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Playing through the heat wave

By Jon Kingdon



Miramonte JV players Grant Jedick, right, and Gabon Levesque, left, keep hydrated during the recent heat wave. Photo Ann Murphy

Under conditions that could be described as biblically hot, the high schools and Saint Mary's College were forced to make concessions to the heat in many ways. Practices were shortened, postponed, canceled, or moved to a time when the heat began to diminish. Cooperation was essential between the administration, the trainers, the coaches, and the players and unlike with the COVID situation, there was a game plan that was put in place and the issues with the heat were kept at a minimum.

"We knew it was coming so we had parameters around it, knowing when it was safe to play," said Acalanes trainer Chris Clark. "We were on top of it, but we were just at the mercy of what the weather would allow us to do."

As with the coronavirus, the high schools utilized a color-coding system to determine what the athletic teams could and couldn't do. Beginning with the least threatening conditions, the colors were green, yellow, orange, red and black.

"The red range was where you had to decide what you wanted to do outdoors," Clark said. "When we were in the black ranges, we were not allowed to do anything. There were a number of days where we started in the black range so there were a number of cancellations or postponements to try and let the temperature drop enough to allow the kids to have some sort of activity."

With the temperatures seeming to max out when the teams were scheduled to have games or practices, events were moved to later in the day. "The gyms were also hot, so we pushed back the starting time for the volleyball matches to the evenings," Clark said. "Everything was modified. The freshmen football games were moved from 5 to 7 as were the tennis matches. I worked with (Athletic Director) Randy Takahashi and we were in constant contact with the coaches taking the temperatures and disseminating the information as to when to start practices and when to reduce the intensity of the practices. I would ask Coach Burnsed to hold off practice for another half an hour when the temperature should drop into that safe range and he responded simply: "Whatever you've got to do."

Did Burnsed cancel, postpone, start early, or have pad-less practices? "All of it," Burnsed said. "It was difficult to adjust in that we only had one good practice during the week. No one missed any games. We were very careful and followed what Chris advised us to do and we did all we could to stay on top of it."

The preventative word for every trainer, coach and athlete was hydration. "We told our athletes to pre-hydrate in advance of practice and the games," Saint Mary's Head Trainer Josh Sims said. "We directed them to drink Gatorade to get more electrolytes into their systems along with adding a little more salt on their food to keep their bodies regulated as much as possible," Sims said.

With the medical histories of all of the Saint Mary's players, Sims and his staff knew that some of them would need special attention. "Some of our athletes have conditions, such as sweating excessively which made them more vulnerable to the heat," Sims said. "We would modify their activities, giving them special attention whether through diet, hydration, exercise restrictions and other precautions. It does get hard in the games because you can't control the intensity but hopefully, we've prepared everybody along the way."

Saint Mary's and the Lamorinda trainers all used an item called the wet-bulb globe thermometer (WBGT) to estimate the effect of temperature, humidity, wind speed, and visible and infrared radiation (usually sunlight) on humans.

"Based off that reading, we determine what type of work-rest ratio the players should have," Sims said. "Luckily for us, humidity usually drives that and so the hotter it gets here, the lower the humidity. We're pretty lucky in that regard unlike in the south and southwest where it's hot and humid so they will get more restrictions than out here. Still, when a certain number is reached on the WBGT, the National College Athletic Association has a set of rules which requires that in games like soccer, the players have water breaks at assigned times during their games."

At Saint Mary's, there were more alternatives available to work around the heat than there were at the high schools. "We got lucky in that our schedules could line up where we were able to practice earlier in the day, unlike the high schools where it's classes all morning, so we were able to have soccer practice at 7 or 8 a.m. Our soccer team was able to finish by 10 o'clock when it really began to heat up," Sims said. "On days when the team could not change their practice time, we moved them into one of the rec gyms."

Acalanes cross country coaches Bruno Morlan and Jeff Hudson were particularly attuned to the heat. "We canceled practice when it was over 105 degrees," Morlan said. "Between 100 and 105 degrees we kept the runners on campus where we could keep eyes on all the time, making ice water available for them after each loop. Ninety to 95 was as close as we could get to normal. We kept reminding the runners to constantly hydrate before and after practice because they lose so much water when they run so if they start on empty, they're just going to have a bad time. Fortunately, we never had any major issues with our runners."

Amanda Turtle, a senior on the cross-country team at Miramonte was at the forefront of the hot temperatures. "We normally ran right after school, but we had to cancel three of the five days of practice one week," Turtle said. "Coach (Tristan) Tool made sure we stayed hydrated, and we would run in the evening when the temperature dropped to 85 degrees which was a lot better than 100. When the temperature did drop enough for us to practice, we went on a slow 20-minute run and then we were told to get water and go home."

John Grigsby, Miramonte's trainer also saw to the postponing and cancellations of practices and also alerted the coaches to be aware of any athletes that showed signs of heat issues. "I told them to monitor the athletes to see if they had hot, dry and red flushed skin and if they appeared confused or disoriented," Grigsby said. "I filled up big tubs of ice water in case we might have needed an ice water immersion for anyone suffering from heat exhaustion or a potential heat stroke victim. Fortunately, we never had a situation where we needed to make a 911 call. Everyone managed it well as the coaches all adhered to the guidelines."

The field turf also exacerbated the problems with the heat for the football team. "One year we placed a thermometer on the field and the mercury burst the glass so it can be as high as 120 degrees on the field if it's a 100-degree day," Grigsby said. "We moved football practice to the grass baseball field for three days in the evening."

The heat issues were not restricted to the athletes. "We actually had some kids in their PE classes who were not that well trained that had some heat exhaustion issues and we would send them down to the nurse," Grigsby said. "A lot of the one and a half hour classes would normally take little walks to take a break and they also had to send some of their students to the nurse."

Ironically, the one sport where you would not expect to have any issues with the heat, water polo, had an issue in a match at Acalanes. "A player who was not participating for the visiting Davis High School girls' team was sitting out in the sun," Clark said. "She was obviously having a heat issue bordering on heat stroke, so we got her into the pool and then the air-conditioned girls locker room until her mother came down from Davis to pick her up."

Clark essentially spoke for all of the trainers when he said, "We were super-cognizant and aware of all that could go wrong."

Reach the reporter at: sportsdesk@lamorindaweekly.com

[back](#)

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