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Phil: This is Phil Pogue. We're in Bloomington, Illinois. We're going to be talking to Executive Director Craig Anderson of the Illinois High School Association regarding the topic that we have for the Abraham Lincoln Presidential Library Oral History Collection, Tumultuous 2020.

[0:00:22] We're going to be talking about the impact of the pandemic on the Illinois High School Association, its members and its students, the communities that it served, and all of the people interested in high school sports. The date is May 28, 2021. And so we want to thank Craig for being a participant in this Tumultuous 2020 project. And to begin with, can you give us some background about yourself, where you grew up and your education?

[0:00:58]

Craig: Sure. So Craig Anderson, I grew up in Cambridge, Illinois, north central western side of the state. I had K through 12 education all at Cambridge Elementary and High School. I moved on to Monmouth College, where I attended and received a Bachelor's of Arts degree in mathematics, along with education. And then as I became a teacher following that time, I earned a master's degree from Illinois State University in educational administration.

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Phil: What was it like growing up in Cambridge?

Craig: Well, it was, I think, your typical small school. Growing up, you know, I had the lifelong friendships created in such a small town. And, you know, we did a lot of pickup kind of ball opportunities where long before, you know, the club and travel sports were, you know, my closest friends were about just finding whatever game was appropriate for the season to get together.

[0:02:11] So I got a lot of memories and a lot of great friendships created during my time at Cambridge.

Phil: What activities and sports did you participate?

Craig: So in high school, I participated in football, basketball, track and field. I was also in musicals. Three years I was in the orchestra of the musical and one year I served my junior year as a lead in a musical.

[0:02:40] And so that was probably the athletics and activities participation in high school. When I moved on to college, I participated in both football and basketball at Monmouth College for four years.

Phil: What was the musical that you were the lead in?

Craig: I was a lead in Seven Brides for Seven Brothers.

Phil: And can you sing those songs today?

[0:03:09]

Craig: I could sing a couple of them, not very well, and I would venture to say that probably in high school I didn't sing them very well either, but my girlfriend at the time got the female lead and so they thought it – I think this was my take – they thought it would be appropriate that I took the male lead in that musical. But yeah, every now and then to aggravate my wife I'll catch a tune and try to sing it again.

[0:03:38] But yeah, again, part of the memories of high school and the small town and having to participate in a number of things. I was also in four years of band, played the drums in high school, didn't continue that into to college necessarily, but I continue to dabble with drumming at the church I attend, so that's still a part of what I've gained from Cambridge and have taken forward.

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Phil: I thought I had heard that the Fox, or the Muny in St. Louis, was going to be having Seven Brides and Seven Brothers as one of their five shows. So, do you ever go watch professionally with that musical?

Craig: I haven't seen that musical professionally since I did that. We watched the movie, or parts of it, I remember, in preparation. And since that time "ve probably seen it on a rerun.

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But I haven't seen it in the theater. On occasion we will go as a family go watch different Productions theater productions musicals, but I haven't caught that one yet.

Phil: Why did you go to Monmouth College?

Craig: I went to Monmouth because of its small college experience and really I was still interested in the opportunities to play sports. And they offered me the opportunity in two sports, both football and basketball.

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And as I was not sure at the time what I wanted to study, but it quickly led me to math and math education and then a future in coaching and athletics.

It was for me the right decision to expand my opportunities and really enjoyed the small campus feel of the college and the opportunities it provided me.

Phil: Going back to Cambridge, is that still a high school today?

[0:05:37]

Craig: They are still a stand-alone high school. They have all their sports co-opped with a school called Allwood High School, which is made up of the towns of Alpha and Woodhall. So they have sport teams through a co-op agreement, and they still have their own high school.

Phil: What have been your work experiences once you graduated from college?

[0:06:07]

Craig: Yeah, so after college I got a math teaching assignment at Morton High School in Morton, Illinois. And I taught there for 10 years, and at the same time that I was teaching then earned my master's degree in, again, educational administration. And after 10 years of teaching and coaching at Morton, there was an opportunity to go be a head football coach and teach math at Olympia High School in Stanford, Illinois.

[0:06:40] So I made that step, and after the first year of teaching and coaching, there was an athletic administrative position, athletic director's job that opened up at Olympia. So I applied and was able to secure that position at Olympia. And so for a total of four years, one as a teacher, three as athletic director, I was at Olympia High School. After that, an AD's position became available at Washington High School.

[0:07:12] And so I applied and was able to jump over to Washington as the athletic and activities director in Washington. Was there for five years in that role. And then an opportunity came available at the IHSA, an assistant executive director's position. And so I joined the association, was able to come on as an assistant director overseeing the sports of football, wrestling, and baseball along with the officials department.

[0:07:45] I did that for approximately five years. And then an opportunity when Marty Hickman retired as executive director of IHSA, was able to then move into the executive director's role here at IHSA and doing that for a little over five years.

Phil: What was it like being in charge of football, wrestling, baseball and the officials?

[0:08:13]

Craig: Well, obviously those are really popular sports, have a lot of participation and a lot of interest. So, I really enjoyed my time overseeing those sports. While I hadn't played baseball in high school or college because my high school didn't have baseball at the time, I was a former football player and coach, so that fit well with that responsibility. Having played basketball and not wrestled, that was a steep learning curve to have oversight of rules and weight control requirements of those participants in wrestling.

[0:08:52] But I was resourceful. The person I was replacing, I had a connection with. His name is Dave Ganaway. And so he was a former wrestler and well-respected in the wrestling community, and so I really leaned on him along with others, officials and some key coaches, to just learn about the responsibilities I had with the office.

[0:09:17] And then, you know, not having been an official, I again had a steep learning curve to transitioning into having oversight of the officials department with the licensing, the education, the training that we did at the time and continue to offer our officials and obviously continue to try to do more every year in the recruitment of officials.

[0:09:45] And so all parts of that were really an exciting time for me to take a new role, kind of a statewide role in promoting all of those sports, working alongside coaches associations in those sports, along with moving officials in a positive direction on the education training side.

Phil: Although Sam Knox has taken those assignments, as far as recruiting officials, has this been a challenge?

