

Class A coaches try to save a season (published August 24, 2020)

The Nebraska high school cross country season kicks off this week amid a great deal of uncertainty. While there is a possibility that we'll have an effective COVID vaccine by year's end, COVID infection rates and deaths continue to run high, particularly in Omaha, Lincoln and other larger Nebraska communities. Most collegiate athletic conferences have already postponed fall sports until 2021, and Omaha Public Schools (OPS) have suspended all extracurricular activities until at least October 19. While OPS currently stands alone in suspending sports, its decision reflects the challenge facing Class A high schools: how does a school balance sports activities while teaching 1000+ students in a building located within a high-infection community?

Only time will tell whether the high school cross country season reaches its traditional conclusion at the State meet. However, in just the past month, Class A cross country coaches have taken extraordinary steps to improve the odds that their runners toe the starting line in Kearney on October 23.

The first step to save the Class A cross country season was taken by Tim Ebers, the Elkhorn South head coach. Elkhorn South didn't join Class A until the 2017 season so Coach Ebers is relatively new to the scene, but he had a strong suspicion in June that COVID was a bug that wouldn't go away easily. After losing the spring track season, he had an empty feeling that he didn't want repeated this fall. He reached out to Sean McMahon and Jake Smrcina, the boys' and girls' coaches at his alma mater in Fremont, as well as Steve Satterley at Burke and Jeremy Haselhorst at Papillion South. His questions were relatively simple but they were nagging at him. "If we stick with the status quo of huge cross country meets, how can that be safe?" "How can we adapt?" "What things can be done to give our kids the best chance for a full season?"

Coach Haselhorst's initial response was, "Great questions, I don't have any answers, but keep pushing us to come up with a solution." In early July, a larger group of Class A coaches began to share ideas via phone, text and e-mail, and they agreed that being proactive was the best approach. On July 10, Coach Ebers spoke with Jon Dolliver, an NSAA assistant director who has responsibility for the District and State cross country meets. Mr. Dolliver expressed interest in the coaches' early ideas, and essentially gave the coaches wide latitude to create a plan to make the pre-Districts season successful.

I want to pause here. The NSAA is often criticized for its rigid bureaucracy and 'our way or the highway' approach. However, in the midst of an unprecedented pandemic with no easy answers, Mr. Dolliver gave high school coaches – who arguably know more about the fine details of cross country than the NSAA, school superintendents, athletic directors or anyone else – the authority and encouragement they needed to keep the season alive. Mr. Dolliver's decision may seem like a minor detail, but it was truly a powerful gesture.

With the backing of the NSAA, Coach Haselhorst began the process of organizing a Class A coaches' meeting. With normal coaching turnover and no official repository of contact information, this was no small feat, but 39 of 42 Class A coaches attended a Zoom meeting on July 28th. The coaches traded ideas on infection control protocols, and Coach McMahon and Coach Smrcina took responsibility for developing and updating the protocol document (available at _____) based on coach feedback. A quick summary of the key protocols follows:

- No more than 60 runners per race, divided equally among participating teams. Meets will be held on Saturdays when possible to eliminate use of school buses and in recognition that finding substitute teachers for coaches for weekday races will be difficult. If possible, meets will be held in the morning to avoid heat-related issues for facemasks and water.
- Meets will be separated by two weeks when possible to allow for identification and quarantine of infected and exposed runners.
- Athletes will be in masks at all times except when warming up, racing or cooling down. Spectators and coaches to wear masks at all times, and spectators should only watch their child's race before leaving.
- When possible, race start times (boy, girls, JV, varsity) will be separated by longer time intervals to avoid congestion at the start/finish line. Runners will not be called to the start area until five minutes prior to the race and they will have designated staging areas. Water will not be provided at the finish line to avoid congestion. Finish lines will not have funnels, and spectator areas will be pushed further back from the athletes. Each team will have a designated chute worker to help their team's distressed runners. Runners should leave immediately after their race to reduce spectator counts for other races.
- Runner-specific and spectator-specific porta-potties will be designated as such.
- Awards ceremonies will be eliminated.

As noted above, the coaches agreed that smaller meets were safer, and that led to a major revamping of the Omaha-area cross country schedule. In contrast to football, the NSAA has no oversight over scheduling for pre-District cross country meets, so cross country coaches (or athletic directors) build each school's schedule. By the July 28 coaches' meeting, the Augustana Twilight Meet had been cancelled, and several other major out-of-state meets (Rim Rock, Roy Griak) were not expected to be held.

The coaches representing 19 Omaha high schools and Fremont High School began discussing how to coordinate their scheduling to control how many teams attended each meet. This was a major change; in many cases, teams had been attending some of the same meets for over twenty years. However, the Omaha metro coaches and their athletic directors rallied around the concept, and the existing Class A meet schedules for Omaha and Fremont schools were wiped clean. Coach Haselhorst took responsibility for drafting a coordinated schedule – a schedule that first reflected 20 high schools, but fell to 13 when the OPS suspension was announced. (In addition to these meets, each metro coach has taken responsibility for adding other meets – including long-forgotten dual meets – to give racing opportunities to the remainder of their runners.)

Lincoln-area Class A coaches – as well as the other Class A coaches – all had input in the safety protocols and scheduling discussions. However, it made little sense in the COVID era to congregate runners onto

school buses for long rides to or from Omaha, Lincoln, North Platte, etc., so the schools outside of Omaha and Fremont have adapted their schedules in a different manner.

The Class A coaches met again on Zoom on August 11th to affirm the protocols (although it is a 'living' document subject to changes) and to speak with Mr. Dolliver. Mr. Dolliver applauded the coaches for their protocols, and he shared more information on the NSAA's approach to the season. A summary of Mr. Dolliver's comments was previously published and can be found at <https://www.nebraskaelitetc.org/single-post/2020/08/17/NSAA>.

I've managed a 200-employee company through the COVID crisis, and one thing I've learned is that it's easier to cancel everything than to navigate through difficult circumstances. The NSAA's flexibility and the collaborative effort of Class A cross country coaches – who also happen to be competitors – has dramatically increased the odds that a State meet will be held. Could this unique, no-size-fits-all approach serve as a model for other states or collegiate conferences moving forward? We hope it does.

There's no guarantee that Class A teams will compete at Districts or State. If they do, I am hopeful that parents and athletes will recognize that the coaches are this season's MVPs.

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