

Published January 20, 2021

Frustration with state and governor prompts rallies for high school sports

By Jon Kingdon



Parents and students protest Jan. 15 at a "Let them Play" rally outside Acalanes High School. Photo Melissa Murphy

Parents from all around the state of California held "Let Them Play" rallies Jan. 15 at their respective high schools, which included Acalanes and Campolindo. A Facebook account started by parents at Torrey Pines High School in San Diego, designed to restart the states interscholastic programs, grew to a membership of over 27,000 parents, which led to these public demonstrations.

Lauren Fritch, whose son Connor is a junior on the Campolindo football team, was out marching with several parents and athletes representing the various boys and girls sports team at Campolindo. Fritch spoke to the disappointment at the void left by the suspension of athletics. "It's frustration, angst and depression," Fritch said. "The state has taken everything away from the student-athletes. When they sit in front of a computer with no social dynamics, sports may be the only outlet where they can be social and burn off some steam. Social media just doesn't cut it 24/7."

Jen Bielawski, whose son is a sophomore on the Acalanes football team also sees this as a learning experience for the students. "This is a good way for the kids to learn to advocate for themselves and get their voices heard," said Bielawski. "This is an important time in their lives, and they need to be with their peers. Why is it all or nothing? Why can't they have the opportunity to play sports when the data has shown that it can be done safely?"

The goal for the parents and the coaches is to be able to make an in-person presentation with Gov. Gavin Newsom, proving to him that the data they have collected would show that the football programs along with other sports can be run with a minimal threat from the COVID-19 virus.

Serra High School head coach Patrick Walsh created the Golden State High School Football Coaches Community, which has a membership of over 600 coaches from all over California. The coaches began collecting workout data to determine the exposure of the virus to the athletes and coaches from around the state when they practiced proper protocols. "With over 230 schools reporting, the data included 15,000 different kids. These numbers have shown that the spread of COVID-19 or contracting COVID-19 at the workouts was next to zero," said Walsh. "We have had over 700,000 contact points for the athletes and only had 408 reported cases of COVID-19 in that data set, with only five being traced to a workout along with 100,000 touch points for our coaches."

The Coaches Association was important to Campolindo head coach Kevin Macy because it allowed the coaches to speak as a unified voice and to determine that football could be played safely in the red tier. "For us, with all the testing, it's been zero for everyone and we've been doing this from the summer through the fall," Macy said. "I imagine that is what it's going to be for most of the other camps and that's with a lot of activity. There should be no sitting around waiting for an 'Orange green light.'"

For Walsh, the Coaches Association is only a first step for the group. "What's been great about it is the outcome is that we're sharing wonderful ideas and stories that bring us all together; public and private schools, big and small schools," Walsh said. "We're all fighting for one common goal which is that the kids need to get back out on the fields. This is not just a football movement, this is a youth sports movement."

The state of Texas recently held their football state championships and Walsh contacted their Coaches Association, which has over 400,000 members, to see how they were able to have such a successful season during the pandemic. They told him that communication was the key that led to his forming the Golden State Coaches Association. The other crucial aspect for the success of their program was the attitude they brought to the game. "They did not start at no. They allowed summer workouts in coordination with the Governor's office and public health officials and they collected data which showed what our data has shown. They took that data and went to the next step. For us, the next step is to take the protocols of the California Interscholastic Federation (CIF) along with the data that we have amassed and present it to the health officials and show how like in other states, we can create a safe environment for our community, our kids, and our families. The data shows that these would not be super-spreader events."

The starting date for the fall sports season was originally set for Aug.10. Since then, the date has been

moved four times - to Dec. 7, Jan. 4, and Jan. 25 and is currently, and one might assume, tentatively set for Feb. 1.

"They've kicked the can down the road so many times, the next kick may end everything for everybody," Macy said. "In the big picture, our kids have been ignored in this. There's never any language about there being assurances that we're going to make something happen. You have COVID-19 the virus and you have COVID-19 the political tool. Unfortunately, the kids are caught in the middle. The kids are the scapegoat in all of this. It's time to stop thinking of them as the super spreaders. It's time to let them have their dreams back."

Patrick Cruickshank, the Commissioner of Athletics of the North Coast Section of the CIF, sent out a release updating the season of sports calendar for the remainder of the school year and how they plan to implement bringing high school sports back to the member schools.

The key points in the release state the following: The leagues will set their seasons of sport based on the color tier that their county resides in and the sports allowed in that tier; No Athletic Competitions can begin until the local stay at home order has been lifted; Feb. 1 is the earliest teams can begin practicing or competing; There will be no section, regional or state championships; Students can only participate in one sport at a time; The football season must conclude by April 17 for the 2021 fall season to commence as scheduled on Aug. 9; and The final date for NCS competition will be June 12.

The full release can be seen on the North Coast Section website.

If the country remains in the Purple Tier, the only sports that will be permitted will be cross-country, golf, tennis, track and field, and swimming and diving.

The athletic directors of the Diablo Athletic League met this past Friday to discuss what sports should start up and to determine how that plan would be implemented within the league. "We did not want to push back any sport that we would have the opportunity to start immediately," Campolindo's Athletic Director Raymond Meadows said. "The general consensus is that we want to get it going sooner than later. At this point in time, the Athletic Directors are getting feedback from our coaches because they are going to have more insight specific to their sports and how we can make the sports work given the guidelines and parameters around what we're allowed to do," he said. "The biggest message from our meeting, which was stressed by everyone, was that we really want to get our kids back out there playing sports as soon as we can."



Campolindo students hold signs at Jan. 15 "Let them Play" rally. Photo Jon Kingdon

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