[0:10:22] Because, as I recall, the age of officiating has been going up. Then you had the pandemic that impacted that age group the most. And then you throw in the shortened seasons, the overlapping seasons, the impact of dual activities going on with grade schools as well as the high schools.

[0:10:49] What is the status for officials in Illinois?

Craig: Well, we're always in need of more officials and you highlighted all of the concerns. Even before the pandemic, we've been touting and recruiting that we need more officials across all of our sports, including those that we adjudicate like cheerleading and dance and gymnastics.

[0:11:18] You know, there's just a need for folks that, you know, I always see it as a way to give back to a sport that maybe you participated in as a youngster. And you generally have a decent knowledge of what responsibilities exist for an official, but, you know, we offer rules books and clinics for those to learn how to, you know, make their way into the officiating avocation.

- [0:11:48] But we definitely have a need and we continue to try to provide incentives out to our schools and to our officials associations for, you know, a free licensing year for individuals to come on and have a first year licensing fee across multiple sports.
- [0:12:10] And so we, you know, we're looking and continue to look for different ways to entice others that maybe aren't officiating to join and see if it's something that they could find a passion for and continue to support our high schools in all levels of sport in officiating. There's definitely some money to be made in officiating. While for the most part it's not a full-time job, it is a way to supplement an income.
- [0:12:40] And it gives folks flexibility with when it's suitable within their time schedules to accept positions, they have the freedom to do so. So a lot of positives about officiating. So we continue to need more and want to entice people to come and try it.
- Phil: Well, we'll ask this question, a brief overview of the IHSA, although we at the Presidential Library have a detailed oral history under sports stories called the Illinois High School Association.
- [0:13:22] To just quickly review, how many member schools are participating, how many activities and sports do you have?
- Craig: Yeah so the IHSA just provides the governance and structure for our high schools to participate in sports and activities.
- [0:13:43] So that would entail 814 member schools, and we currently have a couple other private schools that are interested in joining our membership. So that number continues to fluctuate a little bit. We have 31 different sport championships and 8 other activity championships that we conduct. And across, depending upon the sport and the number of schools participating, we have a variety of classifications.
- [0:14:16] For example, in football we have 8 classifications. In our larger team bracketed sports we have 4 classes in the sports like girls volleyball and basketball, boys and girls, baseball and softball. And then in our individual sports, we have as many as three classes in sports like track and field and cross country.
- [0:14:44] We're approaching probably 350,000 students involved in our sports and activities. And you know, we're excited because that number continues to grow. And we do it all in terms of governance with oversight from 11 board of directors who are administrators at our member schools and with approximately 23 employees at the IHSA office.

[0:15:15] And we were up to as many as 26 employees at one time but with the pandemic hitting and some adjustments we made financially we had a few administrative assistants find more full time employment opportunities when we had to make some cuts and we haven't replaced those individuals.

[0:15:39] So it's it's quite an undertaking during traditional years of providing oversight and structure for our schools planning for state series activities across all of those sports and activities. But it's definitely something that's gratifying in seeing. the benefits that go out to our student-athletes.

Phil: In the past five years, have there been some sports and activities that have been added?

[0:16:09]

Craig: There have been, yeah. We've added both boys and girls lacrosse in the past five years. And we've seen the participation from our schools grow during that time. When we started, we had just over 80 boys teams and approximately 70 girls teams. And now we're over 80 girls teams and probably approaching 95 to 100 boys teams since we added that in the past five years.

[0:16:40] So recently those are the only two sports or activities that we've added, though we are looking and considering adding eSports as an activity, which is gaming, that would provide opportunities for students.

Phil: And when you create rules for gaming, are those coming from somewhere else?

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Craig: Yes, generally all of the structure within the games and how it's to be played are prepared by those that have published the games. And generally students and those that are providing oversight of the students have a strict knowledge of the game. And so our position as we bring it on as a state series would be to help organize our schools for regular season and then postseason competition where we could celebrate eSports with the crowning and recognition of schools and teams that could earn a state championship.

[0:17:44] And that will really be our part in developing that structure if and when we adopt eSports as an activity. How does the IHSA work with the non-public schools as well as the Chicago public?

Craig: Yeah, so those two groups along with our public schools make up our membership.

[0:18:07] And we're really proud of the fact that we've, since our inception and our association was started in 1900, that we've been able to serve member schools across those variety of types of schools. As you mentioned the private schools and the Chicago Public Schools. And so the private schools has an association of which I'm closely connected and I often go meet with their leadership nearly annually.

[0:18:39] And I have lots of correspondence and they're treated for me in terms of their participation no differently. There are some circumstances within our bylaws where in terms of classification that our membership agreed because of some membership determined advantages of private schools and the attraction of students to those schools that we make use of a multiplier for classification, while there have been some modifications and adjustments to that.

[0:19:17] We work closely with our non-public schools. They vote alongside our other member schools. So that relationship to me continues to be a positive one. And then likewise, the Chicago Public Schools, because of the number of schools, has their own athletic leadership department that provides some general oversight of them.

[0:19:40] But during my time with the association, we've had again a really solid relationship with the leadership there and they have the same privileges that are afforded to other schools in terms of their opportunities to participate in advance in our state series.

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Phil: During the 2019-2020 school year, you started operating normally and then in March 2020 everything changed. How did that have an impact on revenues and expenditures and student participation?

Craig: Yeah, so that was probably one of the most challenging times in my time.

[0:20:39] Well, for sure with the association and then just in my time that I've been employed in a number of different areas. But things changed drastically in that March 2020 time period. Our basketball tournament that we were in the middle of conducting championships were shut down.

[0:21:00] And through the end of that 2019-2020 school year we were basically shut down. Our schools went away from in-person learning and to a virtual learning, which didn't allow students to come to their schools to generally participate in any activities. So it really was a hit to us with losses of revenue of tournaments where nearly 70% of our annually budgeted revenue comes from what we receive from the gate receipts of fans attending our state

series level competitions, starting from the regional all the way to our state championships.

[0:21:55] While not conducting those tournaments helped us a little bit on the expenditures, we still, generally, with the exception of a few sports, we generally earn and make money off of the tournaments we conduct. So that has been a hit for us and it continued and we'll probably talk more about what happened after the immediate time there, March 2020, until the end of that school year.

