

SPORTS

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HIGH SCHOOL

GSL football coaches adjust to new reality of playing in spring

Getting on field will soothe doubts

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On Tuesday, coaches across the state of Washington heard the news they'd been waiting for – since March, really.

Although there are still many questions to be answered – including if there will be in-person learning at all in the fall – at least there's a plan for sports.

The Washington Interscholastic Activities Association announced a revamped high school sports schedule, developing four compressed seasons from the traditional three, in hopes of giving all high

school athletes a chance to compete this school year.

Perhaps the biggest adjustment for coaches, student-athletes, fans and families alike is football moving to the early spring, along with other moderate- to high-risk sports such as volleyball and girls soccer.

"Friday Night Lights" in March instead of September.

Preseason practice on snowy February fields instead of two-a-days in the sweltering heat of August.

At least there shouldn't be any wildfire-fueled smoke problems for two-a-days in the spring.

Mead coach Benji Sonnichsen was guardedly

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optimistic about the announcement.

"You know, honestly, I'm encouraged," he said. "As we were getting closer to the fall, my personal feelings was it looked like things were going to get canceled."

"I think they made the best of a difficult situation," Ferris coach Tom Yearout said. "I just, I'm really hoping we're in Phase 4 in 2021 and we get a chance to play. I like it better than trying to do fall football with everything that we were going to have to do to have fall football and keep it safe."

Yearout added one of his priorities will be to provide a traditional feel to the unique circumstances.

"I think it's difficult for players and senior football players – just the traditions that live within a fall football season. I'm really hoping that we're able to provide some of that meaningful experience that isn't always part of the wins and losses."

When the WIAA moved the start of fall practices back a couple of weeks ago, Sonnichsen was concerned practices would get started and

then shut right back down again.

"We give a little bit more time to get back to school and see how school's doing and learn new things as we go through this new stage of life for all of us," he said. "That makes me feel a little bit better than trying to start football right as soon as the school year starts and trying to follow all the guidelines and, you know, that made me really nervous."

"And it felt like the season was going to be in jeopardy if we tried to do that."

The contingency plan for the low-risk fall sports that will get the go-ahead for WIAA's "Season 1" – cross country, slowpitch softball, alternative seasons for golf and tennis – will be to push back to "Season 3" with the other traditional fall sports.

"To me, it makes sense what they're trying to do," Yearout said. "I don't think it was a spur of the moment – I think (the WIAA) spent quite a bit of time coming up with something pretty good."

"Hopefully, everyone gets to participate in the sports they want, and all the athletes get to play," Sonnichsen said. "Obviously, we're all going through a weird time, but I thought that,

to be honest with you, reading all the other state associations and all their different plans, it seems like we handled it pretty well."

Sonnichsen, whose squad went 4-1 in the Greater Spokane League 4A division last season but will drop to 3A this year under the classification realignment, is still concerned about the public health situation and just getting kids back into the classroom.

"As soon as we get students back to school, and just the mass population of touching different things and you know the social interactions, actions that we have inside buildings and all that type of stuff, we don't know how the virus will keep going, but I think it gives us a great fighting chance with having a plan."

Yearout, whose Saxons went 3-2 in league last year and will join Mead in the 3A ranks, joked that with spring football he'll have to wait for some athletes to finish other sports instead of the other way around.

"That can be a positive, though, because generally kids coming out of wrestling and basketball are in pretty good shape," he said.

One of the conditions of the altered seasons is shortening the regular season and limiting

contests to league games. Sonnichsen said there will be a lot of adjustments to preseason workouts, training schedules and then game play, but thinks there will be a cooperative spirit to get back on the field.

"Obviously, no one wants to have a shortened season, but all the athletes that I'm talking to, you know, I think everyone's to a point where if we get something, then you know it's gonna be worth it," Sonnichsen said. "And if they get put on the helmet and the pads – and for us, we get to play in a new stadium – that's really exciting for us."

"We'll start some conditioning and some weights in December and January and then try and build up to, you know, that March start," Yearout said. "But no, after all of the what-ifs for the last two months, I've kind of just sat back the last couple days and I haven't started writing anything down or anything."

Sonnichsen said they'll have to condense several months worth of workouts and planning into several weeks, but is ready for the challenge.

"I think everyone's just gonna be super happy to be able to get on the field," he said. "That's way better than not having the season."