

Attendance rules puzzling

The state's limit of 25 spectators for sporting events has Bedford County high schools weighing their options

By CHRIS MORRIS
Sports Editor

When it comes to the high school sports season, it seems that the more officials try to clarify COVID-19 rules and regulations the cloudier things become.

With less than three weeks until games are scheduled to begin, schools are scrambling to put into place their own set

of guidelines for players, spectators, game officials and others that are needed to have games that are somewhat near what was considered normal in years past.

The Virginia High School League's latest dictate on limiting spectators to just 25 per venue per game is especially perplexing. That number doesn't allow for

players in most sports to have both parents attend, not to mention grandparents and other relatives. It also doesn't allow cheerleaders or pep bands.

And what about attending away games?

The VHSL has given the final say on those types of rulings to local school boards, athletic districts and health officials.

The window is closing fast and Bedford County athletic directors are puzzled by what the future could hold. But they are also trying their best to keep players playing.

Some have suggested live streaming

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games, others are mulling allowing just seniors' parents to attend games and there's even the possibility of a total ban on spectators altogether.

"At this time, Bedford County Public Schools are looking into virtual options for all three county high schools," said Staunton River Athletic Director Josh Smallwood. "One is the NFHS Pixellot system that the VHSL uses for its state game and over 200 schools in Virginia have signed on to use."

The Pixellot system allows for spectators to live stream games from their home computers or any digital outlet that has the capability.

"It's a great network for our fans to subscribe to and even watch our teams when they travel, assuming our opponent is also using Pixellot."

Staunton River also faces another situation. Recently, school administrators within the Alleghany and Roanoke Health districts, which includes 13 high schools, agreed to determine whether their winter sports teams will compete based on the spread of the virus.

Since Staunton River plays in the Blue Ridge District, all of its opponents fall into those health districts.

With the high number of cases in those regions now, there would be no high school games of any sort.

The schools in those divisions are trying to come up a plan to play during the pandemic, but nothing has been determined for certain.

"I feel like I should put 'to be continued' at the end of every statement dealing with this," Smallwood said.

Seminole District teams Liberty and Jefferson Forest shouldn't be affected by those health district rulings, but they are dealing with their own issues. Jedd Zaring, Jefferson Forest athletic director, said the district is considering allowing no spectators into games.

"Obviously, the Governor's announcement mandating a maximum of 25 participants severely limits our ability to accommodate spectators," he said. "And with school cheer squads, pep bands and student spirit groups like our Hype Platoon considered part of the 25 number, there really won't be any available seating to speak of."

"Additionally, in an effort to give our athletes the best opportunity for a season, the Seminole District is recommending that no outside spectators be admitted this year."

"We are well aware of the hardship this puts on our parents, especially senior parents, so we are working hard on a plan to

"We hope that the community understands that we are doing the best we can during these unprecedented times."

Jedd Zaring

Jefferson Forest
Athletic Director

be able to live stream games so families have an option for watching their kids play. Our goal is to have a system operational by the time games start in late December.

"We are also looking at structuring our Senior Night ceremonies in a way that allows senior parents and families admittance into at least one game this winter season."

Lori Mattson, Liberty High athletic director, also said the school is working on a plan that will include the parents of seniors.

"Once we finish up try-outs with cheer we will know how many additional spectators we will be able to bring in," she said. "We will be using our home games to provide an opportunity for our senior families to get to see their child compete and cheer. We will be trying to solidify a plan as soon as those rosters are finalized."

Mattson said there is a Region 3C meeting this week and some more clarification may come from that.

But while some counties and districts are working toward having an abbreviated season for all high school sports, some across the state have scrapped the seasons. Roanoke's private schools are opted to forgo sports this season as have Richmond and Alexandria city schools. Last week, Williamsburg and James City schools announced they were cancelling the season.

Bath County schools have delayed winter sports seasons until Jan. 18.

"Hopefully the state will provide some clarification as we get closer to the start of the season," Mattson said.

No matter what happens, there is no option that is going to make 100 percent of the folks in Bedford County happy. But officials in the county and at the schools are trying to find the best option that is acceptable to the most people.

"These are difficult decisions with many unintended consequences," Zaring said. "We are cognizant of the fact that folks won't be happy with all of our actions, but as I said, our main priority is to do everything we can to get our kids' games played. We hope that the community understands that we are doing the best we can during these unprecedented times."

NO ADMITTANCE

The Bedford County School Board gave its OK for high school sports, but it also ruled that no parents or fans can attend

By CHRIS MORRIS
Sports Editor

High school athletes got good news and bad news last week from the Bedford County School Board.

