

Area Basketball Coaches Prepare For Upcoming Season As COVID-19 Pandemic Looms, Reduced Schedules Will Be Common

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EDWARDSVILLE - The 2020-21 Illinois High School boys and girls basketball seasons are set to begin next month, and the season will undoubtedly be unlike any other

in the long history of the sport in Illinois, as the continuing COVID-19 pandemic continues around the state, the nation and the world.

Already, many of the tournaments and shootout events that have become staples around the area and state have been cancelled, including the Centralia Holiday Tournament and the Highland Shootout. Games will be played within the COVID districts set up by the IHSA as part of its return-to-play guidelines. The usual precautions and guidelines are currently being followed by area schools, with the old saying "better safe than sorry" being the course of action taken.

"We've been meeting as a team three days a week," said Edwardsville head coach Dustin Battas, "playing some basketball and lifting weights. We're trying to be extra careful with COVID, we wear masks, we wash our hands, sanitize our hands and sanitize the balls after every practice."

Despite the guidelines and restrictions that every school is facing, Battas' players have stayed positive and kept working.

"Our kids are terrific, they're resilient and optimistic," Battas said, "and they're really grateful to have the opportunity to play."



The boys team at Alton High has a similar situation, and is also doing everything they can to stay upbeat and positive.

"We started working out (Monday)," said Redbird head coach Dana Morgan, "and we're trying to keep the kids safe and positive. The kids want to play, the coaches want to play, so we're taking it one day at a time, and hopefully, we'll be allowed to play against other schools."

Meanwhile at Civic Memorial, the Eagles' players and coaches are also optimistic that they'll be able to get the season in, and are awaiting word from both the IHSA and the Illinois Department of Public Health on how and when to proceed.

"Like many schools, we have prepared a season with approximately 24 games, give or take," said CM athletic director Todd Hannaford, "with the possibility of a couple more. Under the current guidelines, it is a little difficult to add too many more. As of right now, we are continuing to wait for further guidance from the IHSA as to if, how or when we might actually be able to play basketball this winter. IDPH guidelines for medium risk sports will have to be changed if we are allowed to play. We remain hopeful, and will be prepared to play once we get the final word."

Morgan also expressed similar concerns about the upcoming season, with the possibility that the entire season may be cancelled.

"We're at the mercy of the virus right now," Morgan said, "and we're dependent on the IDPH and the government on what we can do. And if the season does get cancelled, there's nothing we can do about it."

Battas also expressed some concerns about the possibility of a cancelled season, but also expressed optimism as well.

"I think our seniors would really be devastated, and that would be a worst case scenario," Battas said. "If we keep following the safety guidelines, I think we'll be able to play in some capacity."

CM is currently engaging in open gym and contact day practices as allowed by the IHSA, and will keep on working towards the official opening of the winter sports season.

"Also like most schools, we are currently involved in open gym and contact day practices, which includes on-court activities, as well as strength and conditioning," Hannaford said. "This process ends at the end of October. Currently, the winter basketball seasons are scheduled to begin on Monday, Nov. 16."

The hope is that schools will be able to play at least 20 games in the regular season, with many of the holiday and mid-season tournaments, along with many shootout events, being either postponed or cancelled. There's also the possibility of an abbreviated IHSA postseason, with regional tournaments, and also the possibility of a sectional, but currently, the state tournament won't be played. When the pandemic started in the beginning of spring, the IHSA cancelled the remainder of the boys state tournament, with the Class 1A and 2A finals set to be played, along with the Class 3A and 4A sectional finals that same weekend.

And with the uncertainty of the upcoming season, Battas expressed much optimism and hope for what hopefully lies ahead in the 2020-21 campaign.

"We're just trying to control what we can control, and be fully prepared to have a season," Battas said. "We owe it to our seniors to be fully prepared to go."