Written by Mark Jaeger
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Board hopes switch will salvage sport, prevent sanctions by conference

With a handful of coaches watching from the sideline, the Northern Ozaukee School Board voted Monday to return to summer baseball.

The vote reflects a more optimistic stance than the board discussion in March about the fate of the varsity baseball program at Ozaukee High School.

At that meeting, Ozaukee High Principal Kevin Parker explained how waning interest by players forced him to decide to cancel this year's baseball season.

Originally, 12 players said they intended to go out for the sport this year, but when four prospective members had a change of heart, the season was cancelled.

Parker sent letters to the players and their families, explaining the rationale for dropping the program.

At the heart of the issue, according to the coaches who spoke during the board meeting's public forum, was the decision to switch to spring baseball.

In 2007-08, at the urging of coach John Tucker, the school dropped out of the Central Lakeshore Conference for baseball. Conference games are played in summer

Instead, the school played as an independent during the spring season, with games played in April and May. State tournaments are held during both seasons.

Tucker said the switch was made because students were concerned about losing summer jobs because they were playing baseball.

Even before the school prepared for the new season, Tucker stepped down as coach.

His replacement, Bob Kiefer, had been an assistant coach with the program.

Kiefer told the board it is difficult to get students — and coaches — enthused about spring baseball.

"For our first game of the season last year, it was 37 degrees with a 20 mph wind off the lake. After the game, the opposing coach told me, 'In all my life, I've never been that cold at a baseball game,'" Kiefer said.

He said he was confident he could field a team if the sport was played in summer, but doubted it could be resurrected if the school continued a spring schedule.

The most compelling argument in the proposal to switch back to summer baseball was a letter from the Central Lakeshore Conference warning of repercussions that could affect all athletics.

Conference officials said unless the school returned to the CLC summer baseball program for the 2010-11 season, Ozaukee High would be barred from conference tournaments in all sports next season.

The ban would affect conference championships for cross country, golf, track and volleyball, as well as forensics and honors band and choir.
Failure to make the move by 2012-13 would mean suspension from the conference.

Kiefer said the threat made the switch back to summer baseball “a no-brainer.”

“We cannot let this program threaten the participation by our wrestlers and basketball players. Taking legal action against the conference would cost money and is a bad PR move,” he said.

“I would like the board to consider all student athletes, not just those who play baseball. If we have summer baseball next year, I can guarantee we will have a program. If we keep spring baseball, I can guarantee we won’t have a team.”

Steve Schauer, who runs Fredonia’s youth baseball program, said having a high school program is critical to keeping talent in the community.

“Without a high school program, these kids will lose sight of a high goal and will look elsewhere to play,” Schauer said.

At a time of open enrollment, even Jim Lippe, the Ozaukee High football coach, said his son would not enroll in the school if there is no baseball program.

On a broader scale, Lippe said it would be difficult for any sports program to compete if they faced conference sanctions.
“I don’t see how we can compete if we face sanctions,” he said.

When Parker contacted the Wisconsin Interscholastic Athletic Association, he received little encouragement that the conference sanctions could be overturned.

After hearing the coaches’ comments on the matter, the School Board voted unanimously to return to summer baseball next year.