

High School Coaches and Team Admins,

I hope the start of the year finds you and your loved ones safe and happy. Here's hoping for a wonderful year, or at the least, a return to play.

As always, you are receiving this message because you registered yourself and/or a team for one of our most recent youth events. If you are no longer the contact for your team, please forward this to them. Once a new season's registration is complete, that group of individuals is who I will contact.

Okay, return to play. MN Ultimate is incredibly hopeful we can return to close-to-normal-operations in 2021; ideally in the spring. Almost a year into this pandemic we know a lot more about the SARS-CoV-2 virus and vaccines have been developed and have begun to be distributed. This provides a lot of hope. But just as the situation has been continually evolving, it will continue to do so. Vaccine roll out has been slower than expected and Minnesotans continue to fall ill and die. Just because we hope to return, and as much as we want to, does not mean that we will. We're all depending on the compliance and vigilance of our ultimate community, the broader society, and our state and local authorities.

As an organization there are a couple of things that are clear to us. The first is that we will return to play later than some think we should, and we will return earlier than others feel we should. Like many things in 2020 return to play has become a hot button issue. Perhaps you are not experiencing this within your community, and I hope it stays that way. But on social media platforms and within some out of state communities deep scisms have developed. Folks are demonizing one another on both sides of the debate; either for forcing their opinions of what is safe on others, or for endangering one another and perpetuating the spread of the virus. The details are not incredibly important, and if you or I believe one side is right is not important either. But I bring this up to say that the only way our community returns and remains strong is with compassion, patience, and understanding. There will no doubt be disagreements and heightened emotions. When this occurs I just ask all of you to behave civilly and set a good example for your players and their families. It is my hope that MN Ultimate, as an organization, and I can do the same.

The other thing that has become clear since the start of the pandemic is that return to play cannot be based upon the comprehension of public safety best practices or infectious disease characteristics by the staff and board of MN Ultimate. We will certainly digest and disseminate all the information we can, but we want to rely upon the expertise and guidance of state and local health officials. While the government is motivated by many priorities and obligations, they certainly have the resources and information to make informed decisions in the best interests of Minnesotans.

Barring any clear negligence on behalf of any government entities we will be relying upon their guidance on return to play. The metaphor that makes sense for me is they will be the traffic light we use; a green light when we can play with a manageable amount of risk, and a red light when the risk is too great. While operating with a green light there will be

modifications to normal operations that the government imposes, and there may be others, specific to ultimate, that MN Ultimate inacts. I want to be clear that this is not an effort to shirk responsibility, to pass the buck. It is an acknowledgement of where the expertise and authorities truly lies. For those of you who know me well you won't be surprised to hear me described as someone who always thinks they know best. And while that character flaw remains for the most part, in this instance, I am not the expert.

For those of you that are closely following the guidelines around youth sports you will know that practices were permitted beginning today. There are a lot of restrictions and some high administrative bars to clear, so don't run out and start practicing right away without, but the governor has deemed the risk acceptable. That part cannot be emphasized enough; youth sports practices are not risk-free or safe, for participants or the broader community. Even with restrictions and impeccable vigilance, youth sports will contribute to the spread of this disease and all the consequences that go along with it.

I have attached the most recent guidance from MDH and highlighted what I interpret to be some of the most important guidance that you will have to consider.

Each coach and team administrator must make an informed and conscious decision on whether to begin programming. If you are not comfortable taking on the personal and organizational risk and liability, don't do it. If you do, each family must make the same informed decision. And everyone who does participate must be 100% committed to the guidelines and any restrictions provided by the Minnesota Department of Health and MN Ultimate. Failure to do so will carry grave consequences and sanctions within ultimate. But of greater concern and consequence is the harm that may come to one of our community members, their families, or an innocent stranger that falls ill because of our negligence.

