

Firebirds Return to Play Policy Survey Report

June 15, 2020

The Firebirds Return to Play Policy was released on May 28, 2020. A survey was completed by Firebirds parents the week of June 8, 2020. At the time, Fairfax County was in Phase 1, and some Firebirds teams were practicing under Phase 1 guidelines (e.g., 10 or fewer people on the field, social distancing at all times). In the middle of the week, it was announced that Fairfax County would be moving to Phase 2 on Friday, June 12, which was also the day the survey closed.

This is a summary and analysis of the survey responses. A complete data report can be found at firebirds.com/covid. Parents, players, or anyone else with questions or concerns about the Firebirds Return to Play Policy are encouraged to reach out to their coach or to Jesse Ellis, the NVGSA Vice President for Travel, at travel@nvgsa.org.

Overall, the survey responses show widespread support for the policy. The great majority of parents think it adequately balances health and safety with a return to play. Some think it goes too far, and some think it doesn't go far enough. We knew that no policy could make everyone happy, but this is pretty close. With some minor adjustments based on feedback received in the survey and new guidelines from Virginia and Fairfax County, we feel the policy positions the Firebirds well to allow for a return to play consistent with each family's priorities and comfort.

Response

We had a very good response. We received 90 completed surveys; with approximately 120 Firebirds, this is about a 75% response rate.

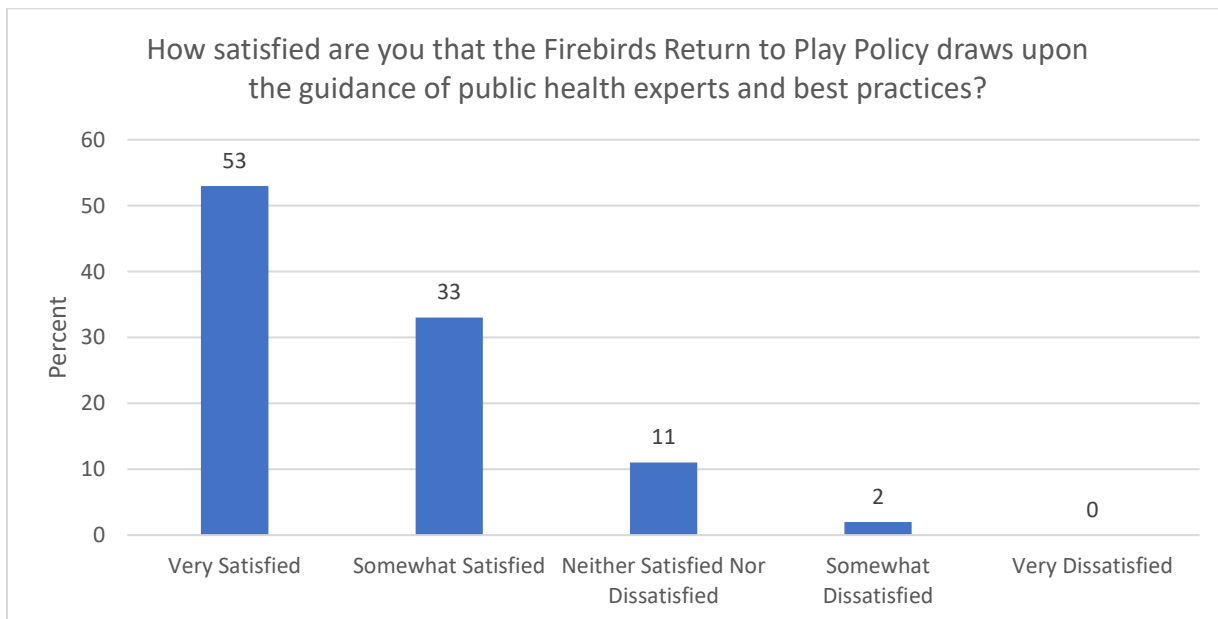
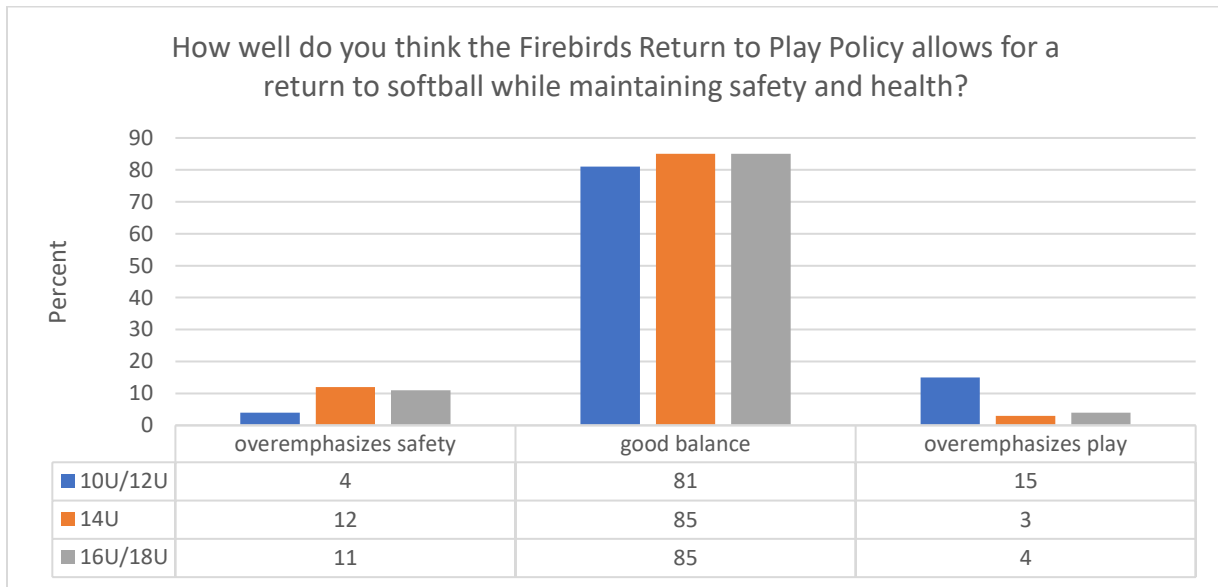
Responses were fairly well distributed across age groups. We received 27 surveys (30% of the total) from 10U/12U families (we have 3 teams at those levels), 36 surveys from 14U (4 teams, 40% of the surveys), and 27 surveys from 16U/18U (4 teams, 30% of the surveys).

