

The IHSA approved 20 contact days for all Illinois high school teams. These contact days started in September and continue through late October. Click [here](#) to watch a broadcast about what these practices look like and how they have been going.



**SHUTOUT:** When this photo of George Gattas Memorial Stadium was taken on Oct. 2, Prospect football was scheduled to be playing the Elk Grove Grenadiers. The next morning at George Gattas, boys' soccer was supposed to face Maine East. Instead, both teams, along with girls' volleyball, were sidelined instead of playing their traditional fall season because of COVID-19 guidelines. (photo by Mara Nicolaie)

## Illinois breaks from rest of Midwest on high school sports

RICK LYTLE  
Editor-in-Chief

Over 250 high school football teams played in Indiana on Aug. 28. Almost 300 high school football teams played that same night in Iowa. By the end of September, Wisconsin had over 400 football teams playing each weekend. In the month of September, well over 2,000 high school girls' volleyball games and over 1,000 high school boys' soccer games were played in Indiana. Stadium lights turn on Friday night in every single neighboring state.

Scenes like these took place all across the Midwest while George Gattas Memorial Stadium and Jean Walker Fieldhouse remained quiet and empty along with the rest of Illinois. So, which experiment proved to be correct?

Illinois Gov. J.B. Pritzker believes that Illinois has made the right decision regarding high school sports.

"If they have decided to endanger children and families in those states by allowing certain contact sports to take place, that is their decision," Pritzker said at a Sept. 15 press conference when asked about every other midwestern state playing high school football while boys' soccer, girls' volleyball and football are not allowed to take place this fall in Illinois.

In Illinois, the Illinois High School Association (IHSA) is the governing body of high school sports, yet they currently have little control over the return of high school sports. As announced in a [July 29 press release](#) from Pritzker, various Illinois state departments — primarily the Illinois Department of Public Health (IDPH) — developed a set of [guidelines](#) to regulate youth and adult recreation sports, including high school sports.

The guidance divides sports into three risk categories: low, medium and high. Currently, low-risk sports like golf and tennis are allowed to compete within their conference and [health region](#). Moderate-risk sports, like basketball and soccer, are allowed to have intrasquad scrimmages, and high-risk sports, like football and wrestling, are allowed to only have non-contact practices.

IHSA had some minor input after the guidelines were released. For example, IHSA was able to get IDPH to move swimming from a moderate-risk sport to a low-risk sport as long as relays weren't conducted.

Illinois restrictions are significantly more stringent than the rest of the Midwest. In every other midwestern state, football is currently allowed to be played, although some local areas have split from state rules such as St. Louis County where high-risk sports are not allowed to compete. In Illinois, moderate-risk sports like volleyball aren't even allowed to compete, and low-risk sports like golf cannot have a state tournament because of complications related to traveling and staying overnight.

To adapt to these guidelines, the IHSA

developed a four-season high school sports schedule instead of the traditional fall, winter and spring three-season schedule. The change moved football, boys' soccer and girls' volleyball to the spring and moved some sports traditionally in the spring into the newly created summer season. Athletes and coaches hope that state guidelines will change by the time these seasons are reached, but with the winter season that includes basketball and wrestling fast approaching, time is running out for state guidelines to change before the winter season start date of Nov. 16.

The relationship between the IHSA and the state has soured, leaving a lot more questions than answers about high school sports. For example, the IHSA has been given no indication when current guidelines might change to allow for more sports to be played, making planning for the remainder of the school year extremely difficult.

"That's been one of our biggest frustrations is that we haven't ever received a clear idea or a clear explanation of any real data that would tell us when and how a sport might change its risk level, how it might be allowed to start, when it might be allowed to play, anything like that ... That's been difficult because, obviously, that's information our schools want to know," Matt Troha, IHSA Assistant Executive Director, said.

The IHSA recently sent a [letter](#) to Pritzker "that seeks permission for the IHSA and its Sports Medicine Advisory Committee to resume control over determining the resumption of IHSA sports and activities." The letter made the point that a number of neighboring states, despite having higher COVID-19 infection rates, have been able to successfully play sports that are currently not able to compete in Illinois.

"We feel like a lot of states have restarted sports safely and have been able to minimize any significant spread events," Troha said. "I think some of the narrative out there, especially on social media, is that all these states are playing — let's say football — [without encountering] any problems, and that's not completely true. [There are] a lot of large school districts [in neighboring states] that simply aren't playing, and there have been a

ton of games canceled for reasons related to it ... but overall, I think it's gone better than anyone anticipated."

Because of this, the IHSA requested more control over the ability to restart sports and expand the postseason for other sports. The letter was unsuccessful.

"They simply told us that there was not going to be a formal response to [the letter] and that we were essentially just to continue as planned," Troha said. "It was pretty blunt in that regard."

Pritzker is doubling down on his position, saying in a Sept. 16 press conference that "all over the world, youth sports have proven to be problematic." At that press conference, Pritzker was joined by Dr. Ngozi Ezeke, the head of IDPH, and Dr. Michael Lin from Rush University Medical Center.

"Contact team sports such as football and hockey can become super-spreading events very easily," Lin said. "Just one youth athlete showing up with a virus can start a chain reaction of spread that can quickly threaten an entire team. While the virus continues to circulate widely in our communities, there's no practical way to prevent outbreaks from happening in sports such as football with all the contact that's inherent in the sport."

