

Gulf Coast coaches already anticipating ‘crazy’ spring

By Dustin Kent

With nearly all fall sports through JUCO athletics pushed back because of the COVID-19 pandemic, the fall semester at Gulf Coast is going to be pretty quiet around the Billy Harrison Field House.

The spring semester, however, will be another matter entirely.

The NJCAA voted on July 13 to move most fall competition to the spring, including all of the fall sports played at Gulf Coast: women’s court volleyball and men’s and women’s basketball.

Those teams still will be able to practice through the fall and into the winter, but no actual games will be played at Gulf Coast until Jan. 22, 2021.

That’s the first day that games are permitted for men’s and women’s basketball, baseball and softball. Volleyball will be allowed to begin playing real games a week later. It will mark the first time that all five Commodore sports will be played in the same semester.

While that moment is still almost six months away, that doesn’t mean the prospect of managing five sports seasons simultaneously isn’t already giving Gulf Coast athletic director and head baseball coach Mike Kandler some anxiety.

“Yeah, I’m thinking about just getting an air mattress and putting it in the office. I’m gonna be up here quite a bit,” Kandler said. “But also it can be fun, too. There will be a lot of excitement on campus. There may be days where we have five sports going on at once. We may start volleyball at eight o’clock and finish up with a softball game at midnight.

“It’s definitely gonna be busy, but busy is OK. I think we’re all gonna look forward to the challenge of how we’re gonna pull this thing off.”

In the meantime, all Kandler and the rest of the Commodore coaches can do is try to get their players as ready as they can for the upcoming seasons. It obviously will be a much bigger adjustment for basketball and volleyball than for the traditional spring sports of baseball and softball, but Kandler said there are benefits to the schedule change for both coaches and players in all sports.

“Well, we’re not gonna have the competition or the games, but as a coach I’ve always felt like the games are for the players and the fans and the practice is kind of my time,” he said. “We’ll still be able to have a lot of impact. In a way it might be good. The freshmen will have a chance to adjust to their academic schedule without having the hassle of playing games.

“You just have to try to find positives in it. Obviously we’d really love to be having a volleyball game in August because they’re fun and our team is looking to win a national title. They came close last year. But that’s not gonna happen so we’ll go make the best of it.”

Gulf Coast volleyball coach Scott Allen, whose Lady Commodores made their first-ever trip to the national tournament last season, said he's OK with the delay given the amount of court time lost this off-season because of the virus and believes the action-packed spring will end up being a good thing for Gulf Coast.

"I think we'll be able to pull it off," he said. "Looking at the schedule already, I think it will be crazy with so many activities. It could be that it generates so much interest in sports in Panama City that there's something going on almost every night, or it could be that it maybe causes a little burnout because there's something going on every night.

"Hopefully it will be the first one and not the second. We'll have a lot of people coming out from the community to see the baseball, softball, basketball and the volleyball team. The gym will be rocking almost every single night. There's no way around it. It's just a scheduling headache for coach Kandler to deal with."

Gulf Coast men's basketball coach Phil Gaffney even proposed the idea of triple-header nights at the Billy Harrison Field House with men's and women's basketball and volleyball all competing on the same day.

"It could be really fun," Gaffney said. "I think it would be great if I could watch the girls game before me, then I could go over and watch a softball game and a baseball game later in the day or at night. That would be so much fun.

"If you're a Gulf Coast fan, and we've got some crazies who go to everything, I think they would love it. They'd live over here. You could draw a lot of fans and interest. I think you've got to look at the positives of it rather than be like, 'holy crap, this is impossible.' Scheduling will be a nightmare, but that's how it goes."

While it will be a challenge to put on five different sports at once, it's better than the alternative of no sports at all. After watching the men's and women's basketball teams lose their shot at playing in national tournaments this past spring as the baseball and softball teams had their seasons ended not even halfway through, it's not difficult for Kandler to find the silver lining in this situation.

"I see the actual plan as a positive," he said. "There are so many unknowns with the virus. The fact that we'll be able to get all of our seasons in and compete for national championships is what matters, and that we'll maybe do it in a safer or certainly an environment with more knowledge is certainly a positive.

"Obviously we'll have some big adjustments to make, but we'll figure it out and use it as a challenge to turn it into a positive. It's gonna be different, but at the same time as coaches and players you just want the opportunity to compete and it looks like we're gonna get that."