

Unsportsmanlike spring

Written by STEVE OSTERMANN
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Relentless pounding from snow, rain, cold takes toll on area sports teams

During his 20-plus years of coaching soccer at Grafton High School, Don Arnold thought he had seen just about everything in the sport.

That is until this spring, when his girls' team has spent more time kicking balls around in gymnasiums and hallways than on the field.



Thank you, Mother Nature.

“This has got to be the worst spring I’ve ever seen for sports,” said Arnold, who like other area coaches has watched practices and games fall victim to lousy weather — first snow, then rain and cold.

“It’s been crazy, like the tale of two springs. Last year, we had 70-degree days, and everybody was getting suntanned.

“This year, we can’t even get out on the field. It’s not that playing in the rain is a problem because we do that. But the fields are just too soaked, too unsafe to use.”

After having its first three games postponed, Grafton caught a reprieve this week. On Monday night, the Black Hawks were able to use Whitefish Bay High School’s artificial-turf field for their season opener against Germantown.

Few teams have been so lucky. Although track and field squads dodged inclement conditions as they finished their indoor seasons, the sloppy spring has taken its toll on soccer, softball, tennis and golf.

As of Monday, the Port Washington and Cedar Grove-Belgium softball teams had yet to play a game on their 2013 schedules. For Port, that’s meant at least six postponements, some of

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which are sure to become cancellations.

“All the fields are so saturated, we can’t do anything,” Port softball coach Steve Schmidt said last Friday.

“We’ve been outside two times (in five weeks), and that was to use the parking lot.”

Early season practices typically have the Pirates inside using a batting cage, playing catch and lifting weights. But this year, Schmidt’s team has had to share gymnasium space with tennis, track and soccer squads week after week.

“Everybody is trying to keep the girls upbeat,” he said. “The coaches know the girls are frustrated, and we’re frustrated, too.”

Although the infield on the Thomas Jefferson Middle School diamond could be prepared for play, a super-soggy outfield has rendered the facility unusable, Schmidt said.

“I don’t foresee us being able to play on at home for two more weeks. We will have basically lost the first six weeks of the season,” he said.

Most meets for the Port Washington and Grafton boys’ tennis teams were wiped out in the first three weeks, though Grafton was able to squeeze in its season opener.

Some tennis meets have also been moved to indoor facilities, a luxury unavailable to outdoors-only sports.

“We’re coping as well as we can,” said Port golf coach Kelly Green, who saw his team’s first three meets shelved, including this week’s North Shore Conference all-teams nine-hole meet at Wisconsin Club in Milwaukee.

“The courses just can’t be used. We can’t make up everything, so we’re probably going to have a very, very condensed season.”

A spell of dry weather last weekend may soon give golfers a reprieve.

Hawthorne Hills Golf Course in the Town of Saukville was expected to be open early this week. On Wednesday, April 17, Port was scheduled to play at The Bull in a makeup of the Sheboygan Falls Invitational, which was postponed April 10.

Coaches haven’t been the only school officials scratching their heads.

“This is easily the most postponements we’ve ever had,” Grafton Athletic Director Scott Parsons said.

“In the past, we’ve always cancelled a few games here or there, but we’re at the point this spring where you know 100% that you’re not going to play for several days at a time.

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“It’s been really, really strange.”

Parsons, who serves as co-commissioner of the North Shore Conference with Whitefish Bay’s Jon Gustavson, said the sloppy spring has sparked an unusually strong sense of cooperation between teams, coaches and schools.

“Everyone has been pulling together through this,” he said. “Our coaches have been phenomenal at sharing facilities, whether it’s the gym or weight room or even hallways.”

Cedar Grove-Belgium and Ozaukee high schools have been spared some weather-related inconveniences. Neither school has a tennis program, and Ozaukee doesn’t play softball.

But both schools are in the same boat for other sports.

“We’ve had one track meet and nothing else,” Cedar Grove-Belgium Athletic Director Brad Mayer, who also coaches golf, said last Friday.

“It’s frustrating, but there’s nothing you can do but try to reschedule things.”

Another alternative is finding a nicer place to play, an approach used by the Grafton softball team.

Coach Ken Hunt’s squad spent spring break in Alabama, where it got in three nonconference games against out-of-state opponents. The Hawks then returned to Wisconsin and saw their next four games postponed.

Port Athletic Director Thad Gabrielse has experienced much of the same frustration, watching scheduling paperwork pile up on his desk. But he’s not about to throw in the towel.

“I’m very optimistic that we will be able to reschedule most of the events,” Gabrielse said.

“Some of the nonconference games and meets will probably have to be cancelled, but there’s enough time left to make up the conference ones.”

Tennis courts are now clear of snow, soccer fields are slowly drying, and softball games can be rescheduled as part of doubleheaders, Gabrielse noted.

“We’ll keep working at it,” he added.

For Parsons, a sense of humor has helped keep the storm clouds in perspective.

“The sun has got to come out at some point. At least that’s what I’ve heard,” he said.

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Image Information: STEADY PRECIPITATION has left most outdoor athletic facilities in the area, including the Grafton soccer field (above), unusable for extended periods this spring.

Photo by Sam Arendt