

Gallup schools praise sports February restart

Written by By Kevin Opsahl Sun Correspondent
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Student athletes and coaches in Gallup and throughout McKinley County have not played any sports this academic year due to coronavirus, but that's about to change now that in-person instruction can begin again Feb. 8.

Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham made the announcement in her virtual State of the State address on Jan. 26.

That was the same day, the N.M. Activities Association, the nonprofit responsible for regulation

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of all state athletics, said in a news release that it learned from the Public Education Department that interscholastic athletics/activities can resume Feb. 22. A two-week monitoring period will be required to prove that expansion is not leading to significant increases in the spread of COVID-19.

Sally Marquez, the executive director of the NMAA, heralded the recent developments.

“The NMAA is extremely excited about the return of athletics and activities and the opportunity for our students to compete,” Marquez said. “We are very thankful for the hard work and consideration of the Governor’s Office, Department of Health and the Public Education Department.”

Ben Chavez, director of athletics and security for the Gallup-McKinley County Schools District, said he was “thrilled” to learn that athletics could start again.

“The students and the athletes and the coaches have been waiting just to hear something. I think this is the first bit of positive news they’ve received in a long time,” Chavez said.

He said the district has been working hard to put all the safety measures in place to be able to play sports so it can be a “great and safe experience.”

“I’m looking forward to this for our students and our community again,” Chavez said.

“There’s light at the end of the tunnel,” he said. We’ll worry about details in the next couple of weeks.”

The NMAA Board of Directors met Jan. 27 and tabled the adoption of a proposed modified sports calendar while superintendents await further clarification from the Public Education Department about the expansion of in-person learning and how that may impact each school’s ability to participate in NMAA-sanctioned competitions.

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The Board plans to hold another meeting Feb. 1 to revisit the proposed calendar.

Last year, Lujan Grisham ordered high school sports shuttered for the fall and winter seasons. In conjunction, the NMAA postponed games, dashing hopes that 4,000 of GMCS' 11,000 students participating in athletics or extracurricular activities, could continue to do so.

In a Q&A last week, Marquez noted NMAA has not canceled any games.

"We do not know when we're going to be able to start, we have so many unknowns still," she said.

Marquez made similar comments in a new video posted on Jan. 26.

"It's just a start, just the beginning," Marquez said. "Now, it's like, where do we finish? We need to make sure we do things right so we have a finish line. We need to mask wear, social distance, and follow the governor's public health order. It's been a long haul ... but here we are, ready to begin."

In an earlier interview, Chavez said GMCS officials said they hoped winter sports would start "the first or second week" of February. The situation presented serious challenges to the district's athletics schedule.

Though competitions have not been allowed because of the pandemic, student athletes and coaches have been able to participate in "non-sport specific workouts," according to Chavez.

"Let's say we have a group of kids that goes out to softball fields — obviously socially distant, wearing their masks — just to get some cardiovascular stuff done," he said. "That's what we've been allowed by the governor this year."

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Chavez said the district, like Marquez, is frustrated that games have yet to be played. GMCS officials believe a balance can be struck between protecting players, coaches, parents and staffers and continuing to play games.

“The reason I believe it’s frustrating [not to be able to conduct athletics] is because the data has shown across the United States that the younger age groups are less affected [by COVID-19],” Chavez said. “We just see a lot of the social and emotional trauma that this virus has caused to our students as far as missing out on a lot of the opportunities being in school, being in shape [provide]. We try to look at the whole child.”

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