[0:22:26] But obviously student participation was hurt because students just weren't engaged in our activities. And so it was really sad to see and to look out on some really sunny days in the spring where ordinarily our fields and our tracks would be full of athletic competition and students engaged in learning from those opportunities that it was just at that point taken away.

[0:22:54] And so it was a challenging time to navigate and and then try to you know think about where we could – how we could get back to students engaged in competition.

Phil: As an executive director of the Illinois High School Association, how closely were you involved with the cancellation of the basketball season, as well as the entire spring season, and getting information from the governor and the Illinois Department of Public Health?

[0:23:31]

Craig: Yeah, so in my position I was extremely involved and so during our 1A, 2A boys basketball tournament we had all of the participating schools at our state final venue. They were prepared to start the tournament on Friday and then on the Thursday evening before, we were communicating generally with at that time the local health department there in Peoria the city and county health department navigating some recommendations that they had.

[0:24:08] And then you know, of course hearing about other things that were happening nationally related to collegiate and professional sports being shut down, it was an extremely challenging time. We met with our board of directors that that night and then made the decision with all of the things I mentioned impacting the decision to shut down the tournament, the basketball tournament.

[0:24:33] And so we had to walk in to what was supposed to be a coaches and administrators meeting to share with them our expectations for the weekend and conducting the tournament, but instead had to tell them that the tournament was canceled. So I remember that very vividly and seeing the faces of the coaches, administrators and knowing that they then were



going to have to walk out of that meeting and report it back to their students and of course to their schools and their fan base.

[0:25:06] So, then likewise as that transitioned and we were shut down, we were meeting and communicating with our board of directors, and then got more connected because now as we think about the spring season, we're talking about all of our membership and what was the potential for getting our spring sports underway, if at all, and what would that look like.

[0:25:31] We then engaged with the Illinois State Board of Education because of the school format and then also with the Illinois Department of Public Health and the Governor's Office trying to navigate what was going to be acceptable. And so we really kind of pushed timelines in hopes that we could resume some activities in the spring.

[0:25:59] And as time went on and the restrictions were instituted for our schools, we just weren't able to get started. And as I mentioned previously, that was challenging to know that we took away an entire season that many of that year's senior spring athletes were hoping for, it just wasn't there. And so we're just gonna have to get back to work. And so that was also a huge challenge.

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Phil: How late in the spring did you hold on, hoping that you would be able to salvage something?

Craig: Yeah, so we held on for a number of weeks and even a couple months, I would say, with trying to push it back. And we even anticipated that we established that we wouldn't have a state series, but we were holding on hope that even if we started in mid-May that there would be some room for practice and then competitions to hopefully allow students to have a senior night and to be recognized.

[0:27:06] And so it went on almost into early May, where typically we would be started in March and mid-March with competition, that we were hoping to resume something that would extend into the summer, much farther than we ordinarily would. And so it got to the point as we got into early to mid-May that, you know, the realization was that the timing wasn't going to be available.

[0:27:35] And at that point students needed to move on with their graduation and college plans. Our seniors, thinking about them, and then, you know, to see then what the summer might look like.

Phil: You know, your board of directors come from all over the state and during the pandemic various regions of the state were impacted differently with positivity and cases.

[0:28:02] How challenging was that?

Craig: Well, that was extremely challenging because you're right, we did have – as it was being monitored county by county, you know, we had a number of counties that early on had, you know, they had no positive COVID people in their counties. And so there was some pressure to say – both locally, I think, for our schools to say, hey, we need to get schools back in session, in person, and then likewise with, you know, wanting to resume some activities.

[0:28:36] So the expansion of our state being, you know, north to south, east to west, so many miles, really creates a variety of different circumstances of what we have to deal with with Chicago and in the suburbs and then, you know, moving all the way downstate. We heard from a lot of different – and continue to a little bit – of, you know, how we should have tried to maybe do some regional based activities and permit some regional things to happen.

[0:29:11] But at that time our was if we were going to resume we needed to resume and permit all of our schools the opportunity when it was the timing was right. And that changed a little bit when we got into – and the state kind of created this for us when they developed the EMS regions and within different EMS regions established some criteria metrics that different regions would have to meet that would allow different opportunities as we were starting to transition back to more things happening.

[0:29:49] Not only interscholastically, athletically, but also just within and you know what they could do with restaurants and those kind of things. So, all that created challenges in navigating the different thoughts about you know how we should resume and the timelines we should resume.

Phil: Were you having press conferences yourself like the mayor's and governor to explain what's happening or were you just taking calls from all sorts of media parents?

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Craig: Yeah so I don't I don't recall a time that we did an entire press conference. We may have done after a couple board meetings a couple virtual things with the media. And that was just by telephone and in a virtual meeting format that we invited the media to just hear about how we saw things progressing and new information from our board meetings.

[0:31:00] But during this time, most of it was just with individuals calling and wanting to, you know, find out how things were going. So it really was just with individual requests, whether it be TV or newspaper or radio. You know, I didn't keep track, but there was a significant number of requests that we provided, and as one can imagine, there was, of course, a lot of interest from parents.

[0:31:30] And so it just got to be overwhelming to respond to all of them, and we really were just trying to get answers back to our membership, our schools, and then working with the media and that relationship to try to keep that group up to date so they could report out our situation.

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Phil: And were you remote yourself at this time?

Craig: I was, yeah. We transitioned to remote and spent a number of months out of the office as we were navigating much like everyone else what this was going to look like and of course trying to keep our people safe. We kind of mirrored what our schools did as they transitioned to virtual. We did the same thing similarly with our IHSA staff.

[0:32:21] We started conducting board meetings virtually. And yeah, so you know kind of self-quarantined and really trying to protect families of our staff as well as our board members and our membership.

Phil: How much time did you have to prepare to go remote?

Craig: That happened rather quickly. So you know we had to discover what was going to be our communication mechanism on the virtual.

[0:32:52] And we adopted Microsoft Teams format that we continue to use in many ways and did as we conducted different types of meetings with our membership. And so yeah, it was short time that we had to kind of reinvent ourselves and the ways in which we would communicate.