The good news, after weeks of uncertainty, was that high school sports will happen, albeit in an abbreviated, controlled manner.

The bad news was that those athletes will not be playing in front of their families and friends, who will have to watch the games at home on their computers.

After much discussion and public comment, the school board voted unanimously that the high schools will play sports, but the playing of those games will be determined by the color-coded state virus map. If Bedford County or the county of an opponent is shaded red, the game will be postponed.

And the board OK'd that no spectators will be allowed to attend the games, despite Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam's announcement earlier Thursday that 25 spectators will be allowed at recreational sporting events.

It was a tough compromise and one the school board went back and forth with for nearly two hours at its packed meeting. Some board members cited the risk of players contracting the COVID-19 virus and passing it along to others as reason to cancel sports throughout the county's public schools.

Several members of the public, mostly health and medical employees, expressed the same sentiment.

Others, led by board chairman Martin Leamy, argued that athletes face risk every time they suit up. Not just from the virus but from everything from broken bones to cuts and scrapes. Leamy said the mental health benefits the athletes get from organized

"I understand and I respect this disease. But we can't live in fear."

Martin Leamy
Bedford County School Board chairman

sports outweighed the possibility of getting the virus, which, according to most data, is not as dangerous to teens as it is to older members of the population.

"I understand and I respect this disease, I truly do," Leamy said. "But we can't live in fear. We have to understand that life is all about risk mitigation. We have cars. People get killed in cars, so what do we do? We've got air bags, we've got seat belts, we've got turn signals, we've got traffic signals. Those are all risk mitigation mechanisms."

"The VHSL has provided us with risk mitigation protocols. I don't understand why this is even an issue. We've provided parents and families an academic choice. Are you comfortable sending your son or daughter to school? If you are, great. Here's an option. If you're not, Bedford Connects is tailor-made for you. We need to provide the same athletic choice to families as we do with academics."

"Leave it up to the fami-



Photo by Chris Morris

Susannah Allen, a junior at Liberty High School, participates in a protest Thursday outside the Bedford County School Board meeting.

lies. Leave it up to their choice whether or not they are comfortable with their son or daughter participating in school sports. That's what this should be about, not a bunch of Brainiacs sitting around this table telling families what's best for them. That needs to be their choice, not ours."

Shortly after, the board agreed to have middle school, JV and varsity sports.

That decision put the ball in the court of the county's athletic directors.

It's up to them to determine weekly if their teams will be playing and how they are going to make the games available online to the parents and fans of Liberty, Jefferson Forest and Staunton River.

"We will be offering free live streaming for all our games on campus," said Jedd Zaring, athletic director at JF. "Planning for this is underway."

Schools are looking into the Pixellot streaming systems and if that system is not installed in time for the start of games, the county plans to stream games over YouTube with its own cameras.

"There has been discussions between Bedford County Public Schools and the NFHS Network to participate in their Pixellot program, which is a streaming service somewhat like YouTubeTV that is subscription based," said Josh Smallwood, the AD at Staunton River. "We hope to have this in place very

soon for our fans."

Lori Mattson, Liberty High's AD, also gave the Pixellot system high marks.

"We have an amazing opportunity that will provide a first-class viewing experience for our families that unfortunately won't be able to be at the games in person," she said. "We are in the planning stages ... but thanks to amazing people in this county, our families will not miss a game until the county is able to get the cameras up and running with NFHS Pixellot."

But these measures may be moot if games cannot be played.

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Screenshot

The Bedford County School Board discusses allowing sports in public schools during its Thursday meeting.



Photo by Chris Morris

Jefferson Forest basketball players Joseph Peters (far left) and Tyson Gage (middle) join with Susannah Allen during Thursday's protest.

Currently, Bedford County is in the red of the Virginia Department of Health school metrics map. The counties surrounding Bedford are also red. In fact, on the latest map, all but five counties in the state are red. Public school basketball teams across the state are supposed to begin playing Dec. 21.

“For Dec. 21 games, that decision would be made sometime before the game,” Zaring said. “A decision as to lead time -- 24 hours, 48 hours, 1 week -- hasn’t been made yet. The Seminole District is probably going to move the December games back to start after Winter Break. They are trying to help BCPS as much as possible to get our games played.”

Smallwood is taking a similar stance.

“I will meet every Monday with our principal to review the applicable data and determine the status of our games for the week,” he said.

No matter when games begin, the nearly 2,000 athletes in Bedford County schools from 6th grade to 12th grade, are happy they will be playing. It’s been almost 300 days since there has been competition between public schools in the state.

