

Winter sports coaches advocate starting soon - and safely

COVID-19 models presented by State High School League

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The Minnesota State High School League offered three models for the winter sports season last week, and the most optimistic of the models would have try-outs and practices beginning Monday, Dec. 21, with the first contests the first week of January. Gov. Tim Walz ordered 'a pause' for winter sports, due to the COVID-19 pandemic in mid-November.

In a series of interviews with Lake Conference head coaches the past few days, the consensus is for opening as soon as possible, with participant safety as the No. 1 goal.

Edina girls basketball coach Jaime Gaard Chapman is in a good position to comment on dealing with COVID-19, which ended the football and volleyball seasons one or two weeks short of completion this fall. All other sports were able to play through section championships, which was the initial plan from the High School League.

"The fall season was informative for the coaches, athletic directors and school leaders," Gaard Chapman said. "For the winter, we feel well-prepared for all three potential models. Our athletes are excited to go as quickly as we can. During the tennis season, we took extra precautions [going beyond the High School League's] protocol. I am really proud of how the girls bought into having a safe season."

The result showed up in the Section 6AA Tournament as the Hornets won the championship with a full lineup.

Looking to basketball season, Gaard Chapman said, "At Edina, we are fortunate to have three full courts to work with. We will disinfect the basketballs before and after practice."

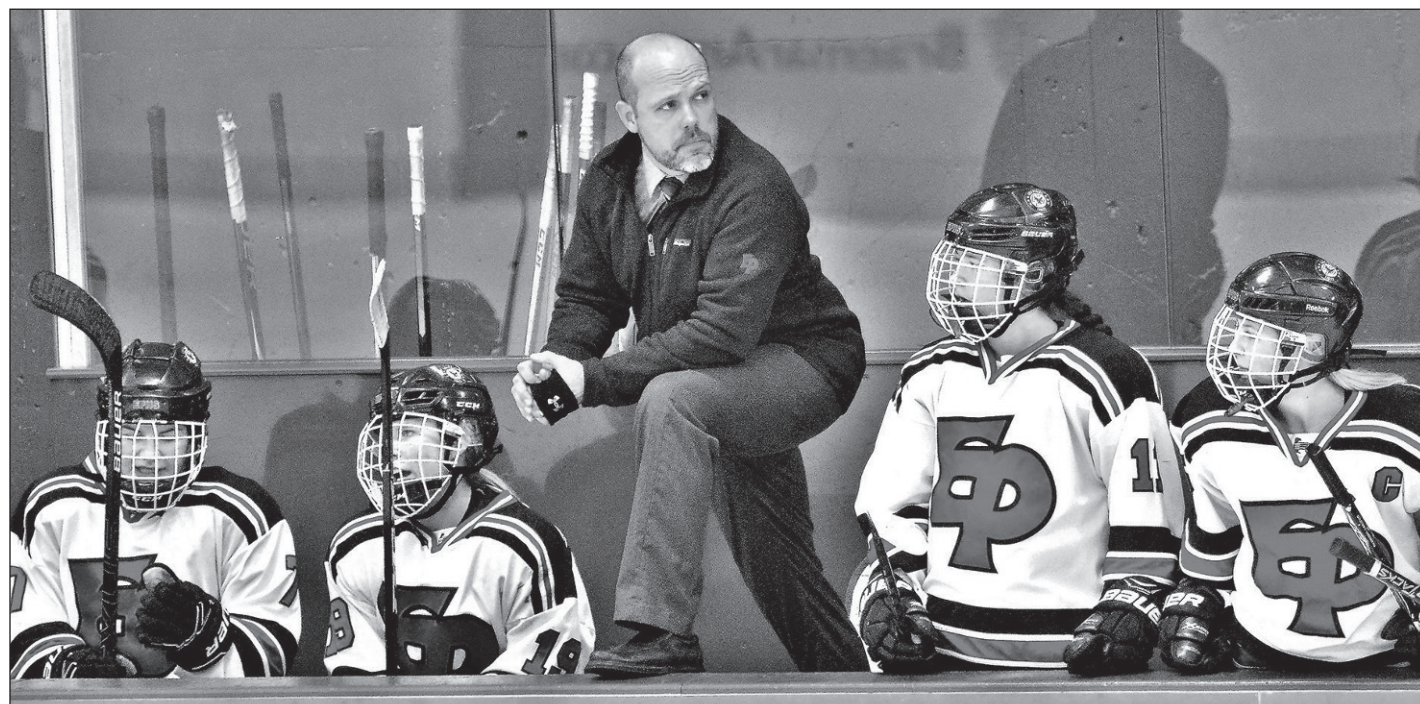
Masks will be worn in team meetings at practice, and with so much space to work with, coach Gaard Chapman likes the opportunities for social distancing.

"The girls are not able to use the gym right now," the Edina coach said. "Physical conditioning will be a priority the first few days."

Edina has four starters returning - junior guards Ella Campbell and Dorothy Stotts and senior forwards Caiya Wulf and Allie Murphy.

"It certainly helps to have that kind of leadership and experience back," Gaard Chapman said.