Phil: When did you come back into the office?

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Craig: Yeah, so we came back kind of in a scaled format. We broke our staff in half and kind of worked an every other day shift so that we could have a group here to answer the phone. That probably started over the summer, June, July, and we kind of stayed on that format probably through August.

[0:33:45] And then in August, probably closer to September when the school year got underway, and we were able to resume a small number of fall sports that we

finally got our staff back with a number of precautions of course that we implemented with masking of staff and, you know, sanitizing areas daily and all those things that were suggested for safety.

[0:34:12] But that was kind of the timeline of quarantining and then resuming activities back in the office.

Phil: Did you have to do something in this building to retrofit it or was it just the basic masks and the sanitizing that you put in?

Craig: Yeah, we didn't have to do anything different to the building. Yeah, we really had people generally separated in their work areas.

[0:34:44] The administrators have their own offices and our assistants have their own cubicles, separated with partitions. So, we really were in a good position, felt like it was safe to get people back. Again, you know, the masking we implemented. But no real changes to structure or the office kind of set up we were able to maintain.

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Phil: What were the plans that you set up for the fall season for this current school year? Because you would assume that you would have some sort of activities being able to be done.

Craig: Yeah, so there came a time where we were leaning on the direction of the governor's office and the Department of IDPH.

[0:35:41] And so as we were transitioning into the start of the school year, schools were making decisions about whether they would be in-person, virtual, or in a hybrid format and we were getting information back. And the IDPH had established at that time some risk levels of sport. And so the guidance was offered that we could resume some activities for lower risk sports, but still within those sports being able to practice and compete, there were some travel restrictions of those schools within their EMS regions for competition.

[0:36:20] So while it did allow us to resume some fall sports, it was only for the lower risk fall sports. And then they were limited by their travel, which in turn limited our ability to culminate those seasons with a state series that would advance all the way to a championship.

[0:36:42] So in that way, we were somewhat restricted in being back to traditional fall sports. Those that were moderate or high risk, we weren't able to compete in the fall. So volleyball and football and boys soccer were held up. And we fortunately found a new season when there were opportunities to play those sports as the guidance was offered to us from IDPH and we created a timeline and a season of which we could

- [0:37:14] But we had to make some significant modifications for how we provided opportunities for our membership to engage students in the sports and activities they were going to participate.
- Phil: As executive director, did you have to make rulings on who schools could play? If schools were only in a six-team conference, that meant they would have to try to find a bunch of other schools, either in their region to play or size of school.
- [0:37:50] And in some cases their geography made more sense that they would be playing schools in another EMS region because they're at the boundary. So did that get to you or did that go somewhere else?
- Craig: No, that definitely got to us and we had schools reaching out to us with all of the concerns you mentioned.
- [0:38:13] Fortunately, the conference competition, even if it overlapped EMS regions, was permitted. And then obviously EMS region competition was permitted. But with those on a COVID region or an EMS region border, we did on behalf of our schools reach out to IDPH to try to get some expanded opportunities for competition. And they did grant permission for our schools to compete against schools within a 30 mile radius of their school.
- [0:38:45] Obviously that went to help out those schools on their border of their EMS region. And so we definitely heard those concerns. And so at that point, we really ended up being kind of a go-between in concerns from our schools about opportunities to engage in competition, where those restrictions were, and then, you know, kind of putting those positions in front of IDPH and asking for some consideration.
- [0:39:15] And that was one example of which we did get some consideration from IDPH to permit that 30 mile radius for our schools. So that continues to this day, even as we talk about the masking of athletes and coaches and the restrictions that are in place. We've advocated on behalf of our schools and the safety measures that they've implemented.
- [0:39:40] And really from early on, we advocated for the safety policies that the state would ask us to put together, that if anyone was going to follow those rules, it would be our member schools. And we believe that, and I think it played out as it was reported to us, to be much different than some of the non-school sports, club, and AAU-related activities that went on even while we as member schools competition were limited, those non-school activities were ongoing.

[0:40:19] And that created a little bit of frustration with us as an office staff along with our membership to see those non-school activities go forward, likely against the guidance that was being offered from IDPH and the governor's office.

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Phil: What impact then has this whole issue from '20, the cancellation of the basketball season, to the impact of this season had on your revenue and ability to function?

Craig: Well, it's had a significant impact on our revenue. So as it turned out, we ended up losing the 2020 spring season revenue, the fall season revenue, and our winter season revenue.

[0:41:14] And that's a result of us not conducting any state series where we would earn revenue from spectator attendance and those gate receipts. So in turn we we had to take some steps here at IHSA to obviously reduce expenditures which included initially taking some salary freezes for office staff.

[0:41:40] And then furthermore we ended up having to reduce hours for staff to help financially and reduce some retirement benefits and a number of other benefits that were costly for the association. So you know we've we've had to do those kind of things.

[0:42:04] We've also with some of our state series had to make some adjustments to how we're conducting those. Those are probably - well much because we've had to limit spectators because of the guidance that we'd been offered. So there's a number of things that continue to impact us from a revenue sense. And then obviously to survive we had to navigate and some reduced expenditures for staff and other things.

[0:42:39] We instituted some things for our membership to try to help us on a revenue side. So for the few number of sports that we did conduct a state series, we did institute a membership activity fee. So every activity that a school chose to participate it was a hundred dollar activity fee.

[0:42:59] And so those sports that we conducted maybe just through the sectional level like we did in Boys and Girls Golf and Boys and Girls Cross Country, we reduced or we charged schools an activity fee for that opportunity. So that fee continued through the 2020-2021 school year and then for the 2021-2022 school year our board approved a one-time membership assessment for the entire year.

[0:43:34] And that's a scaled assessment according to enrollment size of schools as to the amount that they pay, so our smaller schools pay five hundred dollars up to our biggest schools paying as much as two thousand dollars just to be a

member and then have the opportunity to participate in any number of activities and moving away from the separate activity fee.

[0:44:00] So we've implemented some of those things to try to help us through. We also worked with a bank to institute a line of credit that to date we fortunately have not had to enter into and get money from the line of credit. And so we're navigating carefully, of course, the revenue side and hope that where we're at today.

