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Athletic directors look back ... and forward

By Jon Kingdon

It's been a year like no other for the high school and Saint Mary's athletic departments. Campolindo's athletic director Ray Meadows summed it up succinctly for everyone. "The end of this year cannot come soon enough," Meadows said. "Every day has been something different. There has been so much uncertainty and unknowing and not having a game plan, constantly confronting new situations. We were dealing with things that we did not have a blueprint for while not knowing what was around the corner." Despite all the issues, those in charge kept their eye on the prize: get the players participating again. "We were under a lot of pressure to give these kids an opportunity to play sports, particularly for the seniors," said Randy Takahashi, Acalanes' Athletic Director. "We wanted them to be able to look back at something positive and to do it in a safe manner."

For Saint Mary's Athletic Director, Mike Matoso, there were far more than county rules that he had to account for. "Almost 20% of our kids are international so we had to deal with international rules, national, NCAA, state, county, and campus guidelines," Matoso said. "Every step was challenging from a standpoint of assisting with such a small staff."

With sports playing such a major role in the community, the first goal for John Nickerson, the AUHSD superintendent, was to get the athletic programs up and running as soon as they could. "It was a high priority for us to get our student-athletes on the field, the pool deck and in the gym quickly and safely as we could possibly do," Nickerson said. "With over 60% of our students participating in athletics, it's an important part of their life. With the hardships of the pandemic, it was critically important to get them competing or at least participating as soon as possible. We were one of the first districts in Northern California to start our sports camps and became the model for how to do that."

With so many reports coming from so many sources, communication became essential for all involved. "I've tried to stay in contact with the athletes and their parents," Meadows said. "We were fortunate to have John Nickerson and Associate Superintendent Amy McNamara. They were instrumental in meeting with us each week and providing guidance. In talking with the AD's from other districts, it was evident we were getting a lot more guidance and direction than they were. I always felt their support and that I was getting correct information."

Nickerson saw first-hand what the athletic directors were investing in their programs. "Our athletic directors were absolutely extraordinary and heroic in their efforts," Nickerson said. "They were all working time and a half apart from their regular teaching duties to make this happen. There were a lot of hours that went into it from the district level to make sure things happened. Our top priority was to get the kids into the classrooms, and we had a cleaner, easier path to get them onto the outdoor and eventually the indoor facilities."

Testing was far more extensive at Saint Mary's than at the high schools and it was extensive and expensive process. "It was quite a process and we spent close to \$350,000 on testing this year," Matoso said. "We would do the tests and then courier them down to Santa Clara and wait for the results. We've done over 3,500 tests in the spring with only 18 positives (less than a 0.5 positivity rate). All the teams had their own pledge agreements and held each other accountable and it's why we were able to have played over 250 events this spring and close to 300 for the year and we were able to do it because our coaches, our kids and staff did a great job of managing it all. Our assistant athletic director for sports medicine, Josh Sims, was just phenomenal. He did such an amazing job not just within athletics but across campus with the COVID protocols. It was the same with Sam Holden and Ed Arnold who were in charge of running our facilities and game day operations."

There were several unsung heroes at the high schools as well. "We were very fortunate to have a really good athletic trainer and school nurse in Chris Clark and Dvora Citron which enabled us to manage anything that came up," Takahashi said. "Our coaches were very careful in what they were doing when they had the kids together, continuing to tell them to be responsible for themselves, their teammates and their families; to do the right things, not only when they would come to camp but when they were outside of camp as well. I also give the kids and their parents a lot of credit. They were really good at contacting us immediately if something had come up to let us know that their child was not going to be there for 10-14 days."

Meadows was pleased in the way that the community had come together despite the varied opinions and ideas in how to get things done. "At the end of the day, people came to recognize that in the end, we all wanted the same thing," Meadows said. "I've felt a lot of support in this community from the parents and our athletes and the teachers. There have been a lot of moments that have brought us together."

There were some serious financial ramifications that had to be confronted head on by the colleges and the high schools. For Matoso, it was the alumni and other donors that filled a big gap at Saint Mary's. "We took a huge hit, probably close to \$1 million in revenue," Matoso said. "On the flip side, we're probably going to have our best annual fundraising year ever so I really thank our alums and donors for their support. Without them, this would've been a difficult financial year. Their support was huge for us, helping to make up with some of that other lost revenue."

Meadows called upon all of the teams to make sacrifices: "We've asked all of our programs to try and minimize their expenses and we've cut out things that might have appeared frivolous this year so we're doing okay with all our sports team's budgets. We're operating at a bare minimum level to try and offset the costs and expenses and try to get back to the basics to make sure that we're providing the kids with opportunities safely without preventing anybody from being able to participate."

Takahashi has taken a similar approach at Acalanes: "We were in pretty good shape going into this year, but

we are already talking about and planning how we're going into next year because we did have to tap into some of our reserves to get through this year. We'll be okay financially this year but we're going to have to be penny wise."

The school district had its financial concerns: "We had some reserves in place and some one-time money to kind of buffer the hardship this one year," Nickerson said. "Going through two years of this could crush these budgets."

There is more than a cautious feeling of optimism as these administrators look toward the 2021-22 year. "I'm hoping we're full go next year," Matoso said. "There's going to definitely be some things that are changed. You're not going to have pregame receptions or where people are in tight quarters and splitting hors d'oeuvres and you know we do our Hall of Fame for basketball. You know you're not going to go in there now and have 100 people going in and getting food from the same place? There's going to be different protocols we're going to need to abide by."

The high schools are expecting to be fully open by Aug. 9. "We are also counting on athletics being fully open that day as well," Takahashi said. "We are planning for a best-case scenario. However, if we must make adjustments, that's okay, but you want to adjust back. You don't want to have to adjust forward because then you'll be trying to fill gaps."

As the head of the district, Nickerson is still waiting to learn what the official policy will be in every area. "I think we're going to learn a lot in the next four weeks in terms of what schools will look like, but our schools will be in-person five days a week and all of our sports teams will be operating in regular seasons. Some of the things that remain undetermined is to what degree will masking be required? To what degree will testing be required? Will we be allowed to have regular crowds in the audience? We will be very thrilled when we are in June and totally focused on next year and bringing it as close to normal as we can."

With all that went on, for so many, it was an opportunity for all to revisit the reasons they chose a career in education and administration. "This has been my largest professional challenge and made me ask, why am I doing this?" Meadows said. "I soon realized that no matter how hard or how difficult or how worked up I was, when I was finally able to interact with the kids and get back to teaching and going to the games, I found that resurgence as to why I initially got into teaching which was to work with the kids."

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