

Area Schools Ready To Start Sports Activities

by Colin Feeney, Contributing Sports Writer
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ALTON - The announcement that Madison and St. Clair Counties, which are a part of Region Four, has gone to Tier Two mitigations in the Restore Illinois plan is very good news for area high school sports programs, as they can now start practices for low-risk sports such as boys and girls bowling, boys swimming, girls gymnastics, competitive cheerleading and dance, and girls badminton, along with contact days for out-of-season sports.

However, Madison County area superintendents are lobbying Gov. J.B. Pritzker hard to accelerate the entire region into Phase 4, which would allow Madison County.

In Region 3 Restore Illinois are Jersey, Calhoun and Greene counties. All those counties are in Phase 4 and able to play boys and girls basketball again, along with girls and boys bowling at Jersey. Basketball is considered a high-risk sport for the COVID-19 regulations.

Madison County, now listed Tier 2 as part of Region 4 Restore Illinois, boys and girls bowling and swimming are the main sports that are on for the time being. Boys and girls basketball games can't start until the Region moves to Phase 4, the next phase past Tier 2.

With the IHSA announcing the dates for the remainder of the 2020-21 school year after a special meeting of the Board of Directors on Jan. 27, there's now clarity of the length of the seasons and how competitions will be conducted. Games and meets can be played for the winter season after teams have practiced for seven days, each season is set to end on Mar. 13, and there will be no state tournament series for the winter sports.

"I knew we were probably going to go to Tier Two, but are hoping to get to Phase Four right away to allow the high-risk sports to be played," said Alton High School athletic director Chris Kusnerick, "so that's a welcome change. We're now going to have a chance to let our student-athletes play, and that's a very welcome change."



Father McGivney Catholic athletic director Jeff Oller agreed with Kusnerick's assessment.

"It's a step in the right direction," Oller said. "We've still have some things that we've got to do before we start playing, but it's definitely a step in the right direction."

For all the Griffin athletes, getting the chance to finally play is something they're all looking forward to.

"For sure, that's all they wanted," Oller said. "the opportunity to go out and play, and now, it looks like they're going to get to do it."

At Granite City High, there's still some questions remaining, especially with the higher risk sports, but the drop to Tier Two is also a big step for the Warrior teams and players.

"There's still a lot of questions, because we're going from Tier Three to Tier Two, which is good," said Granite City athletic director John Moad, "but for high-risk sports, it only allows for conditioning workouts, and (basketball) is a high-risk sport according to the (Illinois Department of Public Health)."

In the IHSA Board meeting, it was also determined that the spring sports seasons would begin from Mar. 1-15, with boys soccer, girls volleyball, boys gymnastics and boys and girls water polo beginning after seven practice dates, with football having a seven-game season from Mar. 19-Apr. 24. Summer sports seasons begin Apr. 5, with wrestling beginning Apr. 19, ending June 12, while all other summer sports ending June 19. There will be no state tournament series for boys soccer, football, girls volleyball and wrestling. Other sports may have a state tournament series, and the IHSA Board will determine that at a later date.

"We're going to wait and see what happens at the meeting before we move forward," Oller said. "Once we get the information, and we figure out our schedule and contact days, we can figure out our schedules. There's opportunities, and the low and medium-risk sports are looking promising. Basketball is our higher-risk sport at McGivney."

Moad also will take the wait-and-see approach before deciding what direction Granite will take, and he also knows things could change at any time as well.

"We're hoping that they give us some dates and direction for all the seasons," Moad said. "It's a fluid situation, and things keep changing, so by the time they meet, we could go to Tier One, and that's the next step, if the numbers dictate that. We're hoping the

trend continues, because we need to be in Phase Four for the high-risk sports to compete. It's definitely a step in the right direction, and we have to take the steps to get to Tier One and Phase Four, and that's our ultimate goal."

For the Redbird teams, it's now full steam ahead.

"We have started with our winter practices and contact days for our out-of-season sports," Kusnerick said.

The bottom line for all of the schools is that the student-athletes are going to get a chance to play, and it's truly good news around for everyone, especially for many sports that haven't had a chance to have games in nearly a year since the COVID-19 pandemic started in earnest last March. The pandemic forced the IHSA to cancel the remainder of the 2020 boys basketball tournaments as well as the entire spring sporting seasons.

"Oh gosh, yes," an enthusiastic Moad said, "if we can keep on going in the right direction. The kids are missing out on the high school experience. These kids have really suffered, and we want to get them out of the fields. You're going to see a very high excitement level from the kids. This announcement today is that winter sports are still in question, but it's still a very promising announcement for the spring sports and summer sports."

The Griffin teams will be ready to fly once the necessary information is received, and Oller is looking forward to that as well.

"As soon as we have the necessary information, we're going to move quickly," Oller said. "I hope we continued to have some good information, and we have some direction."

For the Redbirds, it's probably the best news that the Alton student-athletes could have gotten.

"This is great, great news for the emotional and social aspects of our student-athletes," Kusnerick said. "We're looking forward to it."