[0:44:30] And the signs are that we're moving in a positive direction to be back with full championships and hopefully in the fall in particular with not a limit of spectators that we could see a return to some normal revenue expenditures that where we were at before the pandemic came about.

[0:44:52]

Phil: Did the IHS qualify for any federal assistance?

Craig: We did, yeah. We were fortunate to qualify for the Payroll Protection Plan, PPP, and so we've been able to get two rounds of PPP money. The first PPP loan was forgiven and we're in the process of completing the request for forgiveness of the second PPP loan.

[0:45:24] But as a non-for-profit, we were eligible for that and that really helped us survive. While we made some other modifications, it helped us get through this this school year. At least it appears we'll successfully get through this school year. And then the membership assessment will help us get started as we move into the fall.

Phil: Was there any state assistance?

Craig: No, we did not get any state assistance. No money from the state. believe that we were eligible for any.

[0:45:56] While we've [lit the ear] of a few different legislators about that possibility, our association has not seen any revenue from the state.

Phil: Now, the state put on these high risk, medium risk, low risk sports and activities. Was this expected, and did the IHSA have some challenges as to how certain sports were put into various categories compared to how other states were doing?

[0:46:34]

Craig: Yes, all of that is true. We did find challenges with that. It wasn't unexpected that sports would fall into categories. The Sports Medicine Advisory Committee from the National Federation of State High School Associations

established some risk levels of sport. Our state, I believe, used some of that information to create their own risk levels.

[0:47:03] And throughout the fall basketball was a moderate risk sport and then in November about the time that our board was set to make a decision about conducting our winter sports, the state did make an adjustment and moved basketball from a moderate to a higher risk sport and as a result basically prevented our schools from practicing or competing in basketball. So there were a few challenges like that.

[0:47:32] They initially established lacrosse as higher risk and have since made an adjustment for girls lacrosse because it doesn't involve physical contact in competition. They moved it back to a moderate risk. And so there's been some minor adjustments. Cheerleading and dance were initiated at higher risk and then with some modifications to the structure of the competition and the different stunting and limits on some of the partner stunts and things that are a part of that, it was adjusted down to a lower risk sport.

[0:48:11] So we were able to navigate some of that. I would also add that we found some success with some sports and activities to conduct them virtually. And so generally in their seasons, we were able to, as a result of virtual competitions where our teams would record their performance, and then adjudicators would review that and make decisions about place levels were based upon the adjudication of the video.

[0:48:48] And we did that not only in speech and cheerleading, but also in debate and music and speech and drama and group interpretation. So we found some benefits and were able to provide students the opportunities to engage those skill sets, and then we were able to crown some championships as a result of the virtual competitions.

[0:49:13]

Phil: How easy was it to work with the various groups that were all scrambling? The IESA, the Department of Public Health, the Governor's Office, the colleges, the National Federation? You mentioned the challenges of clubs, etc.

[0:49:37] And then you've got your sports medicine group trying to work.

Craig: Yeah, so we were actually working very closely with the Illinois Elementary School Association, along with the Southern Illinois Junior High School Athletic Association. We were all basically trying to navigate this together. So we made sure as we communicated with IDPH and the governor's office that the email communications were all inclusive and that, so that all



information was being shared equally about where the limits would be, sport by sport.

- [0:50:17] And then now that we've advanced as to new opportunities as they've come available. So, there were some challenges with the communication. You know, we felt while we see ourselves generally as, you know, the experts in knowing about the structure of sports and activities for our schools, a lot of decisions we felt were made without much input at all from our office or IESA or the Southern Illinois Junior High School Athletic Association.
- [0:50:48] So, that was a bit frustrating. I did communicate with a couple of small college conference administrators within Illinois that were trying to navigate, you know, their potential return and who we were corresponding with.
- [0:51:07] The NFHS as a national leader, of course, had been a great partner advocating for a return. And obviously in the Midwest, we saw a number of states in the Midwest return with regular season schedules on time, especially in the fall with football and volleyball, boys soccer going forward.
- [0:51:32] And so that was challenging for us to sit kind of, you know, within a conglomerate of states surrounding us that were all going forward and while we were being held back a little bit. So, of course, that created challenges even, you know, publicly in people recognizing that those things were happening. And as a result, it led to the non-school groups organizing our students and in most occasions having the club teams traveling outside of our state as permissions were granted in other states to play those sports.
- [0:52:10] Thinking of basketball and volleyball as examples. So that added to the challenge. Because there's so many different club groups, we didn't have a lot of communication with those groups, but recognized that – and it was reported to us often that that was ongoing. with those types of activities going on outside the state. We really leaned on the Sports Medicine Advisory Committee that we have, our own group, to advise us on different sport restrictions or recommendations for how we might resume, and of course resume safely.
- [0:52:53] So, all of the different protocols we established for our schools to move forward with starting a sport or activity were a result of the work of our sports medicine advisory committee. So, they were an important piece for us to create the guidance for our schools in terms of recommendations of limits and how our schools would return to play.
- [0:53:20] Really thinking about the safety of athletes and the potential long timeline of when the last time they had engaged in some type of physical activity. And

so that was top of mind as you know we we were quarantined for months. Some students were likely to remain more active than others.

[0:53:45] And so there was a concern and an injury risk and safety risk of students resuming too quickly with the amount of activity. And our sports medicine advisory committee prepared a lot of that guidance for our schools.

Phil: Were there legal challenges that you were involved in representing the IHSA?

Craig: There were legal challenges. I'll speak to two and one we were a part of that's still ongoing.

[0:54:17] We had one over the summer where we were, when our schools were able to resume what we call summer contact days during the summer where coaches are able to just provide some instruction on the skill of the sport, that we were having students mask during that times, of course for their safety. And so we had a lawsuit brought to us from a parent who was an attorney that thought we were overstepping our bounds and using the guidance from the governor.

[0:54:52] And as a result, we were involved in a lawsuit with that. And then when we made the decision to modify the seasons, basically moving our fall sports out of the fall to a different time, that we were making that decision against what our bylaws had established and would require us to go out and have a vote of our membership to make that decision to move a season start and ending date.