Of those who responded, 73 (81%) had read the entire policy, while 15 (17%) had read some of it, and 2 (2%) had not read it.

Satisfaction with the Policy

How well do you think the Firebirds Return to Play Policy allows for a return to softball while maintaining safety and health? Overall, 84% felt the policy strikes a good balance between safety and softball, while 7% felt it overemphasized safety and 9% felt it overemphasized softball. When the numbers are broken down by age group, the vast majority were still satisfied with the balance. But among those who weren't, in younger groups, more thought it was imbalanced in favor of softball, and in older groups, more thought it was imbalanced in favor of safety.

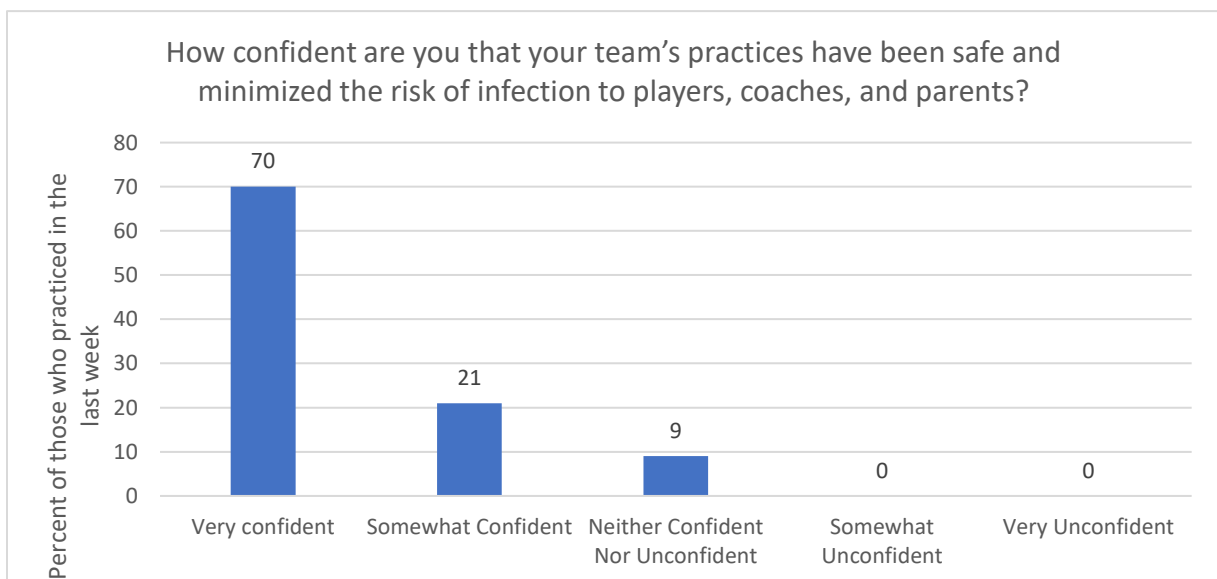
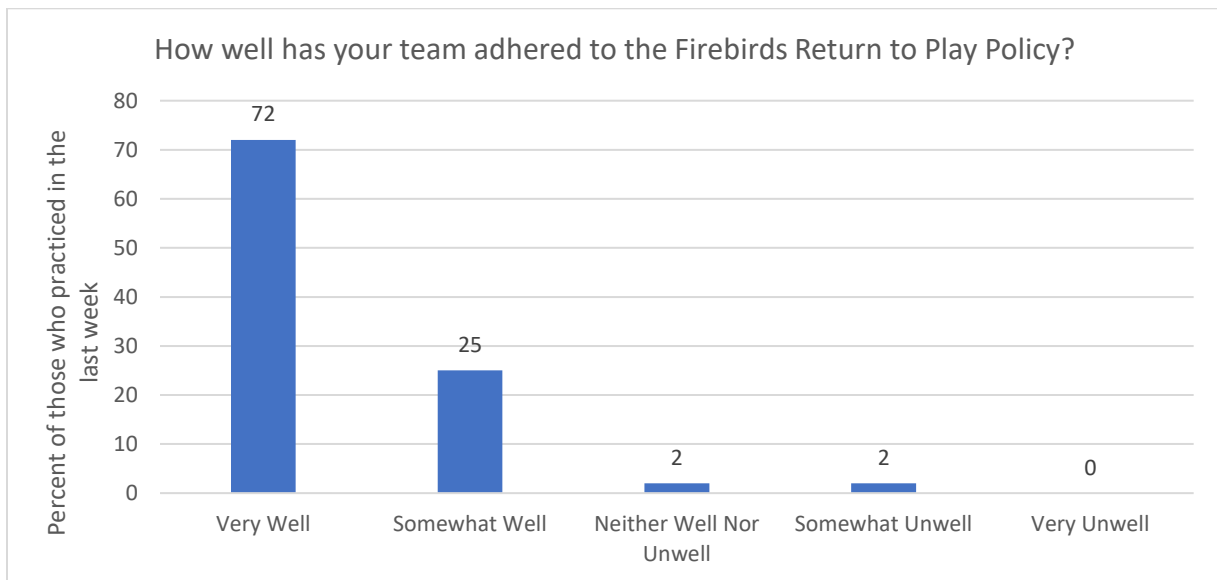
How satisfied are you that the Firebirds Return to Play Policy draws upon the guidance of public health experts and best practices? Nearly 90 percent of respondents were satisfied that the policy was based on sound guidance, while only 2 percent expressed dissatisfaction.



Team Practices

In Phase 1, Firebirds teams were allowed to practice in accordance with Virginia and Fairfax County guidelines and the Firebirds policy (e.g., no more than 10 people on the field, with social distancing). Just over 60% of respondents had a child who had participated in a team practice over the past week. Among them, 97% felt their team had done well in adhering to the policy, and 91% were confident that the practices had been safe and minimized the risk of infection.

