



The NFHS Voice



From Fall Sports in February to Virtual Music Events, Participation Opportunities Continue

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Fall sports in February and March? As we all know, anything is possible in the year of COVID-19. The amazing resolve and determination on the part of state high school associations and schools to provide sports and performing arts opportunities for high school students continues – even in unconventional ways and at non-traditional times of the year.

Normally, at this time of year, all fall sports and championships have been completed and states are on the brink of conducting state events in wrestling, basketball, ice hockey and swimming. The pandemic, however, has presented many challenges to keeping those schedules intact. But when it comes to offering as many fall and winter sports as possible, the motto of state associations has been “never say never.”

According to the NFHS [Fall Sports Championships Guide](#), 36 states held football in the traditional fall season, including 29 that were able to conduct state championships. In addition, 30 states were able to conduct state girls volleyball championships this past fall.

Pennsylvania was one of those states that held its state football championship. Bob Lombardi, executive director of the Pennsylvania Interscholastic Athletic Association (PIAA), felt thankful for the support of everyone involved in reaching the finish line.

“I said repeatedly that the biggest mistake we could have made was not to try,” Lombardi said in a recent article in the *Courier-Express* of DuBois, Pennsylvania. “We still have yet to find any transmission (of the virus) from an athlete on one team to another team. We have yet to see that. . . . We haven’t had any reports, so that’s a positive.”

In 10 states, however, football is just beginning. Starting with Washington which opened its season last week, other states with plans for a non-traditional football season are Massachusetts (February 22), Virginia (February 22), North Carolina (February 26), New York (March 1), Oregon (March 1), New Mexico (March 4), Nevada (March 5), District of Columbia (March 18) and Illinois (March 19). California, Hawaii and Rhode Island have also delayed football to 2021 but have yet to announce starting dates.

Excitement abounds in New Mexico as schools finally will be able to compete in football after the fall season was cancelled due to state government and health regulations. And nowhere is that enthusiasm higher than Artesia High School.

Artesia has won a national record 30 New Mexico Activities Association state titles and commemorates each of them in its one-of-a-kind mini-museum known as the Hall of Champions. Situated near the Bulldog Bowl – the school’s 6,500-seat home stadium – the Hall of Champions not only contains an incredible collection of memorabilia, but functions as a detailed journey through the program’s storied history.

Guests can view game film from any of AHS’ state championship victories, full season highlight videos for each year starting with 1990, and a compilation highlight video of the first 25 state title games set to music from the era each game was played.

Thanks in large part to mitigation strategies of social distancing when possible, wearing masks, reducing the number of fans and general hygiene practices, most states have been able to conduct traditional winter seasons of basketball, wrestling, ice hockey and swimming. At least 35 states have mandated masks for those involved in sports, including 22 states that require masks during competition.

According to the [NFHS Winter Sports Seasons Guide](#), 43 states have started boys and girls basketball seasons. Four other states – West Virginia, California, Oregon and New Mexico – have plans to start in March, and Washington has a May 3 start date. In addition, 43 states plan to conduct state championships.

In ice hockey, all 15 states that sanction the sport are participating in regular-season contests, and it is anticipated that 10 states will be able to conduct state championships. Due to the nature of the sport, it was anticipated that wrestling would be a challenge; however, 32 states have been able to start their

seasons, and 11 others have announced start dates ranging from late February to May.

Many in the performing arts of speech, debate, music and theatre have not been as fortunate to return to in-person competition, but that hasn't stopped activities from happening. Schools are operating in many different formats based on local restrictions. A combination of virtual, in-person and hybrid models are prevalent in every state. Thanks to technology and dedicated teachers and administrators, students have been able to stay connected and involved.

While state associations and coaches and administrators in high schools have done a tremendous job at keeping these programs going, let's not forget a special shout-out to the millions of student participants who have to maintain rigid, daily protocols to **Play.Perform.Compete.Together.**

Dr. Karissa L. Niehoff is in her third year as executive director of the National Federation of State High School Associations (NFHS) in Indianapolis, Indiana. She is the first female to head the national leadership organization for high school athletics and performing arts activities and the sixth full-time executive director of the NFHS. She previously was executive director of the Connecticut Association of Schools-Connecticut Interscholastic Athletic Conference for seven years.