

https://martinsvillebulletin.com/mva/delayed-rebuild-after-canceled-spring-season-martinsville-softball-team-looks-to-2021-to-finally-return/article_73df0efc-0a5b-5d5b-8d6a-27def5fb8e9f.html

EDITOR'S PICK

Delayed rebuild: After canceled spring season, Martinsville softball team looks to 2021 to finally return to the field

Apr 4, 2020



Martinsville High School was set to have a varsity softball team for the first time since 2016, and had 15 girls on its roster when the season was canceled last month due to coronavirus concerns.

Contributed photo by Trinity Gravely

The success of Martinsville High School's sport program through the decades can't be understated.

The school boast more state championships than any other basketball team in Virginia High School League history, winning back-to-back state titles as recently as 2015 and 2016. Even more recently, the Bulldogs boys soccer program went undefeated until the state quarterfinals a season ago, and the girls basketball team has reached the state tournament four straight seasons.

All of that success in other sports was part of the reason Martinsville student Trinity Gravely was so upset the school didn't have a softball team.

Gravely, now a junior at MHS, has been playing softball since eighth grade, and the multi-sport athlete said it's her favorite by far.

“I love the communication and the teamwork of the sport,” Gravely said. “I also love the competition between other schools... because I have been to a lot of schools and you see a lot of people you know and you get to play with them again and again each year. It just becomes fun. I like to be competitive.”

Gravely set out to restart the softball program at Martinsville last year, talking with Martinsville Schools Superintendent Zeb Talley and Athletic Director Tommy Golding. She recruited former softball coach Charlie Holland as the team's head coach, put up flyers around the school, and got players together for conditioning workouts in the offseason, trying to get enough girls together to field a full team.

Gravely got enough interest to have a junior varsity squad last season. It was the first time the school had had a softball team since the end of the 2016 season.

“I was most looking forward to showing other schools that Martinville is not just a football school and we're not just a basketball school,” Gravely said. “Our spring sports are really good as well and starting a softball team, I really wanted to show other schools that we're really good at what we do... I wanted to show people that softball can also win championships here at Martinsville High School, not just basketball. And that's what I really wanted to show this year that we can be as good as other teams.”

After winning one game last year and playing competitive softball in several others, the Bulldogs were able to move up to a varsity program for 2020. Holland said he had 15 girls on the roster, all but one of which had played before.

“It was going to mean a lot. I saw a lot of potential for this year,” Gravelly said.

“Everyone had experience. I really thought that this year was going to be a year that we were going to have some real competition with everyone else and we would be able to go neck-and-neck with these teams.

“Last year was a pre-game for us. I just wanted to make sure all the girls understood the game and stuff last year but this year we really wanted to have a good team, so it's really devastating.”

Just a few days after the Bulldogs played their first and only scrimmage, the decision was made by Governor Ralph Northam and the VHSL to cancel all spring sports through the end of the 2020 school year due to coronavirus concerns.

Holland said he's all for making sure players and students are safe and knows canceling was the right decision, but the next step is making sure his softball players maintain their enthusiasm for the sport and stick with it for 2021.

BUILDING A PROGRAM AND A FAMILY

The Bulldogs knew the hard work Gravelly put in to making the softball team at Martinsville a reality, and the school was already in a good position to rebuild the program, Holland said, because he had heard about the increase in talent in the local parks and rec league.

Holland was no stranger to the school's softball program, having coached it in the early 2000s and 2010s when his two daughters played. Unlike in those years, though, when he started with players when they were six or seven years old and stuck with them through their high school years, with this new team he was going to have to start from scratch.

And while other schools in the area have softball players who start when they're very young and play the game year round for travel teams, even those at Martinsville who had played before hadn't been on a field in several years.

“Our team is fairly new. I was looking forward to getting stronger as a player, sharpening my skills and playing against teams that are more experienced than us,” said sophomore Savannah Brown. “I was looking forward to that rubbing off on us, getting stronger, and working more as a team.”

Brown said she doesn't play for any other teams or leagues other than the high school.

Holland and Gravely wanted to make sure that the 20 or so games the Bulldogs played in the spring wasn't the only exposure players had to the game. They put together a summer team last year that played in a tournament and practiced several days a week for about a month.

“I wanted to be as ready for this year as we could be because we hadn't been playing for a year,” Gravely said. “I wanted to make sure they were as ready as they could be, bringing in the new girls, making sure they knew how to play or getting an idea of the game before we started.”

As they learned the game, they also learned how to play with one another. Rebuilding a team, Brown said, and going through it together helped build the bond between the Bulldogs. That bond would have only been strengthened with more games.

“As you play more you learn how other players work with you and how you can work with them better,” Brown said. “And honestly their strengths rub off on you and your strengths rub off on them...”