[0:55:24] And so we had a lawsuit against us again from a family that didn't believe we had made correct steps in making those types of decisions. And so while neither one of those reached a culminating position, they weren't clearly adjudicated through the court system.

[0:55:49] Both of them were filed as temporary restraining orders and neither temporary restraining order was offered. And then both of those lawsuits that were filed against us, they agreed to basically take them off of any future legal work. And so we were fortunate because obviously when you get into a legal situation, that gets expensive.

[0:56:17] Attorney's expenses are costly to the association to defend those. And so that was another challenge that we faced to represent ourselves, yet knowing that our financial position was challenging. But yet we felt the need to defend ourselves and our membership as an association that we were moving through this the best that we could.

[0:56:46] So those were a couple of situations that we got involved in and fortunately for us got out of quickly so they didn't get too costly.

Phil: Well you talked at the beginning that you had 31 sports and 8 activities for the 2021 school year. Were all of them able to hold some event?

[0:57:14]

Craig: As we finish up this school year, all of them are going to have been able to have some sort of season. Not all of them were able to culminate with a state series. And while some of our activities in both cheerleading and dance were able to culminate with crowning of state champions virtually, only our spring sports will have a more traditional state series from start to finish where we're starting at our typical regional or sectional level competition and we'll be able to culminate with a state championship.

[0:57:54] And the spring season was really important to us as we worked with our board because it was those sports that really lost their entire seasons the previous school year. So we are having some sports that will not culminate with any sort of state series.

[0:58:15] Basketball and wrestling are examples of those. Simply because of when we finally got permission to resume those, the timeline that we had remaining in the school term just wasn't going to allow us to try to maximize participation of our students in a regular season, and then culminate their seasons with a state series that would end in a state championship.

[0:58:40] We worked with our board to try to create what we felt like was the best case for allowing some sort of season of activity and then really trying to make sure that the spring sports that again lost their season could culminate with a championship. And it looks like that's going to play out successfully.

Phil: Well, your high risk sports like football, you had a six game window.

[0:59:09] Not all schools were able to get six games in, either because they had quarantine issues, so they may have had three, four, five. They also created some unique situations where you had kind of a conference playoff, where they would come into that. I think even in the Chicago area, they created an eight team power tournament of some sort in basketball, I think.

[0:59:45] So, were you aware of what they were trying to do, creatively, to do this?

Craig: Yes, we were. When permissions to resume were allowed, in particular the high-risk sports, while they could resume, they were restricted into who they could compete against.

- [1:00:11] And so, as a result, it did create, as you mentioned, a lot of creativity by our schools in modifying some conferences and then, you know, just in – because of, I'm thinking of football in particular, that, you know, they had a six-game schedule created, but when schools discovered that they couldn't play the contest, generally because they were quarantined or for any other reason, schools were quick to start communicating to find those that were similarly situated.
- [1:00:49] Someone who could play but now didn't have an opponent. And so there was a lot of negotiating and navigating, some schools not knowing who they were going to play on a Friday or Saturday until a day before the contest. You know, traditionally football is week to week and you study your opponent and you prepare for your opponent.
- [1:01:10] And that, in a lot of cases, just wasn't the case this year. So we did see tremendous flexibility. You mentioned the eight-team tournament, or maybe even more than that. I think it was eight teams that was put together on a basketball tournament again. At the time, those schools were limited by travel, but they located some schools within a 30-mile radius of one another and put together a little tournament.
- [1:01:39] So, yeah, you know, it was, for our membership, an incredible time to try to rethink how you resume. And, you know, when you get used to scheduling a year in advance and know and anticipate that that's who you're going to play and you'll be on this schedule, you know, we really turn athletic directors in particular, their world upside down when we all of a sudden instituted these brand new time schedules for when seasons would start and stop.
- [1:02:13] And now they had to get, you know, get back together within their conference or even with some non-conference opponents to figure out a schedule. So there was a lot of navigating. I give a lot of credit to our schools and the administrative leadership of our schools in navigating this really crazy time that we created in order to get students opportunities to participate.
- [1:02:41] But a lot of work was done at the local level to make sure those opportunities were available by creating schedules on a really short timeline.
- Phil: Were you involved at all with these AD challenges like busing and gym space and finding officials and having enough trainers, or were you just hearing that from your board of directors who knew what was going on in the schools?
- [1:03:12]

Craig: Yeah, well having a son who was a high school athlete through all of this, you know, I was hearing about it locally there. But also, hearing from our schools. And I was on at times weekly meetings with the statewide athletic directors association and on zoom meetings at times there were nearly 500 athletic directors in the meeting just you know kind of hearing what and answering their questions about what they would be allowed to do and on what timeline.

[1:03:47] So yeah, we heard a lot of those things and as we started to see opportunities for spectators to come back in, of course then we there was a lot of communication with schools about what where those limits were, kind of the locations of where spectators needed to be indoors or outdoors, you know all of the masking questions kind of work through our office.

[1:04:14] You know the stuff that's that's done at a local level, you mentioned hiring of officials and scheduling buses, we didn't get a lot of questions related to that because those are generally just, you know, local things and schools scheduling their contests. We heard mainly about the things that schools needed to prepare for when it comes to the procedural things of sanitization, those recommendations, modifications to rules.

[1:04:44] In basketball, we eliminated the jump ball. And, you know, in volleyball, they may switch benches from match to match. You know, we provided some recommendations for some adjustments to some rules things. And so those are the types of questions that we would get and the questions related to things that were being provided to us as guidance from IDPH.

[1:05:15]

Phil: Now, when you're talking about some of the changes in the sports, did that... those ideas generate out of the National Federation?

Craig: Yeah, many of them came from the National Federation, but some of them also came from just the knowledge of our Sports Medicine Advisory Committee. Those groups kind of work together. But for the most part, when it comes to rules modifications, because we use the National Federation rules for sport, we were working off of mainly the guidance that likely their sports medicine advisory committee was providing nationally, recommendations for the adjustments to rules and playing procedures that created things to be safer for students.