Jefferson Forest basketball players Tyson Gage and Joseph Peters were among a dozen or so athletes who were demonstrating outside the school board meeting Thursday. The group wanted to “make their voice heard” before the board’s decision. During the meeting, the demonstrators could be heard chanting, “We want sports! We want sports!”

“We’re really hoping for a season, obviously,” said Gage, standing along with Peters. “Especially now that we’re seniors. One last season. We’ve been waiting for this year for a long time. It’s very important to us, for sure.”

Added Peters: “For me and Tyson, this is our way to college.”

Liberty track athlete Susannah Allen,

who was also among the demonstrators, echoed her peers at JF.

“I’m a junior this year and I’m looking at going to school and college for track,” said Allen, a pole vaulter. “I’m trying to get a track scholarship. I need this junior year for colleges to look at and I definitely think it can happen with social distancing and wearing a mask.

“I’m hoping (the board) support us. I’m thinking positively.”

It worked.

But it wasn’t all good news. Families of the athletes will not be able to attend their games and it is disappointing many mothers and fathers.

“I am a mother of four, all four of my children participate or participated in sports activities,” said Forest resident Jane Morris. “It proved to be an integral part of their growing up and was essential to their social and physical wellbeing. I am not happy about the ‘no spectator’ rule, as I am the parent of a senior wrestler, and have only missed one of his competitions since he was 5 years old.

“If that’s what will allow them to compete, I’m all for it. It’s all about the kids. They have and will continue to abide by any restrictions put in place to be able to participate in sports. We all understand the virus can be serious to some and are willing to take any and all precautions to ensure their participation in sports doesn’t result in the spread of it.”

She’s not alone.

“My parents definitely want to be at the games,” Peters said.

“Mine as well,” chimed in Gage.

Allen said it wasn’t the best situation, but was pleased that there will be competition again.

“I think the best hope is we’ll be able to play, there just won’t be spectators,” she said. “That sucks, but if we can still play and that’s how it is, then I’m fine with that.”

DELAY OF GAME



Start of winter sports seasons postponed for local teams

Like a motorist stuck at a stoplight, middle school, JV and varsity teams in Bedford County are waiting for red to change

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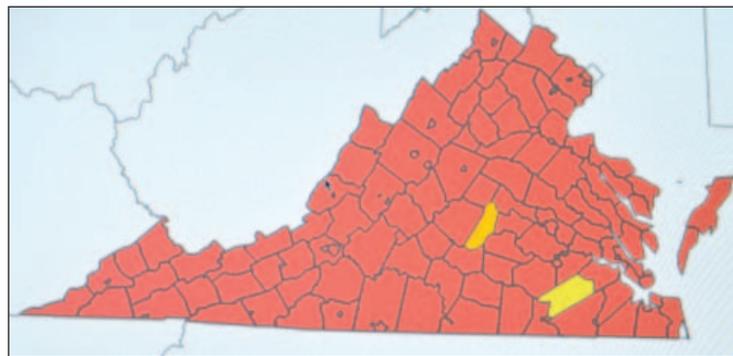
The roller-coaster ride that has been high school sports in Bedford County the last couple of months took some more twists and turns last week.

And, like a roller-coaster, it ended where it started.

Three separate rulings from three different boards last week have left county athletes, coaches, officials and parents wondering if, and when, games will begin. It's the same kind of limbo they have been dealing with since late October when the Virginia High School League announced that sports will be played, but left the details to local and county officials.

The wait continues.

One week after unanimously voting to allow winter sports seasons for middle school, JV and varsity teams to begin but be



VDOH

The Virginia Department of Health's 14-day case incident map on Dec. 21. The map is one metric used by the Bedford County School Board to determine when high schools can begin playing games.

At the special session, the Bedford County School Board opted, in a 4-3 decision during a special session last Thursday, to keep those constraints in place.

The special session was called mostly because of a petition that had been circulated around the county - and had garnered nearly

1,000 signatures - that asked for the board to lift the metrics rule, thus allowing sports to begin on time and unfettered.

The rationale being that the VDOH color-coded map hasn't changed from red for Bedford County since October and it's unlikely it will change any time soon, which would keep local

athletes idle and basically kill the seasons before they start.

The school board's original ruling said that athletes can't play games as long as the county is in the red or if their opponent's county is red. To date, only two counties in the state aren't red and the state's COVID-19 numbers are expected to spike again following the holidays despite the virus vaccine starting to make its way to thousands across the country.

The color-coded map is based on three main components:

- The number of new cases per 1,000 population over a 14-day period.

- The percent positives in RT-PCR testing over a 14-day period.

- The percent of difference in transmission between the most recent seven-day period and the

See **DELAY 2B**

previous seven-day period.

