-26 vote and spectators will not be allowed from Dec. 1 to Jan. 28.

Following that time, fan attendance will be limited in accordance with local attendance policies.

"I believe we had a solid plan to allow fans to attend our games in a safe manner," USD 416 superintendent Dr. Brian Biermann said. "We had already had indoor sports for middle school girls' basketball and middle school wrestling and it was working well. Now, that fans are not allowed, we will strive to provide our fans a quality livestream option to allow them to cheer on our Wildcats.

"I am glad that the board of directors decided to allow our kids to participate in sports. Our coaches and student-athletes have adhered to every possible safety measure. I know our kids are excited to represent the Wildcats on the mat, court and swimming pool in the upcoming weeks.

From some players' point of view, while getting to play their season was the most important outcome from Tuesday's meeting, the fact of not having their parents there is tough to comprehend.

"Basketball is a momentum sport and fans are a huge part of that," Foote said. "I believe we have one of the best student sections for girls' basketball. When we get into a rough patch, our student section gets louder and helps us out of that. I also have a lot of family that is extremely supportive and loves to watch me play. Not having them there is gut wrenching, especially my dad. Having my parents and family there is huge to me.

"Sadly, this is what it has come to. Right now all we can do is work together as a team and be each other's support system.

We have to depend on each other to be loud and hype each other up. I still hold hope that this unreasonable ruling will be turned around, but I'm incredibly grateful that I can have one last season with my best friends."

Not only players, but coaches having to instruct their players in an empty gymnasium will take some getting used to as well.

"I am so happy for the student athletes who get to play winter sports and I am super excited to see what this season brings," Louisburg girls basketball coach Adrienne Lane said. "Basketball is an extracurricular activity, but it is also a chance for these students to come together and be a team. Playing in an empty gym will be a change, but I think the athletes will mainly be grateful for their opportunity to play."

Even though some parents will have to get used to watching their child on the computer or television, instead of in-person, they are hoping they will be able to back in the gym sooner rather than later.

"I was a little surprised with the no fan policy as I think blanket policies are not good for Kansas," Diederich said. "We have districts of so many sizes and local decision making is best. Districts know what they can and cannot handle. Hopefully we can convince KSHSAA to loosen the policy to allow for 1-2 immediate family members, but for now just be happy with the fact that they are playing at all."