

Union County pulls the plug on youth basketball over COVID-19 concerns

Commissioner: 'We have our kids and the entire county population to consider'

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

Effective Monday, Jan. 18, the Union County Recreation Department has canceled the final weeks of the 2020-21 youth basketball season due to the community's rising COVID-19 cases.

Public opinion remains divided on the decision, but Union County Sole Commissioner Lamar Paris stands by the move, admitting it was a challenging call to make.

"We knew it would not be popular, but we felt we had no other choice," Paris told the North Georgia News on Sunday. "I do not think there is anyone that cares more about our children and their well being. Decisions this difficult are never made until we consult with several people. In this case, the discussion included input from the health department, schools, hospital, recreation department, EMA and others were involved."

Some basketball parents expressed their concerns via social media, claiming the county did not make a substantial effort to save the season by neglecting to institute stricter safety precautions similar to the high school.



The brand new Union County Sports Center hosted its final recreation youth basketball games of the 2020-21 season on Saturday. Photo/Todd Forrest

[two] spectators, mandate masks and social distancing," suggested one parent in response to Paris' decision on Facebook.

Another suggested playing games without parents in attendance.

"Let the kids play the games minus the fans. Its about them anyway."

According to Paris, the county considered other av-

enues, but all fell short of the ultimate goal of keeping the public safe from the virus.

"There is so much involved besides the obvious, and sometimes we mistakenly feel that the public would understand that this type of decision would not be made if there were other viable options, which in this case, we do not think they existed," he said. "We are very sorry, but we have our kids and

the entire county population to consider."

Paris' supporters admit it's a lose-lose situation, but the decision is necessary to prevent the hospital from getting overwhelmed.

"Thank you, Lamar Paris, for putting public health above all else against pressure from folks," said one commenter.

Paris added that using the old facilities was out of the

question, and without the new Union County Sports Center, there wouldn't have been a season at all.

"We worked very hard this year to get the new Sports Center completed in time for youth basketball, and it was recommended that we not even open the new facility to kids because of COVID-19, but we did so while being nervous about it the entire time," Paris

said. "Unfortunately, some of those concerns raised their ugly heads, and we had to deal with it. Other gym facilities we had used in the past were not available this year, and without the new gyms, we would have not even had youth basketball this year. I am very sorry, but it is a decision we feel we must stand by."

Union County EMA Director David Dyer responded to concerns that without an outlet for local families (e.g., youth and high school sports), the community could see an uptick in drug and alcohol abuse and domestic violence.

According to local numbers, January is on pace to be the worst month yet in deaths and total cases, and Dyer believes a short-term shutdown to stop the spread won't produce any significant long-term adverse effects.

"People think they have shut sports down forever," he said. [They are talking] about kids going to drugs and things like that. They also want to know why [we shut down] now and not a couple of weeks ago. The best explanation is that we are in worse shape. We have added 250 cases and six deaths so far this month. December's total was 295 cases and six deaths. [January will set] a record."

Wrestling: UCHS qualifies for first State Duals tourney

By Todd Forrest
Sports Editor
sports@nganews.com

Blue Ridge - Union County Wrestling will make its first appearance at the State Duals Tournament, qualifying third at last Friday's Area 8 Tournament at Fannin County High School.

Only the top two teams qualified for State in years past, but with an expanded field this season, Union County punched its ticket with a third-place finish.

