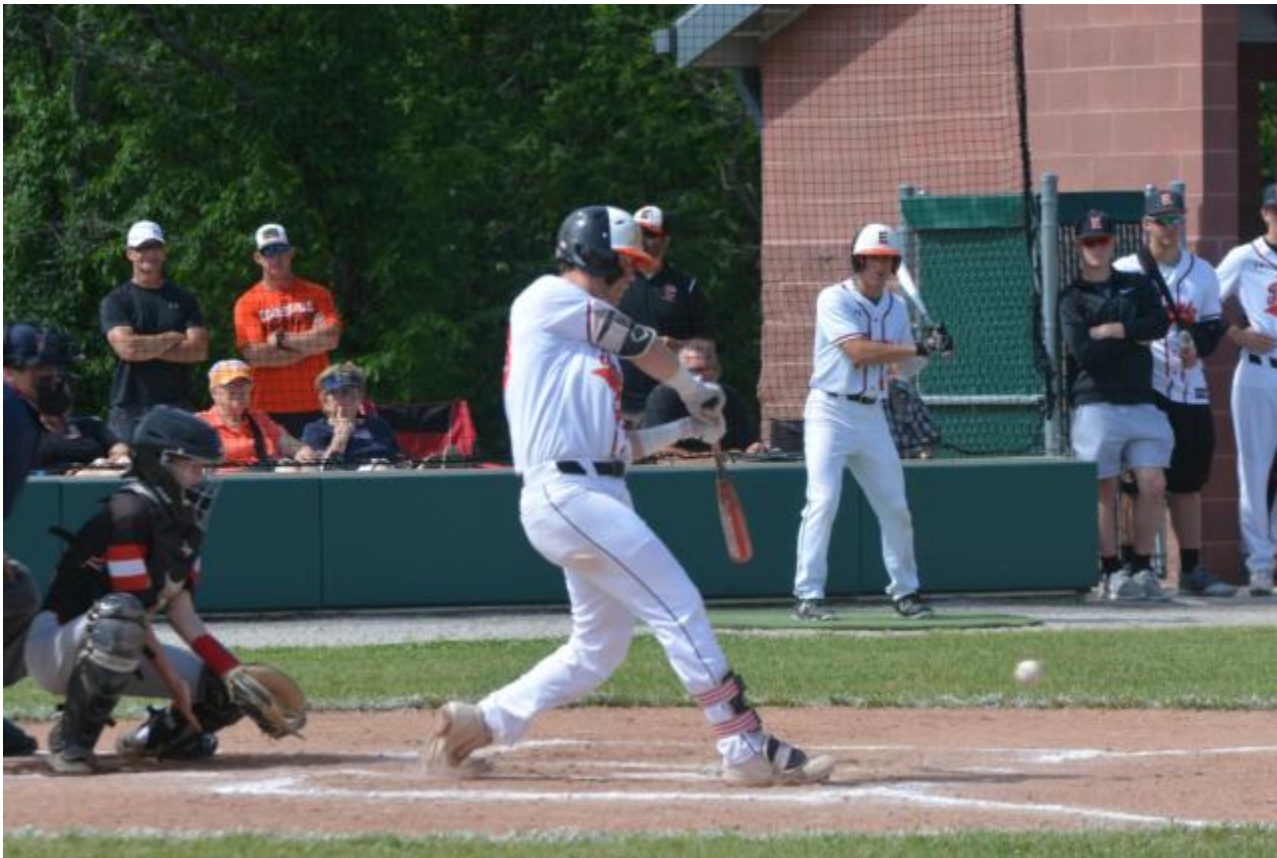


Athletic Directors Express Sympathies For Athletes In Wake Of IHSA Cancelling Spring Sports Season, Express Optimism Going Forward

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer
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It's been a very trying spring sports season for all the area high schools, both public and private, since closure of the schools ordered by Illinois Governor J.B. Pritzker on March 17, due to the COVID-19 pandemic. With last week's announcement that the schools

would be closed for the remainder of the academic year, the Illinois High School Association's Board of Directors voted April 21 to cancel the spring sports season, including all state tournament series.

The cancellations involved all spring sports - baseball, softball, boys and girls track and field, water polo and lacrosse, boys volleyball, girls soccer and bass fishing.

High school athletic directors across the area expressed their sympathies toward their athletes, especially the seniors who won't get an opportunity to play for their schools again, but at the same time, expressed optimism that the athletic programs will continue as strong as ever once the crisis passes.

"I feel bad for the kids, especially the seniors who won't get the opportunity to compete," said Edwardsville High athletic director Alex Fox, "and they lose that year to compete. I feel bad for them more than anything else."

