

Sports

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Softball: GHSA mandates physical distancing, masks optional

Athletic Director Mandy Hunter to spectators: Sports will 'look different' this fall

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Thomaston - The Georgia High School Association (GHSA) recently published a list of safety measures for the upcoming fall fast-pitch softball season.

The GHSA's "Special Considerations and Rules Modifications" were released July 8 to apprise softball programs of the new criteria to be enforced by the host school at each contest.

The updated regulations are "designed to decrease potential exposure to respiratory droplets by encouraging social distancing, limiting participation in administrative tasks to essential personnel and allowing for appropriate protective equipment during practice and competition," the statement reads on the GHSA's official website.

Some significant changes fans can expect to see this fall is the prohibition of public concession stands and mandatory social-distancing by spectators in the bleachers and at facility entrances. Non-participating players must also adhere to social-distancing guidelines, resulting in an enlargement of the bench area to a clearly-marked "out-of-play" area. Extending the dugouts at Union County could mean the relocation of fans that use personal lawn chairs between the dugout and bullpen.

"If needed, we will expand both dugouts with a cover," Union County Athletic Director Mandy Hunter said.

"We'll have to spread everyone out and have the fans stay six-feet apart -- we hope to mark-off the bleachers accordingly. It's all part of the GHSA's 'Special Considerations and Rules Modifications' for the upcoming season, assuming the season goes ahead as we all hope that it does.

"But we're going ahead, abiding by all the GHSA recommendations as if we're going to have a season," Hunter said.

The rule changes also impact on-field interaction. Most notably, players are no longer allowed to leave the dugout to celebrate home runs.

All team huddles must abide by physical-distancing protocols, and charged de-



Rising sophomore Chloe Potts takes reps at second base during practice last week. Since early June, Union County softball has prepared as if the regular season will get underway on Friday, Aug. 7. The Lady Panthers and their coaching staff are prepping for 2020 at the UCHS softball field 3-4 days each week. Late last month, the GHSA allowed the use of bats and balls, unfortunately, scrimmage contests between schools remain prohibited. As a result, Union County was unable to participate in summer league play at Franklin County. Photo/Todd Forrest

ensive conferences will be conducted on the outer edge of the pitching circle. Pitchers are prohibited from licking fingers, touching any part of their hands to the mouth, or blowing into their hands before delivering a pitch. Any violation is an immediate "dead ball" with the ball removed from play. The defensive team will provide another game ball, and the pitcher's hand must be sanitized before continuing.

"Everybody is more than willing to do what needs to be done in order to have a season," Hunter said. "Whatever it takes or whatever guidelines we have

to follow, everyone is anxious to get back on the field."

Although not required, the GHSA advocates that players use their own gloves and bats as much as possible. All equipment is to be sanitized before and after each game/practice. Meanwhile, the sharing of beverages, water bottles and the use of sunflower seeds are strictly prohibited.

Long gone are the days of heated in-your-grill arguments between coaches and umpires. If a coach requests a timeout to discuss a call, they must maintain six-feet of separation at all times - this also applies

to scorekeepers during substitutions.

The pregame conference is limited to one coach from each team and the officials. Coaches must remain outside the batter's box nearest their dugout, and umpires will stay behind the catcher's box to exchange lineup cards.

Base coaches will maintain physical distancing to base runners. The plate umpire shall position themselves deeper than usual to call balls and strikes. Base umpires shall maintain physical distancing from any players in their starting positions and during rotations.

Additionally, the catcher and batter must keep their distance while the umpire dusts off home plate.

With most of the regular season scheduled to occur in late-summer, cloth masks are recommended but not mandatory for players, coaches and officials. However, umpires are encouraged to wear face shields and sanitation gloves.

If a player elects to wear a face covering, they must be of a single color, without symbols or lettering. Yellow-tinted masks worn by pitchers are prohibited. Clear plastic face shields are permitted if integrated into

the fielding facemask, catching helmet, or batting helmet.

The GHSA Board of Trustees met on Monday to further discuss the fall sports season. As of press time, official softball practice is slated to begin Aug. 1, with Aug. 6 listed as the earliest possible game date.

"We're going ahead as if there will be a season, but everyone, please be aware that things change daily," Hunter reiterated. "If (the season) does go as planned, be prepared for things to look a little different."



Union County softball performs infield drills during the Tuesday, July 14 practice. Rising junior Kaelyn Jones at first base (L); Coach Stephen Mitchell (R). Photos/Todd Forrest