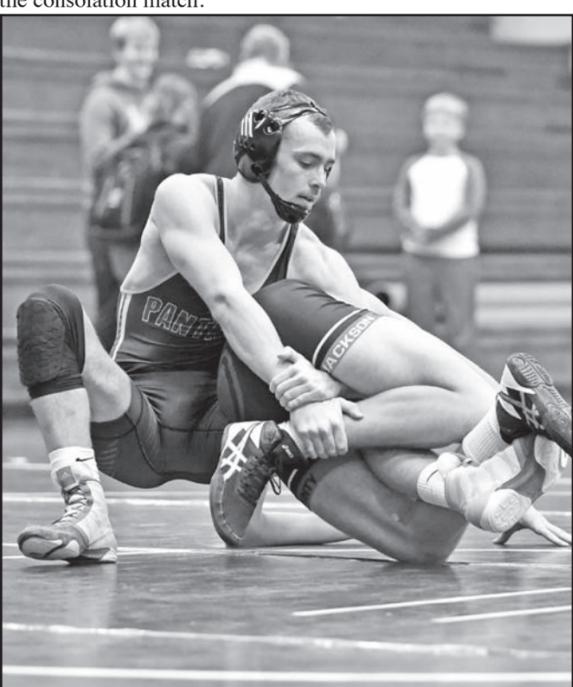
In the opening round, the Panthers fell 48-24 to Fannin County but responded with a 66-12 rout of Rabun County in the consolation match.

Union County will visit Dade County on Saturday at 1 p.m. for the first round of State competition. Joining the Panthers will be Elbert County, Dade County and one additional opponent, head coach Justin Byers said.

Only one team will advance from Dade to the State finals at Lamar County the following weekend.

The Traditional Area Tournament will be held at Banks County on the first Saturday in February. The top-three individuals in each weight class will advance to State.

In 2020, Union County qualified a program-record five wrestlers to the Class AA State Sectionals.



Union County senior wrestler Turner Cone and his Panthers teammates will make the program's first appearance at the State Duals Tournament when they visit Dade County on Saturday. Photo/Todd Forrest

NASCAR 2021

By Gerald Hodges/the Racing Reporter

Harvick named NMPA Driver of the Year

Kevin Harvick has been named Richard Petty Driver of the Year for 2020 by vote of the National Motorsports Press Association. He also won the award in 2014 and 2018.

The driver of the No. 14 Stewart-Haas Racing Ford received 45 percent of the votes cast by the NMPA membership. Also receiving multiple votes were reigning Cup champion Chase Elliott, IndyCar Series champion Scott Dixon and Kyle Larson, who won 46 races on dirt in Sprint Car competition in the second half of the year.

During the heavily altered 36-race schedule due to COVID 19 restrictions, Harvick won a career-best nine events this past season. He enjoyed victories twice at Darlington and swept the Cup weekend at Michigan with back-to-back victories at the two-mile track.

The 2014 Cup Series champion also went to victory lane at Atlanta, Pocono, Indianapolis, Dover and Bristol. After 26 races, he was crowned the regular-season champion and finished fifth in the final standings.

Harvick said he accepts the points platform NASCAR currently uses. It is one of many the sanctioning body has put into service throughout its long existence.

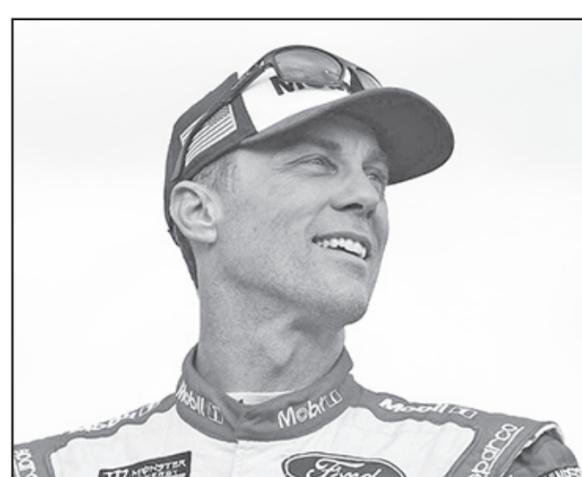
"That's the system that we work in," Harvick said. "It's obviously skewed more towards entertainment than the whole year, so it's exciting to watch and has that format that goes with it and you take them as they come. We race within the system that they give us and do our best...."