One thing that is not up for debate is that indoor activities are exponentially more risky than outdoor activities. The MN Ultimate board canceled all of our indoor, winter programs because of that risk. And while indoor practices can happen, I would personally ask that you consider forgoing them as down-payment on what we all hope will be a safe and viable outdoor season. As a long time player and coach myself I can also say with confidence that very little meaningful development and competitive advantage can be gained from winter indoor practices at the youth level; especially when measured against the heightened risk. As the ones that set the tone for your programs I would encourage you to prioritize safety and fun above all else, this year especially. A really fun, safe, meaningful, and memorable season can be provided to these kids even if we have to forgo indoor, winter practices.

If you decide to hold practices, will follow all the restrictions, and develop a plan to do so with as little risk as possible, MN Ultimate is here to help you. We can share resources and best practices, I can get insurance for you and your players, and I can just be a resource and sounding board for you. Although I am not an expert, and while I wish I didn't spend much of my work day consuming return to play information, I do. Please let me help you.

I'll say right now, I made the same offer to each of you in the fall. And officially no ultimate happened in Minnesota. In truth, you and I know that several teams did operate. I'm not

sure why a coach or administrator would not take the help of MN Ultimate, but that is in the past, and regardless of what motivated teams to operate independently, I would please ask folks to reconsider that path. I will not personally judge you for practicing or not, I just want to make sure that any coach and team that does practice does so safely. Please, let me know. Let me help you do it safely. And let me use your experience to inform the rest of the community. If it is something about me, personally, that makes you uncomfortable, there are other agents of MN Ultimate you can connect with. My co-worker, Brit, can be reached at bgartner@minnesotaultimate.org. Our board president, Kristina, can be reached at kgolling@minnesotaultimate.org. The high school committee chair and league competition director, Chris, can be reached at cmiller@minnesotaultimate.org

Looking ahead to the spring season and competition. Team and player registration for the league will be open before the end of the week. And while competition doesn't normally begin for another three months, the event sanctioning covers participation in practices that lead up to the program; whether that is now, late March, or in season. I want to be clear, just because we register for the league, does not mean the league will take place. But we all recognize the logistics that go into coach certification, player registration, memberships, scheduling, etc. And all that takes time. The league will only take place, if at that time, it is deemed as not too risky. If it is too risky we will have postponements or cancelations; whatever the situation demands at the time. But registration will be open to begin all the administrative work required.

The staff, high school and youth committees, and board of directors have been meeting and discussing the 2021 spring season for several months now. No one can predict what April and May will be like in Minnesota. Of course we are hopeful the risk isn't too great to prevent a close-to-normal-season, but we know that is a real possibility. We've spent a lot of time considering how to structure a season that gives us the greatest flexibility and chance to succeed.

With that in mind, we plan to extend the season three weeks later than a normal year. We hope to start the season at the same time, just make it 12 weeks long, instead of the normal nine weeks. So instead of the last week of league games being the week of May 24th, it would be the week of June 14th. Of course that means that if a state championship event is possible, we would target the weekend of June 26th and 27th.

An extended season has implications for individual players, families, and perhaps teams. It also complicates MN Ultimate's summer programming. And all those implications were considered at length. When measured against the flexibility provided by an extended season, when considering that June will assuredly be less risky than April and May, and other ancillary benefits, the pros outweigh the cons.

The specifics of the season structure will be developed over the coming months and will be shared with the community when appropriate and fully developed. There will also be some opportunity for input. But any questions about conference playoffs or competition modifications will be met with a "We're not exactly sure right now and ask for your

patience," response. Of course what is an acceptable amount of risk, and therefore possible, in May may not be known until...well, May.

There will be a clear refund policy included in the team and player program and membership registration beginning in 2021. So any questions on that will have answers later in the week.

I think I have said enough for the first big email of the year, but to summarize:

1. We are planning on a spring season. Much of the specifics are understandably TBD, but we want it to happen, hope it can, and think there is a good possibility it will.
2. In an effort to give the season the best chance of succeeding and finishing safely, the season will be extended by three weeks.
3. The state is permitting youth sports teams to practice. If you decide to practice, please inform MN Ultimate and let us help you make it as safe as it can be.

More updates to follow. Until then, be safe and be well.

See you at the field,

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