We're a group. I think honestly, we work hard, we love each other, and we love the game. It's just about how we can work more fluidly together.”

“I thought, we're still learning, we're still getting used to everything with it being our second year back but I thought we were going to have a pretty good season,” said junior Lali Vazquez. “I kind of just wanted to play. I really like softball. I was looking

forward to all the games, practicing more, learning how to get better.”

Vazquez started playing softball in fifth grade, but quit for a few years before coming out for the JV team last year. It was the team-building time, going to away games, being on the bus late into the night, practicing, and working with her teammates she said she'll miss the most this season.

“I was pretty bummed out. I was pretty disappointed. I was going to miss having something to do. I was going to miss playing with our team,” she said. “We barely just got our softball team back last year so we were all looking forward to it.”

FUTURE CONCERNS

As with any program in a rebuilding phase, losing a year of competition could be a huge setback, but Holland said so far his players seem motivated. He's had players texting him ever since the cancellation announcement asking if they can get together and practice, work on conditioning, or just have a team meeting.

While none of that is possible now, he's in the beginning stages of making plans for the summer and fall. He'd like to set up some tournaments with other local high school teams in the area, similar to the local high school league baseball teams play in.

If anything, he'd at least like to have a day teams in the Piedmont District can play games and have one big senior day to celebrate the players who didn't get a chance to play their final season. The Bulldogs had one senior on the roster this year.

Summer tournaments, too, are another way for new players to simply learn the game, and play a different level of competition. And if the tournaments are a part of the school program, Holland said, there aren't as many factors keeping players away as there are for other travel ball teams.

“If you think about it, so many of girls around here, they have to travel so far to play on a softball team, and it can get kind of costly,” Holland said. “If you go out and try to play for some of those teams, they really take some of the more known players and it's

hard for girls on my team to make teams like that because they're not one of the premier players around.

“Some of those girls started at 10, my girls might not have started until they were 13 or 14 so they're already three or four years behind and it kind of hurts.”

Gravely knows, too, that whether they're playing games or practicing or just conditioning, the more time the players spend together the more outsiders will want to be a part of it. Her hope is that the program at Martinsville can soon get on par with other teams in the PD.

“I just feel like we need a lot more participation with girls in the high school,” Gravely said. “We don't have as many girls who are willing to play like what Magna Vista does or the Henry County schools have. We have I think 12 girls who wanted to play this year. We should have at least 30 girls trying out. I just feel like if we played more in the summer, did a lot more advertising and a lot more letting the school amp up our spring sports we'd have a lot more participation than we do now.”

Holland has seen in the past very good softball players at Martinsville transfer to schools with better, more established programs. He's also seen those same players move on to play at the college level.

That level is where Gravely would like to eventually go one day too, but transferring isn't something she's thinking about to make that happen. She'd rather stay with the Bulldogs and help the program there, while making herself better.

There is still that fear though that her plans could be cut short, though.

“It is a big worry this year that everyone fell off and a lot of us juniors who really love playing the game we will not be able to play our senior year, which we all want to do,” Gravely said.

“One thing I hate about it this season getting cut short, we are in a rebuilding stage and that's going to throw us behind. I really hate that for the kids,” Holland said.

FOR LOVE OF THE GAME

Brown said she loved the idea of having a fall league or playing tournaments this summer, whenever sports resume. She jumps at the chance to get stronger and strengthen her skills, and work with her team again.

She's also “most definitely” going to return for the spring of 2021, a future prospect she's very excited about.

“Honestly, it's a fun game,” she said. “It's a way to get exercise and work as a team. You have a new family, basically.”

A lot of Brown's enthusiasm for softball comes from Gravelly's love of the game.

“She's one of the best parts of the team, honestly,” Brown said.

For now, Holland said he's staying focused on getting through this tough time, and keeping it all about the girls, continuing to try to rebuild when the time is right.

“We'll get back and we'll practice when we can have more girls on the field again. I think we'll still be ready for next year,” he said. “I'm so close with the kids that I coach it's hurting me just as much as it hurts them because I do spend a lot of time with them as well.”

All the Bulldogs can do now is be ready to hit the field as soon as they can, and stay positive through it all.

“That's the kind of family we have,” Brown said.

https://martinsvillebulletin.com/mva/high-school-football-teams-staying-connected-from-afar/article_009e93d1-4822-5bb8-8ac1-615c6abcd196.html

EDITOR'S PICK

High school football teams staying connected from afar

Cara Cooper

Apr 18, 2020



Bassett's football team huddles during a late fall practice last season. While schools are currently shut down and team workouts aren't allowed due to the coronavirus, high school coaches are making sure they're still staying connected with their players and helping them get through current stay-at-home directives.

Bulletin file photo

Cara Cooper

By Cara Cooper

Bulletin Sports Editor

Spring is a busy time in high school football.