[1:06:02] An example, you know on football there's a sideline restriction of where the players that aren't in the contest can be on the field and there was a recommendation to expand that just that so when you were on the bench you could have students have a better opportunity to social distance from one another. So some of those recommendations you know were things that

we upon recommendation from the federation we went ahead and implemented and communicated to our schools.

Phil: What about wrestling? What's the status of it?

[1:06:43] So wrestling, with recommendations coming from that Statewide Coaches Association, just anticipating it being probably one of the higher risk sports in competition with the close physical contact of you know the competitors, we, before the winter even season was going to begin moved that season all the way to the spring. So it corresponds with the spring sports seasons.

[1:07:16] It continues to be a sport that's going on now with the shift from the winter to the spring. I think we've moved into a position where schools, while it's high risk and indoors, there's still some limits of where they can travel and compete with schools, but there's been at least some more comfort because of the expanded vaccines and where the state has moved in terms of opportunity that it's just a better time period for us to be conducting that sport in the spring as opposed to where the limits were.

[1:07:56] And frankly they couldn't have got started in the winter as as the our typical timeline would have had them. So we've moved it there we're we're not going to conduct the championship we won't have a state series in wrestling really because it mirrors what our other winter sports were limited to.

[1:08:17] And so our focus has been on the spring sports and preparations for a wrestling championship would have needed to have been started a long time ago and the timeline just isn't there. And we feel like it should have the same similar opportunities in terms of a season but no postseason much similar to our other winter sports.

Phil: And the soccer seasons how did they get fit in?

Craig: Boys soccer is a fall sport so they fell in alignment with where we situated football and girls volleyball.

[1:08:54] So you mentioned football had a six-week season during that same time interval. Boys soccer was able to be played along with girls volleyball. Because girls soccer was a spring sport as is boys volleyball those sports are ongoing now this spring, and we will conduct the championship for those sports.

[1:09:17] Again because they missed out on that opportunity and their entire season in the spring of 2020.

Phil: And is that the same for lacrosse boys?

Craig: So boys and girls lacrosse are both spring sports so they're both being conducted now. Girls lacrosse is a moderate risk sport.

[1:09:42] And because of that risk level, they do have the ability to expand travel and compete. So we had early on established that they would have a state championship. And then not until the governor announced that we can anticipate June 11th being the time at which we can move into phase five. When we discovered that information, we began planning for a state championship series in boys lacrosse, because that's gonna be conducted after June 11th, at which phase five allows for the expanded travel that we would need to conduct that state championship series.

[1:10:21] So along with boys lacrosse, boys volleyball, moderate risk indoors, had a similar limitation, but boys lacrosse and boys volleyball have now moved similarly to we're going to crown champions and have a full state series in those sports, anticipating that the governor's announcement will hold true that on June 11th we'll move into phase 5.

[1:10:47]

Phil: So if it doesn't go through then those end?

Craig: Yeah, we would have to make some significant adjustments and wouldn't likely be able to culminate with a state final.

Phil: What were some of the biggest questions you got either from the athletic directors or parents outside of the legal issues that you were getting?

[1:11:12] You talked about masking and questions regarding fan participation, but were there some really big ones that you got?

Craig: Well, you hit on the biggest two. When I think back of the questions we were receiving, when the ability to bring fans on, we got a number of questions from Ads. Just, you know, what groups are considered spectators? Are cheerleaders part of the spectator group or not? Are pep bands part of the spectator group or not? And so ADs were just trying to sort out kind of where are the limits and so that's where a lot of the questions from athletic directors came was you know as we resume, you know, where are the limits?

[1:12:05] And you know as the state made adjustments then we were letting our schools know there could be adjustments and that was burdensome because they would make decisions limiting maybe only parents. But then when the percentage of spectators were allowed to make an adjustment you know we communicated that now they could have more spectators. And so they had to make adjustments in their planning whether it be ticketing or how they

were gonna still maintain a limit but what additional groups would they allow in to be spectators?

[1:12:39] So the pressure of course built from families and parents about wanting to be in attendance of course and spectate, and so we heard a lot from families at that time. We also heard from families as you know they were seeing whether their sons and daughters were traveling out of state with these non-school teams.

[1:13:04] They were wanting us to return and at times move against the guidance of IDPH and the governor's office. And the pressure built as it ended up culminating with the lawsuit. But there were a lot of parental pressures about us permitting students to engage in practice and then competition on a timeframe that really went against the guidance of the state.

[1:13:32] And then we've heard it again now with the spectator piece, as we've had to in some sports, just because of venues that we're in limit spectators. That continues to be a concern of families being able to be there and watch and experience watching their sons and daughters play. Of course it's challenging, and we want to provide those opportunities where space and the opportunities allow us to, but that has continued to be a challenge.

[1:14:01] And that's really, as I think about input from families, that really, in addition to the masking and wanting to obviously remove masks in sports and activities where students are exerting themselves, has been one that we've heard often also.

Phil: The 21-22 season, are there some things that because of your experiences the last, since March 2020, that you're now going to implement and add as to part of your protocols with 21 and 22?

[1:14:46]

Craig: Yeah, as I think about that, you know, there's a number of different parts of what we do that I think about related to that question. Just in terms of communications and meeting with different groups that we like to do on a statewide basis, you know, this virtual meeting opportunity and where we maybe went away from seed meetings in some of our sports, you know, the opportunity to get coaches together for a seed meeting in a virtual, while it's not true face-to-face, it's as good as at times being face-to-face and being able to ask questions prior to seeding.

[1:15:28] I see that being something that we'll likely implement for many of our sports. Thinking about the structure of our tournaments, which is really a big part of what we do, you know, we're looking at significant modifications to our track and field championships upcoming, where our state finals will



be conducted in single class days. Our three classes will have their own separate day of track and field tournaments.

[1:15:59] So 1A on the first day, come in, compete, crown the individual and team champions, and they'll leave. 2A will come in, do the same the next day, 3A the last day. You know, we need to get through that to see and hear from our coaches what their thoughts are as well as our schools related to that. So there's some tournament related structural things where we're now conducting championships maybe a little bit differently that we'll consider.

[1:16:31] You know we've had to adjust and use some different venues that we ordinarily wouldn't use. So it's evaluating you know the use of this new venue. I think a number of the safety precautions that we've implemented will continue. And just thinking about any type of spread of whether it be COVID or any other communicable disease, I think will always be a going forward top of mind in terms of safety and sanitization.

