



CONTACT DAYS RECAP



By Randy Whalen

After practicing on Thursday, Oct. 29, which would be his team's final contact day of the fall, Lockport Township football player Kyle Hartman summed it up perfectly.

"It felt good to be back to normal," he said. "Not much has been normal."

That's for sure.

With the coronavirus pandemic going on, Hartman and the rest of the Porter football team saw their season put on hold. So instead of the Friday Night Lights in the fall, they will hopefully have them starting in the spring. That is when the Illinois High School Association (IHSA) has moved the football season too.

Two other fall sports, boys soccer and girls volleyball, were also moved to the spring.

The IHSA came up with the contact days idea at the end of August. They were not just for the three fall for sports that are not in season but also for the rest of the sports that weren't in session.

Contact days could take place over 20 days from Sept. 7 to Oct. 31. High-risk sports such as football, wrestling, lacrosse, competitive cheerleading, and competitive dance could have no-contact practices, but with an exception for 7-on-7 in football, not intra-squad scrimmages.

During their 20 contact days, football teams could participate in handoff and passing drills and also hit sleds and tackling dummies. They could also run plays against air and against stand-up dummies.

So even though that wasn't normal, it was something and an opportunity to get back out on the football field.

"It means a lot, it means we are having a season," Hartman said of the contact days. Just being around the guys means a lot. Everything else is such a different thing, this is a normal thing."

Hartman, a center, is the only returning offensive line starter. Fellow senior Peyton Potempa, who hopes to step in at starting right guard is cautiously optimistic about football next spring.

"I'm definitely missing the actual games this fall but this is something," he said of the contact day practices. "I'm glad they didn't cancel it altogether. We will deal with having it in the spring but would rather have it in the fall."

Football players could wear helmets and shoulder pads during contact days but were not allowed to participate in person-to-person contact. They were not allowed to share helmets or pads and could participate in padless 7-on-7 intrasquad scrimmage, with parental consent

"We did a lot of 7-on-7's and drills," senior free safety/wide receiver Will Orban said of the Porter practices. "I dunno... It's weird. We were out here now but then have three-and-a-half months off until we play."

Besides the 20 contact days, teams were allowed virtual team meetings which did not count as one of the days. Plus schools could hold open gyms and open weight rooms throughout the school year provided they are advertised and open to all students.

"It's really been quite a different schedule," Lockport football coach George Czart said. "To have the weekends off is definitely different. But we are in the weight room when we are not on the field.

"To have anything with football is good. So to have the contact days is better than not having them at all. But it doesn't compare to the Friday night games."

Medium-risk sports such as basketball, soccer, volleyball, and football 7-on-7 could have intra-squad scrimmages if parents give consent. Athletes had to wear masks during the scrimmages except when able to social distance outdoors.

The Porter soccer programs took full advantage of that.

"The contact days were fun," Lockport boys soccer coach Chris Beal said. "We did a lot of 7-on-7 tournaments and brought both the boys and girls together. They were just playing the game and enjoying it for what it is. We had a great turnout and it was a great way to get in contact with the players. I think it was awesome that we were able to do that.

"The cool thing was just to see the kids playing and have a smile on their face."

Beal and girls coach Todd Elkei are both entering their 11th seasons coaching the Porters soccer programs. The boy's team should return upwards of a dozen players from last year's squad. This next season isn't like any other though.

"We will figure it out, we will adapt to it," Beal said of playing the boys season in the spring rather than now. "We will hopefully have a season, which is good.

The girls and six seniors lost their spring season to the pandemic this past spring. But with around 16 players back they are expecting good things when they start the new summer season in late April.

"All the girls out there were competitive," said Elkei of the mixture of boys and girls in the contact days. "We ended our contact days a week early, on Oct. 20. But we didn't get a true camp in the summer like we usually would. Because our staffs are the same we went together and had both boys and girls out there. It was great to see the girls get after it.

"They got to have fun and not do a lot of drills. They got to play games and the parents got to be there if they could. We did temperature checks and social distancing. It was just as much fun for us as it was for the kids. We had a lot of freshmen out too, and it was good to see the faces out there."

When the contact day practices were held indoors, athletes and coaches were required to wear masks. If the participants could socially distance outdoors, masks are not required.

So the masks were required for volleyball contact days. Nick Mraz coaches both the boys and girls programs so they also combined some of the workouts.

"It was good just getting them together and seeing them out there having fun," Mraz said of the contact day workouts. "There are a lot of them playing club too, so we tried to use our contact days when there weren't as many club matches going on.

"We are all in the same boat (with the pandemic). When we play (girls in the spring, boys in the summer) we will look to be as successful as we have. We've been having a good run (back-to-back regional titles for the girls, a regional title in 2018 for the boys) so just to put a halt to it has been tough."

But like every other sport, the volleyball teams have made the best of it.

"I think it went really, really well," said Lockport senior libero/defensive specialist Eliana Anselmo of the volleyball contact days, which the Porters ended on Friday, Oct. 30. The school has really done a great job of juggling all of this.

"We usually scrimmaged the boys in the last hour and it's really been good competition. I play for Ultimate and I'm glad that they will let us play both club and high school together. But I definitely missed it this fall. Being a senior I looked forward to Senior Night and everything. Hopefully, it all turns around for the (now spring) season."