The tone on high school sports is very different just across the border in Indiana.

"We have a great relationship with our Governor, Gov. [Eric] Holcomb," Kerrie Schludecker, an Assistant Commissioner of the Indiana High School Athletic Association (IHSAA) said in an interview with The Prospector. "He's a big supporter of high school athletics and understands the importance of them, especially with the studies that are coming out knowing that student athletes need it very much in their lives ... so he is in full support."

One of these [studies](#) mentioned is a study from the University of Wisconsin School of Medicine and Public Health. In May, 3,243 adolescent student-athletes in Wisconsin were surveyed on the effects to their mental health and physical activity of school closures and sports cancellations. The study found that 65% of students reported symptoms of anxiety and 68% reported symptoms

of depression. Half of these students reporting symptoms were showing signs of moderate to severe anxiety and/or depression. This would [translate](#) to over 100,000 high school athletes in Illinois.

In a [video](#), one of the lead researchers of the study, Dr. Tim McGuine, explained the results.

"We're not saying this means all kids should go back to all sports immediately ... We're saying this is a piece of the puzzle that everybody needs to consider when they decide whether or not to move forward," McGuine said.

According to Schludecker, Holcomb has personally read this University of Wisconsin study.

Schludecker mainly works with swimming and diving, softball and volleyball. Girls' volleyball has been playing their fall season in Indiana, something not happening in Illinois.

She estimates that over 90% of volleyball games are being played and added that most instances of contact that they have seen have come from in the classroom or from things like carpooling. They also have not been made aware of any large outbreaks stemming from sporting events.

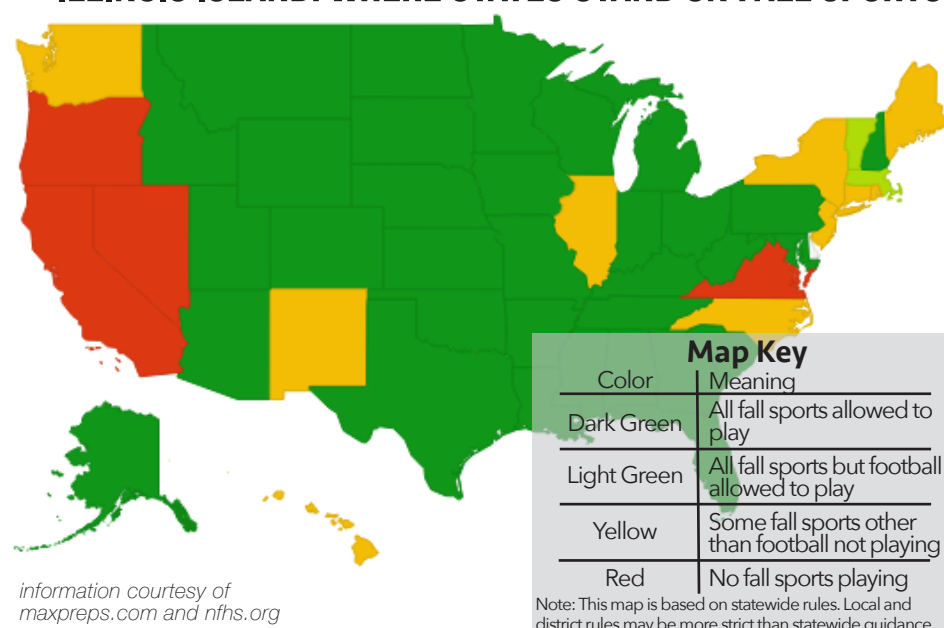
While the information provided by Schludecker can give insight into a potential volleyball season in Illinois, a recent [study](#) shines light on the risk coronavirus poses to soccer, the other moderate-risk sport that did not happen this fall in Illinois. The study, also from the University of Wisconsin, involved "124 clubs [who] represented over 90,000 players from 34 states who have participated in over 45,000 trainings and over 6,000 games since restarting." 57% of these soccer clubs were involved in contact play during the study.

In total, there were 325 cases reported in the clubs, 282 of those coming from players. This rate of 310 cases of COVID-19 per 100,000 players was actually lower than the nationwide case rate for children during the same window, meaning that competitive club soccer players involved in training and sometimes games were no more likely to have contracted COVID-19 than the average child in the United States. Of the 325 cases and 90,000 players involved, just one case was reportedly traced to transmission during soccer.

Pritzker and the IDPH are holding firm on their positions, and Illinois still remains on an island in the Midwest regarding high school sports. Some small steps have been made regarding the IDPH and the IHSA, one example being approval for the IHSA to organize Sectionals that includes teams from different health regions in what Troha described as "common sense" scenarios. Two "common sense" scenario examples are a team being near the border of a health region or if a Sectional is overloaded with teams. The IHSA would like to see more safe steps like this in the future.

"Regardless of what our personal feelings are about the pandemic or about politics in Illinois, or in our country in general, COVID-19 is real, [and] we've seen the impact of it ... With that said, we've also seen states around us play, and we think there are some ways that we could provide more opportunities to play and mitigate some of those risks." Troha said. **TP**

## ILLINOIS ISLAND: WHERE STATES STAND ON FALL SPORTS



information courtesy of  
[maxpreps.com](#) and [nfls.org](#)