All told, Harvick has 58-career Cup Series victories to his credit in 718 starts and is currently ninth on the all-time win list just behind the late Dale Earnhardt with 76 wins.

The Richard Petty Driver of the Year award has been presented annually since 1969 to recognize the season's most outstanding driver.

KYLE PETTY CHARITY RIDE POSTPONED
CHARLOTTE, NC - Kyle Petty Charity Ride announced its decision to postpone its 26th Anniversary Kyle Petty Charity Ride Across America for the second time due to the ongoing coronavirus pandemic. Originally scheduled to take place May 28, 2020 and first postponed to May 17, 2021, the Ride will now be held April 30-May 6, 2022. The Ride will still follow the same route and visit the same scheduled stops as previously announced.

"We talked through every 'what if' scenario and tried to come up with a way to safely execute the Ride this spring, but ultimately we don't feel we could safely make that happen," said Kyle Petty, former NASCAR driver, and founder of the Ride. "There is still so much uncertainty and risk with the pandemic, which is why we have decided to once again postpone the Ride, now to 2022. The health and safety of our Riders and the communities we visit is of the utmost importance to us and we simply cannot take that



Kevin Harvick in 2018

risk.

"I hope that we will soon be in a much better place. I'm choosing to cling to that hope and now focus on making our 2022 Ride the best it can possibly be. The camaraderie of the riders, the beautiful scenery of our country and the mission to raise funds to send so many deserving kids to camp at Victory Junction is what the Ride is all about!"

Victory Junction is a camp dedicated to providing life-changing camping experiences for children with chronic and serious medical illnesses, and has served as the Ride's primary beneficiary since its establishment by Petty and his family in 2004 in honor of his late son, Adam.

Meanwhile NASCAR is considering moving the numbers on the sides of race cars.

After experimenting with the concept at last year's All-Star Race, NASCAR is discussing whether to slide the number decals on race cars back permanently to maximize sponsor exposure opportunities, according to people familiar with the matter.

The test last year moved the number decal from the center of the door back to just before the rear wheel well. The move drew the ire of some fans in the tradition-rich sport, considering that since the start of NASCAR in 1948, number decals have adorned the middle part of both doors of cars to identify the vehicle, much like numbers on jerseys in stick-and-ball sports.

But in a sport where teams rely on sponsorships for 75 per cent of their annual revenue, some in the industry have continued pondering the idea because finding and retaining sponsorship is getting more difficult.

The thinking is that moving the car numbers back would give more space for sponsors to share their brand logo or marketing messages, which would theoretically make the space more effective and valuable. Given that cars are racing at well more than 100 mph, seeing sponsor logos clearly on TV is not always easy. Currently, primary sponsor logos are on the hood, rear quarter panels and bumper of the car.

FOOTBALL VIEWERSHIP WAY DOWN

In 2020, the college football season never attracted the viewership numbers typically see on Saturdays across the season, which included

both semifinals failing to hit 20 million viewers and the entire slate of conference championship games falling short of 10 million viewers. The floor for the College Football Playoff National Championship had been set at 25 million viewers, with every prior game at least hitting that mark.

Unfortunately for the larger college football world, the floor was lowered by Alabama's 52-24 destruction of Ohio State on Monday night. The game drew a total of 18.654 million viewers across ESPN, ESPN2, and ESPNU, down big from every prior title game in the Playoff era and down a tick from both of this year's semifinals as well.

The previous low came for the game back in January of 2017, when Clemson's win over Alabama drew 25.226 million viewers. This year's number is down 27 per cent from last year's LSU-Clemson matchup, which drew 25.588 million viewers.

While viewership is down for all team sports, NASCAR's 2020 numbers have not fallen as much as football, baseball, and basketball.

From The Pits: Kyle Larson is back in NASCAR after a suspension following his use of a racial slur during an iRacing event. After an amazing success on dirt tracks, the

Larson Wins Chili Bowl for Second Year-In-A-Row

It took 13-years for Kyle Larson to win the Lucas Oil Chili Bowl Nationals in Tulsa, OK, but it only took one to add a second Golden Driller to his trophy case as he led start to finish in Saturday's 55-lap championship event.

