

# Sports

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## GHSA eases restrictions but says 'no' to pads and scrimmages

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THOMSON - The Georgia High School Association is taking the next baby-step toward a return to normalcy with its latest coronavirus safety recommendations.

On July 1, the GHSA approved tryouts, limited intra-squad scrimmages (7-on-7, 3-on-3) and will allow players to break off into groups of 50. The changes may be implemented as early as Monday, July 6.

In late June, the GHSA upped the total number of practice participants from 25 to 50 while authorizing the use of balls, bats and other equipment. Football pads and helmets were not included and remained off-limits as of the July 1 modifications.

Athletes returned to the practice field Monday following the GHSA's mandatory dead week (June 29-July 5). And according to Union County Athletic Director Mandy Hunter, local teams will begin using the approved equipment upon their return.

Some local coaches were hoping for a return to standard practice procedures following the dead week, but with the recent surge in COVID-19 cases, the GHSA is tapping the brakes despite



(L) Brian Allison and his squad will begin using footballs with a full squad this week. (R) New athletic director Mandy Hunter took over her new post on July 1. Photos/Todd Forrest

volleyball and softball opening in less than a month.

"The GHSA and the Sports Medicine Advisory Council appreciates our member schools' efforts during the successful implementation of the Coronavirus Guidance Plan," the GHSA's official

statement reads.

"The GHSA has elected to implement: 1) intra-squad competitions (7-on-7, 3-on-3, ... ) are allowed but competition between schools is illegal 2) Groups of 50 are allowed to re-group if it can be done safely, 3) Cheerleading, Softball and Volleyball tryouts are allowed, 4) mask and face covering are recommended and 5) Each student should have their own personal water bottle (water bottles may be re-filled during workouts). No use of water fountains or "water cows" is allowed, starting Monday, July 6th with the following stipulations:

1. Recommend a mask or face covering.
2. Groups may be re-grouped into a group with up to the limit of 50 individuals.
3. Water bottles may be refilled during workouts.

"Football - No helmets, shoulder pads, girdles, knee

or thigh pads can be worn at any time. The face mask and face-covering recommended guideline does not refer to helmets or helmet face masks but to the use of cloth face-covering/masks to help slow the spread of Covid-19."

Union County sports is currently scheduled to get underway Aug. 7 with the softball season opener and a football scrimmage at Towns County. The regular season is slated for an Aug. 21 start.

Cross Country will begin at Chestatee on Aug. 25 before hosting its home opener Sept. 5. Volleyball, meanwhile, has yet to release its official 2020 schedule. However, the 2019 season opened on Aug. 8.

In related school news, the American Academy of Pediatrics recently issued a statement advising schools to open their doors to students this fall. Except for vulnerable



populations and those with health issues, disabilities or the medically fragile, the AAP "strongly advocates that all policy considerations for the coming school year should start with a goal of having students physically present in school.

"The importance of in-person learning is well-documented, and there is already evidence of the negative impacts on children because of school closures in the spring of 2020," read the statement, which was endorsed by more than 67,000 American pediatricians.

"...(COVID-19) appears to behave differently in children and adolescents than other common respiratory viruses, such as influenza, on which much of the current guidance regarding school closures is based. Although children and adolescents play a major role in amplifying in-

fluenza outbreaks, to date, this does not appear to be the case with (COVID-19). Although many questions remain, the preponderance of evidence indicates that children and adolescents are less likely to be symptomatic and less likely to have severe disease resulting from (COVID-19) infection.

"In addition, children may be less likely to become infected and to spread infection. Policies to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 within schools must be balanced with the known harms to children, adolescents, families, and the community by keeping children at home."

For additional athletics information, you may visit the GHSA at [www.ghsa.net](http://www.ghsa.net). The entire AAP statement is located at [www.aap.org](http://www.aap.org) under the "COVID-19 Guidance..." header.



## Cross Country: Dyer's fifth year features a mix of experience and youth

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Out of all the fall sports programs at UCHS, head coach Paige Dyer's cross country squad has been the least affected by the Georgia High School Association's COVID-19 safety measures.

With no equipment, pads, bats or balls, it's been business as usual for Union County Cross Country over the last month. In fact, Coach Dyer has yet to unpack her stopwatch.

"(Practice) hasn't been nearly as difficult for us compared to the other sports, so we've been really lucky," she said. "But we're not concerned with times right now, just endurance and conditioning. We haven't done a whole lot of speed drills either and it will probably stay the same for a little longer."

Dyer noted that her runners are more out-of-shape than years past, due in large part to the cancelation of spring sports, which led to many athletes completely shutting it down for several weeks.