The cancellation of the seasons also affects senior athletes who have yet to sign letters-of-intent to attend various colleges on athletic scholarships.

"The kids who signed, they're obviously good to go," Fox said. "But the kids who haven't signed yet, it's about getting their tapes and information out to colleges so they can find a home for college."

Like the other athletic directors, Fox is looking forward to a return to normalcy, and the crisis is also a very good teaching tool as well.

"I just think that everybody's getting ready to get things back to normal," Fox said, "and this shows that you can't take anything for granted."

The situation is about the same at Alton High School, where Redbird teams and athletes are also disappointed with the cancellations.

"I think it goes without saying that all individuals associated with high school athletics has been a very difficult time," said Alton athletic director Chris Kusnerick. "All athletic programs had completed their tryouts and preseason practices, and were excited to begin the season with the normal excitement and expectations that go along with the start of a new season. This is usually our busiest time in the Alton athletic department, and it has been very strange not to have the hustle and bustle of the practices and games going on. Our hearts go out to the seniors who will not get this opportunity again, at least not on the high school level. It is a very tough life lesson, and we are trying to be as supportive as we can despite not having contact."

The Redbird coaches and staff are also helping their athletes learn the life lessons coming from both the pandemic and the cancellations.

"In athletics, coaches are constantly teaching the life lessons to our student-athletes, and the COVID pandemic is a perfect example of to teach some of these life lessons,' Kusnerick said, "even though we are not holding athletic contests or practices."

Marquette Catholic athletic director Jack Holmes felt that the IHSA was following the lead of Pritzker and the state government in announcing the cancellations, thinking that the organization had no other choice but the cancel the seasons.

"When the governor shuts everything down, (the IHSA) are doing what they've got to do,' Holmes said. "That's when the governor shuts everything down, how is the IHSA going to play sports? So I think the IHSA is doing what they have to do, and you can't blame them for that."

Holmes does feel bad for everyone involved in athletics during this trying time.

"I really feel bad for the kids, of course," Holmes said. "But there isn't anything we can do but wait."

Father McGivney Catholic athletic director Jeff Oller also expressed sympathy for the student-athletes who aren't able to compete, but as always, safety first.

"It's a really unfortunate situation, but we've got to take in consideration our students' safety," Oller said. "It's because they put in so much time and work to get ready, especially the seniors. There's a lot of frustration and sadness that, there's no question, there's no season and the end of their careers."

And although there won't be a final season for the seniors, there's also the pride that they helped get the school's athletic program off the ground, and their accomplishments won't soon be forgotten by Oller or the school.

"Still, there's a lot of pride in their accomplishments, especially the seniors," Oller said, "because they're the ones who helped start our programs."

One of the casualties of the cancelled season was the debut of the school's new baseball field, which was nearing completion when the spring season was called off.

"It's going to be one of the nicest ballparks in the area once it's completed," Oller said. The plan is still to still open the field for the 2021 baseball season.

All schools will follow the state's guidelines for resuming athletics once the all-clear's been given by the state government and local health officials. However, the state's summer contact days, mainly used for football drills, has been suspended for now, and it's uncertain when they'll be resumed when athletics can get back started.

"I think the programs will be fine," Fox said. "I hope the summer contact days will be reinstated at some point, and everything will be back to normal."

Kusnerick also expressed optimism about a return to normalcy during the summer.

"We hope to have some return to normalcy before the summer is over for our student-athletes and coaches," Kusnerick said. "Right now, it is impossible to plan, because we have to follow the lead from the governor of Illinois and the state."

But all are looking forward to the return to the fields of play for the various teams.

"We're just going to follow the guidelines issued by the state, and hopefully at some point, we'll be able to resume," Fox said. "Just getting things back to the status quo, and getting the kids back active in their sports, and starting back in the fall fresh."

Kusnerick has been in constant contact with his student-athletes and coaches, via the school district's E-mail system and social media, and is also looking forward to the return of Redbird sports.

"Kids and coaches are resilient," Kusnerick said, "and when we are able to return, I expect a renewed excitement and energy because of the time away from athletics."

In the case of Holmes, he'll be retiring as Explorers' athletic director on June 30, and has a very good replacement in Brian Hoener, currently the girls soccer head coach.

"It's time for me to go, and I'm very happy that I have a great person to take over," Holmes said. He also expressed hope that the crisis will end sooner rather than later.

"I sure hope so," Holmes said. "It's a bad nightmare, and I want it to be over."

Oller again expressed sympathies for his athletes, but also pride in everything they've done, and feels that the Griffins' teams are going nowhere but up.

"We obviously feel for them, but we're proud of everything they've done," Oller said. "I still think we're taking steps in the right direction, and we're really excited for the future."