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Nothing Normal for Early Tourney Hosts

Plans remain fluid as first events near

By Rod Williamson

(Editor's Note: The interviews for this article were conducted prior to any announcement from the Oct. 5-6 NCAA meetings where further word is expected.)

Amber Lemke has hosted her share of bowling tournaments but nothing compares to the challenges of organizing the 2020 SFA Ladyjack Hammer Classic.

"I've done about 10 rewrites to our tournament policy manual and we are still more than a month away," sighed the head coach of the reigning national champion Stephen. F. Austin Ladyjacks.

The Covid-19 pandemic has thrown a monkey wrench into the normal order of NCAA bowling and the small handful of schools planning to host a fall tournament are struggling to find ways to safely and successfully give student-athletes a return to some normalcy.

"I feel so bad for these kids," says Shannon O'Keefe, the head coach at McKendree and the host of the nation's first scheduled event, the Bearcat Hammer Classic October 23-25. "If we can give the kids some sort of normalcy while being safe I'm all for it. I feel it's my duty to move forward if we can."

Both coaches say their schools have advised them to proceed as normal as possible and so they are until being instructed differently.

The NCAA has deemed bowling as "low risk" and therefore it carries fewer administrative restrictions than a close contact sport such as wrestling does, for example.

That doesn't mean it is business as usual.

"We are doing a lot of extra things that we normally wouldn't consider," Lemke says as she runs through a quick list of policies that include mandating masks, employing dead pairs between competitive lanes, limiting attendance, considering student-athlete transition patterns between games and limiting attendance to 20 people per team in addition to team limits of 10.

O'Keefe has a similar list although her tournament will be closed to spectators, is allowing extra time between games for coaches to sanitize their settee area and has addressed participant rest room needs in the name of caution.

Neither tournament will require competing teams to undergo Covid-19 testing at the site although both will expect individual daily temperature checks to occur.

“I might be more concerned about the risks of travel – the airports, the restaurants, the gas stations – more than potential risks at the venue,” Lemke says. “And we understand in these fluid situations that a team may get a positive test and have to drop out of the field the week of the tournament.”

The Ladyjack Hammer, scheduled for Nov. 13-15, will limit its field to 10 teams on the 24-lane Sheridan Lanes facility in Kenosha, Wis., while the Bearcat Hammer anticipates eight teams on the 50-lane St. Clair Bowl venue.

“We’re all probably looking at smaller tournament fields this year,” O’Keefe observes.

Both coaches say that while they are not worried about their role as hosts, they understand that it is important to the sport that their events run well.

“These first events will likely set the tone for tournaments the rest of the season,” Lemke notes.

“Hosting doesn’t make me nervous but we must do our due-diligence,” O’Keefe agrees. “We’ll be under the microscope as others all want to run their events safely. We can help the NCAA moving forward, we’ll have created a blueprint. We know we’re in a pandemic but I feel good about where we are.”

Both Lemke and O’Keefe say they are open to suggestions that would make their events safer or reduce any potential stress from participants. They also agree that if further information or policy becomes available, they will adjust as necessary.

“People are looking for answers and to be honest, we don’t have any more answers than any other coach,” Lemke admits. “I keep looking to my university administration for advice but really nobody knows all the answers. It’s hard on us coaches because we typically don’t have a lot of people in our departments familiar with running a bowling tournament so the details often fall to us. We’re looking to find safe middle ground.”