"Before this year, many of our runners were involved in soccer, track and other sports, but they all got cut short," she said. "After that, a lot of them didn't keep running, so we're trying to get them back into shape. Once we build up their endurance, then we'll start working on speed."

Since June 8, the cross country teams have hosted a pair of voluntary workouts each week at Meeks Park. And despite the "voluntary" label, Dyer has seen a strong turnout among returning runners and incoming freshmen.

"They've been really good about it and they're working hard," she said. "We have a couple of ninth-grade guys who are doing very well. There has only been one ninth-grade girl, but we've had some girls in the higher grades that came out for the first time. I'm excited about that because we lost a large group of girls to gradu-



The Lady Panthers Cross Country team will feature several new faces this season following the graduation of five seniors that combined for two state titles and four state appearances. Photo/Todd Forrest

ation." As for expectations heading into 2020, Coach Dyer begins her first year in the post-Zoe Sanchez era. Before taking the reigns at UCHS in 2016, Dyer coached the eventual two-time State Champion in middle school before the duo moved up to the high school ranks.

Last year, five of Union's top-six finishers at State were seniors - Sanchez, Sadie Underwood, Lexi Ochoa, Allison Vincent and Jessie Holbrook. The two returning runners from 2019 are rising juniors Hana Gregory and Campbell Chambers.

"When I came up to high school there was a big group of freshmen (last year's seniors) that came up with me, so that was another big (re-build)," Dyer said when asked if 2020 will be her toughest challenge as a coach.

"This year's girls team doesn't have any seniors at this time, but we do have a lot of juniors and sophomores.

We're also excited about this year's eighth-grade class. We're looking forward to next year when they can come up and combine with all the current juniors."

The guys team, who just missed a state title in 2019 after winning it all in 2018, are led by senior Luke Gambrell, who is coming off consecutive fourth-place finishes at State. As a sophomore, Gambrell led Union County to the first team State Championship in school history.

Then, at last year's State meet, two of the three runners finishing ahead of Gambrell were seniors, making the Panther a title-favorite in 2020.

Also back for Dyer's squad is rising-junior Hunter Hartzog (11th at State in 2019) along with rising-seniors Malachi Patrick (30th) and Trevor Guild (54th).

However, Union County will need to replace Thomas Mellendorf (26th), Guage Shumaker (36th) and Marcus

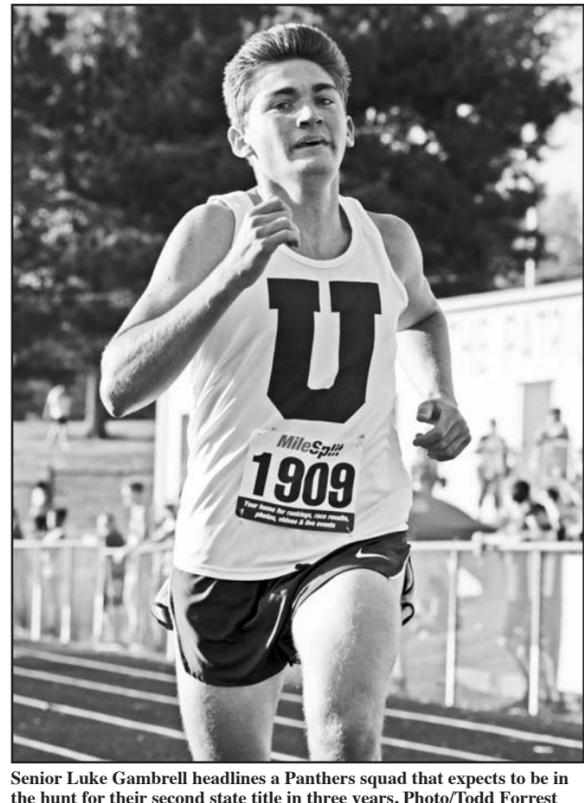
Forrester (66th).

"They're good. It's no secret; they're really good," Dyer said regarding the current guys team. "What's often overlooked is, a lot of our JV runners just missed making varsity. They were very close to our varsity guys and they should be even stronger this year. Top-to-bottom, it's a good group."

"We're also looking at the region realignment (defending State champ Oglethorpe County is gone) and the state reclassification for AA. It could help us in some ways or it could hurt us, we're looking at that closely."

There is also a slight adjustment to the schedule with Union opening at Chestatee instead of the customary Meeks Park race in late-August.

The home-opener at Meeks Park has moved to Sept. 5 with Union County traveling to Chestatee on Aug. 25.



Senior Luke Gambrell headlines a Panthers squad that expects to be in the hunt for their second state title in three years. Photo/Todd Forrest



Coach Paige Dyer will lead two contrasting groups this fall with a young girls squad and a title-contending boys team. Photo/Todd Forrest