A city or county must be at a moderate, low or minimal level in all three measures to play games or hold full-scale practices. The VDH map is updated daily and found on its website.

Rockbridge County schools announced last week it was cancelling its winter sports seasons, adding to a growing list in the state. To date, 40 schools in the state have cancelled winter sports and another 113 in 42 divisions have delayed participating in winter sports because of virus concerns.

One of those is the Seminole District.

Shortly before the Bedford School Board meeting last week, the Seminole District announced it was pushing the start of its seasons from Dec. 21 to Jan. 4. Jefferson Forest and Liberty high schools are members of the Seminole District.

The district's ruling said, "The rationale behind this decision is rooted in safety for our players and staff. The return-to-play guidelines established by this committee calls for each division to follow their Virginia Department of Health approved mitigation plans when there is a positive case or students being tested for COVID-19. These plans call for the school's COVID contact tracing teams to make decisions about when to quarantine individuals and groups. The committee acknowledged that many of these COVID teams will have key members unavailable due to winter break and it would not be possible to safely contact trace and monitor positive and potential cases. Additionally, several of the district's teams are unavailable for competition due to COVID cases and quarantines."

It went on to say, "While we are eager for our students to return to competition, we are committed to doing so safely and responsibly. Safety remains our top priority and the decisions and actions of our administrators are made with our students' best interests and safety in mind."

A day before that announcement, the Lynchburg City School Board also voted to postpone games until Jan. 11, thus affecting Heritage and E.C. Glass high schools, the two teams JF and Liberty were supposed to open their seasons against.

The Lynchburg board went further when it ruled that teams would return to Phase 2 guidelines until Jan. 11, meaning they cannot share equipment and must work out in small groups of 5 to 10 people, among other constraints.

The Blue Ridge District, which includes Staunton River, also reverted back to Phase 2. But because Staunton River is in Bedford County, it can remain under Phase 3 guidelines since the school board did not change that rule.

"Our practices will be ongoing," said Staunton River Athletic Director Josh Smallwood. "Which is great. At least our kids can play against each other and have real practices and not individual workouts."

Smallwood and the other two county athletic directors were at the school board meeting last week. During the meeting, Liberty AD Lori Mattson was asked if any of her coaches were disgruntled with having to go above and beyond their normal duties because of the COVID protocols.

"No," she answered. "They are more

than willing to do whatever the board requires them to do."

Board member Dr. John Hicks set the tone for the meeting when he voiced his support for keeping the VDOH guidelines in place.

"I think sports are an important and valuable part of student's school experience, but I think our primary focus has to be on the student's academic learning experience. Under the circumstances we've had a relatively successful hybrid instructional model thus far. We cannot jeopardize in-person learning by introducing inter-school athletic competition that may cause student and staff COVID infection and our quarantine numbers to rise.

"I believe allowing competition before VDOH thinks it's safe to do so is irresponsible. Since our unanimous vote last week there has been a 42 percent increase in the 14-day total number of positive cases per 100,000 and a 24 percent increase in 14-day positivity rate for Bedford County.

"Just because we want to do something doesn't make that thing safe to do. I encourage everyone in the community to strictly follow the mitigation practices of masks and social distancing that are universally recommended so that our athletes can safely resume competition."

Members Marcus Hill, Susan Kirby and chairman Mart Leamy countered by citing county youth and AAU infection numbers, the risks of shopping at any retail outlet and their own personal experiences as athletes and parents of athletes to support their stance that the VDOH metrics should not dictate whether county athletes can play or not.

"Why are we telling these kids no?" Kirby asked.

"I'm not getting my brain around why there is so much resistance to this," Leamy said. "The state of Virginia has not shut down sports. The state of Virginia shut down sports last spring. And if the state of Virginia did not think that sports were safe and can be played with mitigation, they would have shut it down this year and in 2021.

"So, we need to let families make the decision about whether or not their students participate. ... This can be done safely. If this could not be done safely, I guarantee you that the state of Virginia would shut down competitive sports in a heartbeat. They have not done that, so why should we?"

Jason Johnson closed the discussion on the topic by suggesting the board hold to its earlier decision.

"I think it's important we trust ourselves," he said. "Trust the decision that we made last week. Let's give the metric more than a week to see where those numbers go. ... Sports are still continuing and maybe competition will be permitted down the road. ... Let's give it a chance."

Shortly after, Johnson, Dr. Hicks, Georgia Harriston and Dr. Susan Mele voted against changing the previous guidelines to allow athletes to play.

Leamy, Kirby and Hill voted in favor of it.

So, the wait continues for athletes in Bedford County to compete against other teams.

Nobody expects this roller-coaster will stop running.