

High school athletics coping with time change

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By Michael Laval

While many high school students are sleeping in an extra two hours thanks to the county's new starting times, some of their peers will be working up a sweat at dawn.

The Orange County School Board's decision to swap high school and middle school hours has drawn a variety of concerns from parents, students and administrators. Among them - how high school sports and extra-curricular programs will be affected. At Dr. Phillips, Ocoee, Olympia and West Orange, athletics and clubs are determined to continue without interruption, although it will take some adjustments.

So far, WOHS's bowling program appears to be the lone casualty. However, Assistant Principal Murray Sawyer said the school is still trying to find a bowling alley that can host the Warriors.

Athletic directors at DP, Ocoee and Olympia confirmed that no sports teams will be dropped from the 2008-09 school year as a result of the time change. Slowpitch softball, which will no longer be offered this fall, had been scheduled for cancellation by Orange County Public Schools since 2006. Olympia will actually be adding a new sport to its athletic program - girls flag football.

"So far, we have been able to accommodate our needs," Ocoee High Principal Mike Armbruster said. "It will be an adjustment for some of our working students, but the truth is, many of our students have shared that they have work schedules that actually work better for them with the time change."

Ocoee High, he added, is forced to be creative in scheduling some sporting events, while clubs and other activities will meet primarily during lunch hours. Where there have been conflicts, Armbruster is working to accommodate students through early release and **Florida Virtual School classes**.

Some sports, such as golf, swimming, cross-country, water polo and basketball, will practice during the early-morning hours, and baseball, along with golf and basketball, will play Saturday matches, DPHS Athletic Director John Magrino explained.

"We have worked diligently with all the county athletic directors to make sure our athletic teams are able to operate with minimal disruption," Magrino said.

Schools will attempt to utilize as many Wednesdays and Saturdays as possible to hold games and matches, Olympia Athletic Director Tom Curran agreed. Baseball and softball can expect many Wednesday evening games and Saturday doubleheaders.

On-campus sports can hold practice from 6:30-8:45 a.m. and off-campus athletic programs, such as swimming and diving can begin as early as 6 a.m., Curran said. The YMCA Aquatic Center, located off International Drive, hosts both Olympia and DP swimming, diving and water polo teams and is working with coaches to accommodate practice and match schedules.

Student-athletes with after-school practices can expect them to begin at 4:30 p.m. and last as late as 7:30.

While some might oppose the new starting times, athletic and extra-curricular programs seem to be surviving the change.

"Coaches and teachers are making the best of it and are willing to become creative to remain competitive," Curran said.

DP's Magrino agreed: "Rather than waste time complaining, we chose to focus on the solutions, and I believe we have done a superb job countywide in keeping the opportunities available for the students."