Bassett's squad would be having their annual "spring ball" practices right now, where they spend four days in the weight room, then 30 minutes each day outside mimicking fall practices. The Bengals have both speed and weight lifting programs they follow religiously in the months leading up to summer.

Magna Vista would be in the weight room three days a week, and out on the field at least two days, spending a lot of time throwing the football, building strength, working on timing, and simply trying to improve.

Martinsville? Working in the weight room, doing 7-on-7s, learning pass routes and pass drops. The linemen would be doing footwork techniques as a unit, and most players would be staying in shape by competing in other spring sports.

Out in Stuart, Patrick County uses this time of year to work on its secondary, offensive pass game install, fine tuning different things, playing around with the run game a little bit. Outside of Xs and Os, they'd be focusing on strength and conditioning right now, running and trying to get into shape.

"There's a lot of things you do in the spring that goes unnoticed," Cougars head coach David Morrison said. "So it's definitely a very valuable time of year we're losing right now."

Instead, local high school football players are having to do it all on their own. Thanks to the coronavirus that closed all Virginia schools through the end of the school year, coaches can't instruct players to do anything relating to football.

Mike McCall, Director of Communications with the Virginia High School League, said there isn't an actual dead period in place for high school football, but the VHSL is following the directive of Governor Ralph Northam, who closed all school facilities, meaning coaches can't have any contact, practices, or out of season conditioning with their players.

“They cannot get together at a park and practice. It’s a complete shutdown,” McCall said by phone this week. “Under normal circumstances there is no dead period right now for fall sports. They could continue, but still schools are closed so that option is not available right now.

“The main reason for that of course is public safety, health, and safety for our students and coaches and everyone else.”

Even though teams can’t practice, they’re still a team and a family, and coaches have been concerned about their players during this difficult time. Most have been staying in touch with players doing wellness checks, calling them up and simply asking “how are you doing?”

Bassett coach Brandon Johnson said he put together a Zoom video call with his players last week, and more than 35 logged on. They didn’t even discuss football, they just enjoyed having a chance to see each other and chat.

“It was really nice and the guys love joking and see everyone,” Johnson said of the call. “I spend more time with them than I do my real family so to be just cut off from them was difficult. Having that meeting, it really gave us a boost of energy I think we all needed in the times ahead.”

Johnson said the call was about helping players get their free meals from the school and staying on top of their classwork, offering help with other issues they may be having right now, and simply about chatting about life. He hopes to set up weekly team calls through the rest of the spring.

“All my coaches got a chance to see the guys, see their faces, and it really lit their faces up,” he said.

“At the end of the day my guys are my guys off the football field as well and I like to stick with them to see how they’re doing at home because some of them are in unfortunate situations, so I’ve just had those conversations about when adversity strikes how are we handling it. That’s kind of been what’s going on right now with that.”

Coaches can talk to players right now, they just can't direct them to do any sort of workouts. Morrison, Bobby Martin at Martinsville, and Magna Vista coach Joe Favero all said they've had players reaching out just looking for someone to talk to. Favero said he had quite a few who reached out after the spring sports season was canceled.

More than just football, coaches said they don't mind being a sounding board for their players who just need to talk.

"That's something that we want to try to encourage our guys to do is reach out to each other," Morrison said. "As coaches, we're reaching out to kids just to tell them hello. Just to say, 'Hey man, we've got you, we're here for you. If you need anything, whatever you need we're always going to be here' because it's definitely an extended family and when you spend as much time together as these kids do and with us as coaches it's like missing a family member when you don't get to see somebody for a long time... At times like these it's good to just reach out and remind each other that no matter what we're here for you."

"I was just trying to make sure they took care of themselves, took care of their families, and just ride this out," Martin said. "I didn't want to put any emphasis on sports, basketball, football because they need to just focus on making sure nobody gets sick and they're staying healthy."

Favero said he has a good feeling his players are staying active right now, and Johnson said he's seen social media posts of his players getting in groups of two or three running routes and working out together. It's different, though, when you're doing it on your own and not competing against one another.

McCall said as soon as Northam's stay-at-home mandate, which is set to expire on June 10, is lifted the VHSL will allow schools to start working out again, with the first fall football practices scheduled to begin on July 30.

Until then, teams will at least have each other to lean on, even if that means they're leaning from a distance.

“Of all the kids that I’ve talked to everybody seems to be taking it pretty well,” Morrison said. “They definitely miss the camaraderie of seeing the coaches and talking to each other as players and seeing each other every day... but I think for the most part our guys are pretty tough. They understand this is just one of those things where you kind of weather the storm and you get back to work when the day comes. As soon as we get the go-ahead we’ve got to be ready to go.”