Eden Prairie High girls hockey coach Jaime Grossman said, "We know it's not



(SUN PHOTO BY JOHN SHERMAN)

Coach Jaime Grossman of the Eden Prairie High girls hockey team is looking forward to being back on the bench for the new season, with games scheduled for January 2021.

going to be the same this year. What I look forward to most is our time together as a team. Some of the girls feel isolated right now. Taking care of the kids is first and foremost. It is beginning to look like we will have a State Tournament. If we start playing with no chance of that, it changes everything."

Eden Prairie always battles Minnetonka for the girls hockey title in Section 2AA, and this year should be no different.

"We lost [All-State forward] Sydney Langseth [to graduation]," Grossman said. "Some people might think we'll be down, but we might be deeper than we've been the last 2-3-4 years. A number of kids are ready to take the next step forward. Team building has always played a big part in our success. How we handle the locker room is going to take some fresh ideas."

Grace Kuipers, an All-Lake Conference Eden Prairie senior forward, was one of the league's scoring leaders last season.

Hopkins High boys basketball coach Kenny Novak Jr. didn't coach girls tennis for the first time in many years this fall. So he has had more time than usual to think about the basketball season.

"I'm not betting on opening Dec. 21," he said. "My fear is that we won't be able to start until the middle of January. The Lindbergh Center is closed, so our kids aren't even shooting unless the go to a park and wear mittens."

The season will be less than the usual 26 regular-season contests, and because

of the late start, it will also be shorter in number of weeks.

"With fewer weeks, we won't be able to teach as much," Novak said. "I have never coached an AAU team, but the season could end up looking more like an AAU season."

Novak always sends his best senior, and sometimes others as well, on scholarships to NCAA Division I schools. He speculated that scholarships will be fewer this year, mainly because some college juniors and seniors currently on scholarships may be granted an extra year of eligibility by the NCAA.

As far as competition is concerned, Novak said. "Every team is in the same boat."

Wayzata High wrestling coach Eric Swensen is in a unique position this year. He not only heads the Trojan program, but also serves as president of the Minnesota Wrestling Coaches' Association.

"With COVID-19, we have to take it day by day," he said. "We are holding our breath, hoping we can start Dec. 21. Our schedule will look different this year with no big tournaments. We are limited to dual meets and triangulars."

Swensen noted that Andrew Rotschaffer, Eden Prairie's associate athletic director, drew up a composite schedule for teams in the Lake and South Suburban Conferences covering January. February matches will be added later.

"I am happy with the schedule that has been created," Swensen said. "The good thing is that we have a very competitive mix of opponents."

Practices will take on a different look in most high school wrestling programs this year. Since most of the wrestling rooms are tight spaces, Swensen said, "Practices will be in smaller groups and shorter."

Meets will also have a different look - with fewer spectators, who will be asked to mask up and social distance in the bleachers."

Soccer and football attendance was limited to 125 per school in the fall. Fewer fans were allowed at volleyball matches. Chances are the crowds will be limited for all winter sports except possibly the two outdoor sports - Alpine and Nordic skiing.

Swensen said, "As a teacher, I want to make sure everything is done right. As a dad, I have seen how hard this is on families. I know how important it is for teenagers to socialize. It is a tough balance between social interaction and trying to keep everyone safe. I don't want to increase the risk of anyone getting sick."

The Wrestling Coaches' Association has always had safety at the front, Swensen said, pointing out how matches are stopped whenever blood is spilled or a wrestler is injured. He also cited health checks during weigh-ins before the matches.

"The Wrestling Coaches' Association has an 11-page document with safety protocols," Swensen said. "[Looking to the postseason], the State High School League has reserved three weekends in March for section, and hopefully, state competition. I feel we will be able to do it safely."

Eagles

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points this season than anybody.

"Our entire program had a good year," Grant continued. "In addition to an undefeated varsity season, our JV and sophomore teams were undefeated and our freshman A team only lost once [to Minnetonka]. We have a lot of good kids, who share a passion for football."

Grant learned a lot about football from his dad Bud, the coach who led the Minnesota Vikings to four Super Bowl appearances. Other influences include former high school head coaches - John Hanson of Osseo, Dick Hanson of Burnsville and George Thole of Stillwater.

"I studied them and identified what made them successful," Grant said.

The Eden Prairie coach structures his practices "the St. John's Way" with a nod

to his college coach John Gagliardi of St. John's University. Gagliardi didn't believe in hitting during practice and Grant has followed that tradition. That's one reason Eden Prairie has fewer injuries than most high school teams. The Eagles save their hitting for the games.

"The other thing coach Gagliardi said all the time was: 'We want to do a few things exceptionally well,'" Grant noted. The Eagles' playbook isn't very thick - some basic plays and a few trick plays

for special occasions.

As Eden Prairie's head coach since 1992, when he arrived from Forest Lake, Grant has not had a losing season. His resume includes 11 state championships in the big-school divisions. He has instilled a tradition that is second to none. No wonder his team is at or near the top in the state rankings year after year.

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