

MPA changes course, allows coaches to speak with athletes

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By Mike Lowe Staff Writer

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With the start of the high school spring sports season on hold until April 27 because of the coronavirus pandemic, the Maine Principals' Association has loosened its hands-off restrictions and will allow coaches to communicate with their athletes.

In a meeting on Friday, the MPA established a set of guidelines for coaches to follow when communicating with their athletes. Previously, the MPA said the delayed start to the spring season should be treated as a hands-off period, which prohibits contact between coaches and athletes.

“Coaches play a pretty important role with athletes and athletes have been reaching out to them. We want to support that, but we needed to create guidelines, too,” said MPA Executive Director Mike Burnham. “We’re making sure they follow all district policies regarding social media, as well as the directives from the state and the Maine CDC.”

Dave Utterback, the Brewer High athletic director and chair of the MPA’s baseball committee, said it only made sense to do this. “What we’re seeing now is a lot of remote learning from an academic standpoint,” he said. “Athletics are an extension

of the classroom. This is an opportunity for coaches to remotely teach and stay in touch with the kids they work with.”

In a memo sent out Friday to member schools, the MPA encouraged coaches to remind their athletes to remain active physically and to maintain their academic standing. And it reminded the coaches that “all recommendations should focus on individual workouts. Coaches should not be encouraging athletes to come together for a team workout, including ‘captain’s practices.’”

Dr. William Heinz, the chair of the MPA’s Sports Medicine Committee, said it is important for athletes to maintain all CDC guidelines regarding social distance.

“We also understand that kids need to do something, that we need to get them out and do something,” said Heinz. “They all want to participate in a sport. But we don’t want them getting together in groups. So we reached out to the coaches to make suggestions for individual activities to get them in shape a bit and to help them maintain their sanity.

“We want coaches involved in the process. We don’t know how long this will last, we don’t even know if Gov. Mills will allow the schools to open again. But we want kids to be active and to keep them safe, at home, without special equipment, to work on general conditioning, sports specific drills or technique.”

Tom Griffin, the coach of three-time defending Class A softball state champion Scarborough, said communicating with his players will also provide some mental relief.

“Just being able to connect with them a little bit more, just to let them know I’m still out there thinking about them, is important,” said Griffin. “I’ve been doing this a long time and I know the social connection is so important for female sports. It’s something they really miss.”

South Portland girls’ lacrosse coach Leslie Dyer agreed: “One thing good about it is just to be able to check up on them. During this time, a lot of kids are nervous and don’t know what’s going to happen.”

Mike D’Andrea is simply glad he will have a chance to talk to his Falmouth baseball players. It’s his first year with the Yachtsmen after leading Scarborough to the Class A state title last year.

“The way I run things, positions have to be fought for and won each year,” he said. “Communication is important. What will they be evaluated on? How will they be evaluated? What will the process look like?”

“I haven’t had the opportunity to discuss that with athletes at Falmouth. It’s encouraging that the MPA is going to implement some type of communication policy. I think we all want to be ready to roll when the time comes when fields open and we head back to school.”

That, of course, is still to be decided. Virginia and Alabama have already canceled their spring sports seasons after governors closed schools for the rest of the academic year.

Everyone understands that is a possibility here as well.

“Right now our tone is hopeful, but realistic,” said Thornton Academy Athletic Director Gary Stevens, also the head of the MPA’s tennis committee.

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