[1:17:03] All those things will likely continue, maybe not to the extent that we initiated it, but I think that'll continue for our schools especially to be top of mind. And then, you know, thinking about, you know, we conducted the activities and cheerleading and dance virtually. Well, we want to see those get back to in-person. I think our schools will consider having some virtual competitions whether we had success in chess with virtual competitions.

[1:17:38] I think some of our schools will make use of that. So, there are a number of things that we're navigating and thinking about to discover you know, what makes sense for us going forward in terms of meeting procedures, tournament structures, and you know, just the activities themselves.

[1:18:01] And you know, some of the rule modifications that we've made adjustments to will, you know, I'm sure the Federation will be looking at some of those things that we'll see about if it warrants some adoption in some regard.

Phil: Are there any considerations for dealing with promoting activities and sports because you probably had some decline in involvement?

[1:18:35] Because of the limited season, the overlapping of seasons where some athletes maybe decided we don't want to play football because we've got something coming up that we're involved in.

Craig: Yeah, you know, that was one of the things when we created that overlap that we were concerned about. The number of teams. And we frankly have seen, especially in girls soccer, there's been a significant reduction in the number of teams participating this spring.

[1:19:04] And so, yeah, we'll have to see. And, you know, I hope next year is back to some normalcy. We'll have to see where the numbers are. But in a number of our low sport participation groups, I'm thinking of boys and girls, gymnastics, and some of our activities debate, even journalism that we offer a state series in, we saw a drop in the number of schools offering those, likely for a number of reasons.

[1:19:33] You mentioned us creating some overlap where students weren't as comfortable overlapping those seasons and wanted to steer more towards their primary sport as opposed to a secondary sport. So we're looking into that and I'm sure schools are too. You know we have a policy that says we need 10 percent of our membership to adopt us participating in a sport to adopt it.

[1:20:02] So we similarly make and should make considerations in a similar perspective of when does it come a time to maybe drop a state series? And so you know a few of those that I mentioned that had significant reductions where we we really had they were on the border of almost having not enough to continue. We're gonna have to watch those closely as to see how if they return to their ordinary number of schools participating to evaluate if as an association we can continue to offer them as a state series.

[1:20:38] You know I'll also offer that as we worked through the 19-20 school year we felt like we were building towards instituting e-sports during the 2021 school year. And then when COVID hit us in the spring you know we we just made the decision that – and not knowing what the 2020 2021 school year was going to look like it wasn't the time to add an activity.

[1:21:13] So, you know, that right now is something that we're looking at. Do we expand? Because we do, we recognize that we have the participation within our membership that would meet that kind of 10% schools participating in eSports. And now trying to evaluate, is it the time to adopt it?

[1:21:35] And that'll be a decision our board will probably make in the next month or two. So we've had to make those types of adjustments and again, there's a number of things to consider about the participation levels in some of the sports that we lost some participation in and something we'll have to see if that's a trend that continues.

Phil: Well, we just have a few more questions. Because you've not had a state basketball championship for two years, and you're going to be at the University of Illinois for the first time for a number of years, is there anything special that is being planned if you are going to have a two- year hiatus?

[1:22:25]

Craig: Well, nothing at this point. I know that the folks at the University of Illinois and... and all those at State Farm Center are incredibly excited about having the tournament back after we, you know, had spent 25 years in Peoria. So, I'm sure locally, we'll start talking about that. And, you know, we had intended this past year to be that first year there. So I'm sure that excitement has just now taken another level.

[1:22:58] So we'll work closely with the folks. In Champaign-Urbana area and it'll be a special opportunity for our students and for us as an association to return the boys tournament, back to State Farm Center and the University of Illinois. But likewise with the girls tournament. Now they fortunately got their tournament completed, but we have a new contract continuing at Redbird Arena, but it's a new structure to both tournaments where in addition to resuming those, having been off a year or two years, the structure of the tournament has changed also where we're now conducting all four classes in the same weekend and culminating the final Saturday of the season with four state championship games.

[1:23:53] So that in itself I anticipate creating some excitement. And again, we'll probably lean on the folks locally as to some things we can do to really highlight the new format of the tournament, but also being back to culminating basketball with a state championship.

Phil: Well, we've covered a lot of questions. Is there anything else that you would like to add, or were there any unusual things that you dealt with that you'd never thought you would be dealing with as an executive director of a Illinois High School Association?

[1:24:36]

Craig: Well, there were a number of times I remember being at home quarantining and reflecting on the fact that – and I'm sure as a nation or as, you know, nobody had thought to prepare for this and I know as I assumed the executive director's position it was absolutely not on my radar to have to deal with this. And I just reflect on during that time and continue – it caused me to reflect on when we lost the opportunities for students to participate how valuable that is.

[1:25:20] And my heart broke for those students that couldn't culminate their high school experience on the playing field and on the track or on the court, and it has really raised the level of appreciation for what we're able to provide students, you know, nearly 350,000 students annually with these unique opportunities to represent their school and communities and really dedicate significant time of their younger years in preparation for these opportunities.

[1:26:03] And so how special and unique that is. And I've seen it in my son as he's resumed activities now, that it is so special. And it causes me to reflect on all the values and the benefits that our students are getting from these opportunities. And as I was being interviewed in the spring, that's what came top of mind for me, that was what was being lost. And that was so significant to me as the director that would be generally having the leadership of this, that I couldn't provide that.

[1:26:43] So it feels really good to be back in, engaged in some of these activities, seeing all of the benefits and seeing the student-athletes gain from this experience. It just has raised my level of appreciation for what we're able to offer our students, our schools, our coaches. Everybody has a hand in it, but I feel extremely fortunate to have a leadership role in it.

[1:27:08]

Phil: Well, Craig, I want to thank you very much for taking part and discussing with us the impact of the pandemic and starting in March 2020 and working our way here to May 2021, on the IHSA, the students that are participating and the members of the IHSA, the member schools. So I want to thank you very much for being a part of our Tumultuous 2020 project.

Craig: I appreciate the opportunity .Thank you.