Cara Cooper

https://martinsvillebulletin.com/sports/local_sports/watch-now-smith-river-sports-complex-hosts-first-tournament-since-start-of-coronavirus-pandemic/article_5f019030-4bd8-5ac6-a166-9d0b46767fc9.html

WATCH NOW: Smith River Sports Complex hosts first tournament since start of coronavirus pandemic

Cara Cooper
Jul 11, 2020



Lacrosse coaches, wearing required masks, talk during a game at Smith River Sports Complex Saturday.

Bulletin photo by Cara Cooper

Cara Cooper

SRSC hosts lacrosse tournament

Smith River Sports Complex hosted a lacrosse tournament this weekend.

In any other summer that wouldn't be a big deal. The complex hosts more than a dozen tournaments of various sports every year. However, after the coronavirus shut down the sports world more than three months ago, the complex hasn't fielded a single organized game since March 8.

About two weeks ago, Ira Vanterpool, director of boys lacrosse with the NC Fusion, a program based out of Winston-Salem, N.C., called the complex about wanting to move a previously scheduled lacrosse tournament to Henry County. The Fusion had been practicing for about a month and a half under U.S. Lacrosse's return to play guidelines, which included things like all coaches wearing masks on the field, players remaining 6 feet apart during training and water breaks, wearing masks to and from the field, sanitizing their hands before and after workouts, and having no contact during practices. But they hadn't been able to play any games.

Vanterpool said the Fusion originally had some teams scheduled to travel to Philadelphia this weekend, with others set to host a tournament in Winston-Salem. With North Carolina pushing back its own reopening timeline, hosting a tournament was out of the question, and Vanterpool wanted to be able to allow his players to play a game without the added stress of traveling far.

That's when he made the call to SRSC Director of Operations and Marketing Houston Stutz about moving the tournament to Henry County. Virginia had gone into Phase 3 of coronavirus reopening the day before.

The Fusion brought about 20 teams to the complex on Saturday, all youth and middle-school-aged, and will bring 21 more on Sunday, all high school-aged. Vanterpool said he received numerous calls from other teams wanting to join as well, but he turned them away to keep this weekend small and ensure social distancing wasn't an issue.

Vanterpool and Stutz worked together to come up with safety protocols for the event, which included masks and distancing.

"All of them have done a really good job with it. It's good to see people are taking it seriously," Stutz said of the response to the safety protocols.

"It comes to a point where we have to strictly enforce some rules ... but other than that everyone has been very gracious and thankful that we're doing it," Vanterpool said.

"They're happy to follow the rules we've set in place. We've got a couple stragglers, a couple outliers, but they understand if we ask them to put on a mask, put on a mask. That's the most important thing we feel, especially if we have young kids around. We want everyone to be as comfortable and safe as possible."

The Fusion will have a video streaming service available for Sunday's game for parents and fans to watch the games online and keep the crowds down.

"That's been a really cool way to say, 'Stay home, stay safe, don't be out here if you don't need to be,'" Stutz said.

Stutz said the complex provided about 10 staff members for the weekend, which is about the same as other tournaments. But instead of having a big staff preparing food in the concession stand many were instead on cleaning duty throughout the day. The Fusion also brought their own staff to help police the crowds.

“We’re just trying to provide some activity for the teams that have been training ... and who have lost the summer,” Vanterpool said. “It was getting tough but we all wanted to do it in a responsible way. We felt us being together and putting on an event that we could control was a better option than having to go to an event that was out of our control.”

“It’s really good to get people back out here. It’s exciting,” Stutz said. “It’s a nervous time but it’s an exciting time. Seeing everybody back out here enjoying our facilities and enjoying the fields. I couldn’t tell you how many compliments we’ve received.

“Obviously we’re doing everything we can so people can continue to be out here in these crazy times so that’s good. It’s been organized chaos. We’ve got a lot of people running in a lot of directions to make sure these things do stay safe and we’re working on a schedule each hour to make sure everything is taken care of to the T.”

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Safety protocols for the event

- All SRSC and Fusion staff wearing mask, and teams and parents asked to wear masks and social distance when at the complex.
- Signs were placed around the facility with notes about safety.
- Hand sanitizer and masks were available throughout the complex.
- Benches and bleachers were sanitized between games and bathrooms were cleaned every hour.
- Players could only bring one parent to watch each game.
- Bleachers were marked off for where spectators could watch, with spots six feet apart and a row in between seats. On fields with no bleachers, fans could only watch from one side of the field, with an extra field in between where two games were being played.
- Every field had a designated entrance and exit to ensure traffic flow before and after games didn’t cause big crowds.
- Everyone was asked to leave the facility as soon as their game was over, and stay in the parking lots when not playing.
- The concession stand only served pre-packaged food and drinks, nothing prepared by staff.
- Players could not bring bags in. Only sticks and water bottles.

Cara Cooper