But his win was not without challenge. Larson had to fend off the charge of Justin Grant numerous times and Christopher Bell in the closing laps.

"To get two of these feels awesome," said Larson. "It was a different race than last year, but just thankful to get the chance to even come race here. I think a lot of us thought maybe we wouldn't get to come run the Chili Bowl with the pandemic going on, so hats off to Emmett Hahn and everyone else with this event. It's the greatest event in the world, and very lucky to be a part of it."

Advancing through several days of racing at the Tulsa Expo Center, Larson took the lead from Grant early on and held him at bay before receiv-

28-year-old racer landed in the No. 5 car for Hendrick for the upcoming season. Now it's up to Larson, winner of four Cup Series races in 2017 to prove he can run at the front of the field on a consistent basis.

Larson received a multi-year deal with HMS but one issue facing his team is the fact that, no sponsors have committed to the backing of the No. 5 car. Even with Rick Hendrick's supposed deep pockets, no owner wants to fully fund a race team on his own at any level, but especially in the NASCAR Cup Series.

Racing Joke: Travis and his wife are sitting on the sofa when the phone rings. She answers it and begins talking. After about a half-hour on the phone, she hangs up. Travis is surprised, "Wow, that was quick - usually you women are at it for two hours at least!"

"Yeah, well, it was a wrong number," his wife replied.

Racing Trivia Question: Who did Kevin Harvick drive for before Stewart Haas Racing?

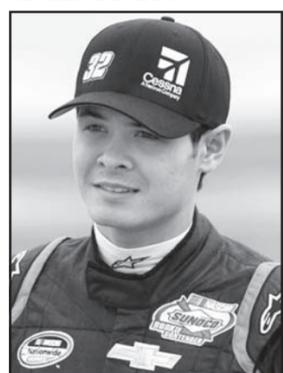
Last Week's Question: Do you think Chase Elliott can bring Hendrick Racing back to the top? Here are some of the answers we received.

"It would be very difficult for Chase or anyone to win six or seven championships, but he is the best young driver in the series. F.A.-Dahlonega, GA.

"I would expect him to stay at the top. He is the biggest asset Hendrick has going for them right now. Jeff-Canton, WI.

"Great little driver. He will win more championships. I would like to see him be more aggressive when he gets shoved around on the track. Bill S.-Leasburg, MO.

Gerald Hodges is a syndicated NASCAR writer and author. His books may be viewed and ordered online at Amazon.com. You may contact him by e-mail at: hodges@race500.com.



Kyle Larson in 2018

ing a serious challenge from longtime dirt rival and fellow NASCAR competitor Christopher Bell. Bell's chances of winning ended when he hit the cushion and went for a wild flip, and Larson was able to survive a pair of restarts to go back-to-back in one of dirt racing's most prestigious events.

Larson will now turn his attention back to NASCAR, where he will drive for Hendrick Motorsports. NTJJan20/21/CA

Baseball and Softball Registration at the Union County Recreation Department

Registration for baseball and softball opens at the Union County Recreation Department
January 5, 2021 - February 19, 2021 for ages 5-14.

Age you will be September 1, 2021 is the age group you will play in.
Fee is \$55.00

Please register online at unioncountygga.gov or in person at the Union County Sports Center, 519 Industrial Blvd. **Please call 706-439-6074 with any questions.**

Soccer registration at Union County Recreation Department

Soccer registration will open at the Union County Recreation Department
January 5, 2021 - February 19, 2021 for ages 5-14.

Age you are January 1, 2021 determines age group you play in. Copy of birth certificate is required.
Fee is \$55.00

Please register online at unioncountygga.gov or in person at the Union County Sports Center located at 519 Industrial Blvd.
Please call 706-439-6074 with any questions.