

SPORTS



Elite Swim Club coach John Casadia sprays hydrogen peroxide on Tanner Innis' snorkel and goggles during a team swim practice at Vineland High School on Jan. 19. ADAM MONACELLI/THE DAILY JOURNAL

Is high school swimming safe? Only in water

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After 28 years as a teacher, swim coach and pool manager at Morristown High School, Donna Gelegonya was seriously thinking about retiring last summer. COVID put those plans, and so many others, on hold.

“I want to go out on my terms, not like

this,” she said.

Normally used as part of gym classes, the Morristown pool has been shuttered since Gov. Phil Murphy ordered New Jersey schools to close on March 18.

Though Morris School District students have been back in their classrooms, the pool remains off limits. With high school swim practice set to begin Feb. 1, Gelegonya and other coaches and administrators across the state still

aren't sure how the season will look.

“When (the NJSIAA) pushed it off to February, I thought I had time, and everything would be fine by then, but it's not,” Gelegonya said.

Studying the science

On paper, swimming is perhaps the

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safest indoor high school sport. The chlorine and other chemicals used to keep the water clean have been shown to kill the novel coronavirus. Most are similar to what's in the cleaning products on supermarket shelves.

"Of all places, I'd rather be in the pool when it comes down to it," longtime Indian Hills coach Bryan McDonnell said. "I feel confident swimming is something that's safe to do. Other sports are risking athlete safety by putting them face to face with each other to compete. Swimmers don't."

But Dr. Tanaya Bhowmick, an infectious disease specialist at Rutgers Robert Wood Johnson Medical School, is concerned about potential COVID spread outside of the pool.

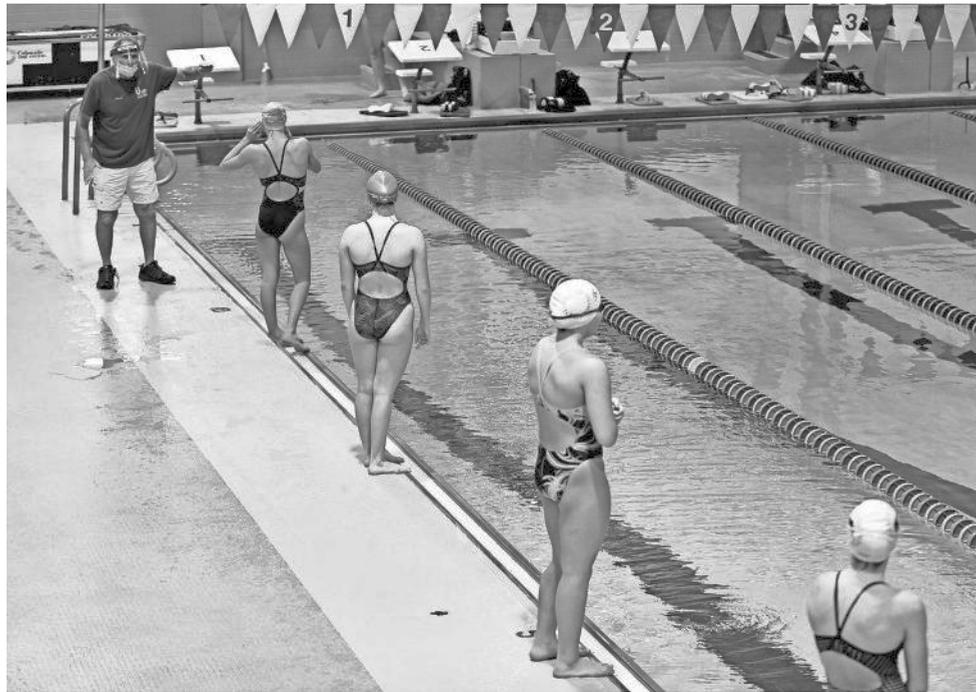
Gov. Murphy's executive orders have reduced indoor facility capacity to 25 percent and introduced restrictions on use of restrooms, locker rooms, and other amenities. Social distancing must be practiced on deck, and preferably in lanes during swim practice as well.

The six-foot barrier is based on studies of horizontal spread of viral particles. But many pools have seating areas above the water, and Bhowmick admitted, "You have potentially more viral particles, and a false sense of security, in a bigger space."

The scent of chlorine, normally a sign of safety, may now indicate poor ventilation in the pool area. Both Bhowmick and Drew University virologist Brianne Barker agree that increasing air flow is key to safe swimming, particularly allowing exchange to the outside by opening doors or windows.

