

HOT TOPIC #34: November 10, 2020

COVID-19 updates from San Juan County around subjects on the minds of islanders

Youth Sports: Guidance for Staying Healthy

As anyone who has interacted with island kids of late can tell you, COVID is taking a toll on the mental and physical health of our children. While that's true for all of us, many younger islanders are really struggling.

Opportunities for our youth to engage in physical activities can be a great way to rebuild the rhythms of their day to day lives and social connections- so long as it is done thoughtfully and safely.

The science is clear: groups of unmasked kids in close contact and exerting themselves is a highly effective way to spread COVID throughout our community. Caution is required. We're all tired of the disruption, but cases are spiking. The next couple of months may well be our toughest yet.

County Health Officer Dr. Frank James highlights his concerns, "There are two things I'm most worried about right now. One is [holiday travel](#). The other is youth sports. Ensuring that we're operating with an abundance of caution is the only way we'll move forward safely as a community."

So what should we be (and not be) doing?

Island schools, coaches, and youth sports programs have been carefully following requirements from both Governor Inslee ([Requirements](#) and [FAQ](#)) and guidance from the Washington Interscholastic Activities Association ([Guidelines](#)).

There is a lot of useful and detailed information in those documents, but that said, there's sometimes a gap between what is allowed and what is safest. Below are a few ideas to help fill those voids and support school leaders, parents, facility managers, kids, and coaches make sense of best practices beyond the official guidelines.

-First of all, it is on everyone to keep things healthy. No one wants to be the enforcer but building a culture of thoughtfulness takes people being willing to take a leadership role. Once established, that culture needs to be monitored and refreshed over time.

There are some practical things, none of which should be surprising:

-Outdoors is infinitely safer than indoors. Winter in the islands makes outdoor activities difficult with soggy fields and short days. But this may be an opportunity for island creativity and community solutions. Can covered outdoor basketball courts be lit? Is there a roofed spot for weights and training equipment? Is this a good time for track workouts? Clearly none of these are optimal, but there may be solutions which make good sense to consider.

-Indoor activities should be conducted in small (five or less) consistent pods of kids. Designing practice around this approach is essential. Clearly this limits things, but the alternative might be nothing at all. Getting kids out and moving should be the priority.

-No gathering of spectators, parents, other teams or kids. Everyone involved is either a coach or participant. Pick up of kids is outside. Parents stay in their cars.

-Coaches keep their faces covered. With face coverings that limit droplet spread, not with bandanas or scarves.

-Kids keep their faces covered when they're standing or doing activities where they can wear a mask like weight training, waiting to use the water fountain, stretching, listening, etc.

-At this point, everyone is itching for a real game against a real opponent. But, given the current surge in cases, even if it was officially allowed, competing against other teams, especially from off-island, is a very bad idea.

-We all understand how difficult and tiring these limitations are. The overall requirements can be confusing to understand, harder to implement, and difficult to have patience with- but the basics are simple. Outside when possible. Small consistent groups. Face coverings. Practice and small group drills only.

Nothing about this is easy or ideal. Dr. James sympathizes, "More than anything I'd like to be able to say that our kids can play basketball or wrestle or practice indoors and have it be perfectly safe- but, as cases rise everywhere, that's simply not the case. The islands have done very, very well so far and that is because we've all made sacrifices- unfortunately our ability to play sports like we used to is one of them."

"This issue of exponential spread is critical. We know now that kids have just as much ability to contract and spread COVID as adults. One unmasked, infected, and likely asymptomatic kid around 10 other kids, and suddenly we may have a large and uncontrollable outbreak on our hands. The risk is real."