"I'm not sure if the chlorine concentration in the air is enough to inactivate the virus. That atmosphere you feel around the pool makes you think ventilation is very bad," said Barker, an assistant professor of biology.

"The chlorine part of swimming makes the risk for an individual swimmer not that bad, but it's the collective swimming as a group that worries me. You, as a swimmer, can practice on your own, or in a very low-density practice, but getting in a big group all to swim together seems like a problem. ... It's really hard for me to imagine. I worry a lot about indoor anything."



Elite Swim Club members practice social distancing while training with coach John Casadia at Vineland High School on Jan. 19. ADAM MONACELLI/THE DAILY JOURNAL

Divide and conquer?

Due to COVID restrictions, the NJSIAA is permitting virtual meets to be held this winter. Essentially, each team would swim the same events separately and certified by officials on site. The times would then be compared, converting mathematically from meters to yards if necessary — which Gelegonya called "comparing apples to oranges."

Both meets would have to be held within the same week, but not necessarily in the same pool. Kittatinny athletic director Todd Van Orden, whose pool hosts most of the Sussex County teams plus Jefferson, is only permitting virtual meets. Swimmers will warm up and practice in pods, three or four to a lane. Teams will enter through one door and exit through another, separated by 20- or 30-minute intervals, during which the pool deck will be cleared and disinfected.

"You can't have a virtual basketball game, but you can have a virtual swim meet if you have to," Vineland High School girls swim coach Mike Schneider said.

"We have a dual meet schedule. It's condensed. It's not even by conference. ... We're keeping our fingers crossed it goes well, and counting our blessings we can give the kids some kind of a sea-

son."

Vineland has already eliminated dry-land workouts and early-morning weight-room sessions. The Fighting Clan has traditionally separated its boys and girls practice sessions, which will now help keep within the capacity limits. But at Morristown, where Gelegonya leads both boys and girls, and the roster regularly balloons to more than 100 swimmers, scheduling is more complex.

High schools without pools are facing an even greater challenge.

Montville, Kinnelon and Mountain Lakes, which normally swim at the Lakeland Hills Family YMCA, have been looking for pool time elsewhere. Morristown-Bear is renting time to Madison and Park Regional, whose normal training sites are off limits due to COVID restrictions.

"It's so tough when you have sports that are facility driven, like bowling, swimming and hockey," Van Orden said. "We all know one or two cases could mean you're shutting down your program. Everybody needs to stay diligent in school (and) outside of school. Hopefully we can get through this and give the kids what they really need."

The Wyckoff Family YMCA has emphasized its paying members over outside vendors, so McDonnell is often making difficult decisions in his role as

aquatics and facilities director.

In a normal year, McDonnell has 13 one-hour practice slots each week to distribute to multiple high school teams, including his own. The capacity limit — 24 swimmers at a time — would require double that.

"That simply can't happen," McDonnell said. "The NJSIAA needs to realize what the big issue here is. They shouldn't just sit back and say, 'if a team doesn't have a pool to swim in, they don't swim.' Right now, that seems to be the message from the state. ... It's irresponsible of the state to host a sport where there's going to be some number, greater than zero, percent of teams that can't participate this year. That's on the state."

NJSIAA assistant director Tony Masselli acknowledged trouble finding facilities, but had "no estimate" on how many teams will be affected.

"We haven't received any desperate calls. I think they're all managing," Masselli said. "Right now, we're trying to keep our head above water. We're trying to get to that start date, and hopefully we can get it going and get some kids in the water and move on from there."

Wardlaw-Hartridge athletic director Karl Miran has opened his pool to more teams this winter, including USA Swimming clubs. But with the capacity down to 28½ people, there still isn't enough room for a dual meet.

Wardlaw-Hartridge has closed its locker rooms, and is using hydrostatic sprayers to clean any rented facilities — including the gym and the outdoor turf fields — between teams. Miran said "there's no interfacing" between Wardlaw-Hartridge students and outsiders.

The Greater Middlesex Conference will not be holding a swimming championship meet this winter. Neither will Morris County, the Cape Atlantic League where Vineland swims, and many others. There simply isn't space, and the glory isn't worth the potential exposure risk.

"We're not bothered by the fact that competitions will be taking place under different conditions, given the limitations and the craziness of this pandemic year," said Miran, the GMC swimming tournament assistant director. "It's just about getting the kids some good, healthy competition under whatever rules we can."

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