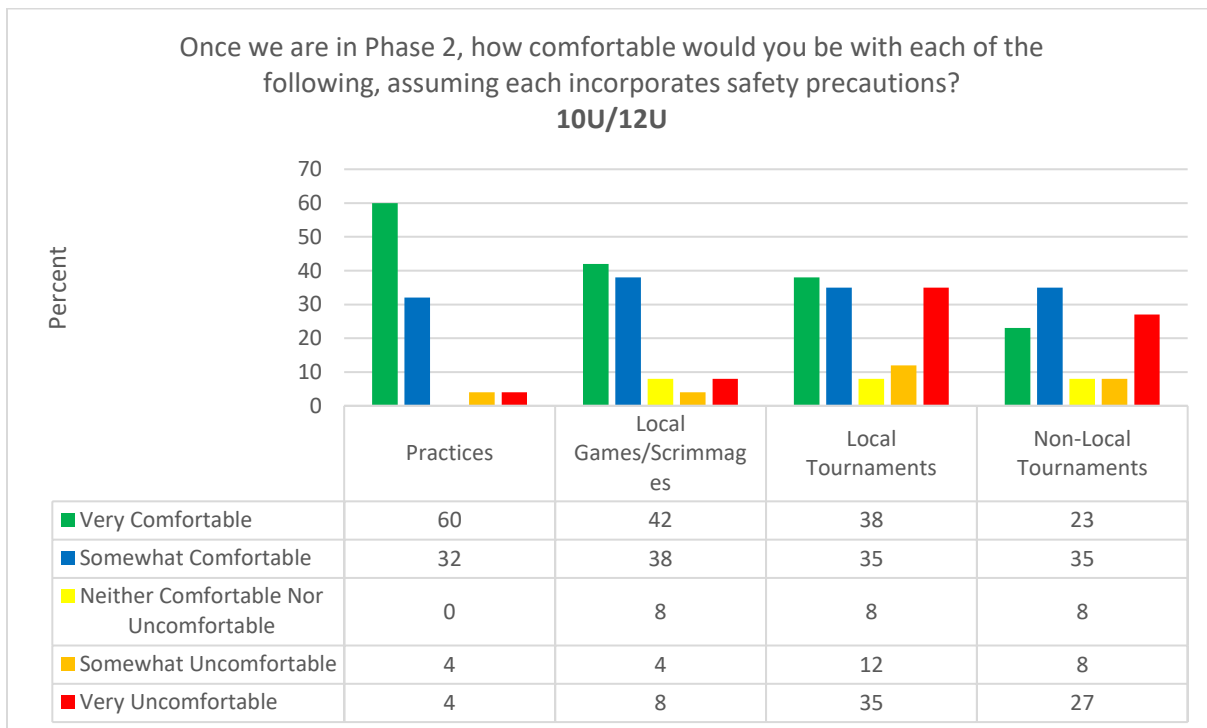
There were 17 written comments from parents about practices. Most (11) noted that practices had been held safely; parents felt that coaches were making safety a priority and that the players were respectful of the rules. Six of the comments noted concerns, including that social distancing rules on the field were not always followed or enforced, and that few players and coaches were wearing masks, even in team meeting situations.



Returning to Play in Phase 2

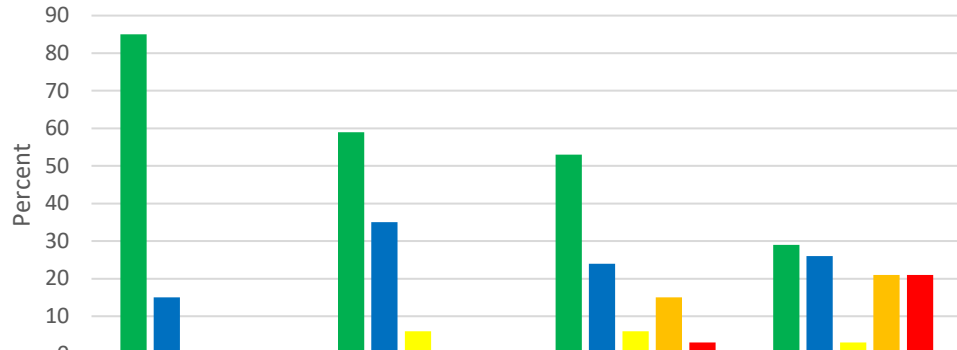
The survey was initially released before the Governor announced that Northern Virginia would transition to Phase 2 on Friday, June 12. With the expectation that would happen, however, we asked parents how comfortable and ready they were to return to play in Phase 2.

Overall, respondents were most comfortable with practices (95% were very or somewhat comfortable), and only slightly less so with local play (87% were comfortable with local games and scrimmages, and 78% were comfortable with local tournaments). There was greater discomfort with non-local tournaments, as only 59% reported being very or somewhat comfortable, as compared to 36% being very or somewhat uncomfortable. While results were fairly consistent across age groups, younger groups tended to be less comfortable than older groups.



Once we are in Phase 2, how comfortable would you be with each of the following, assuming each incorporates safety precautions?

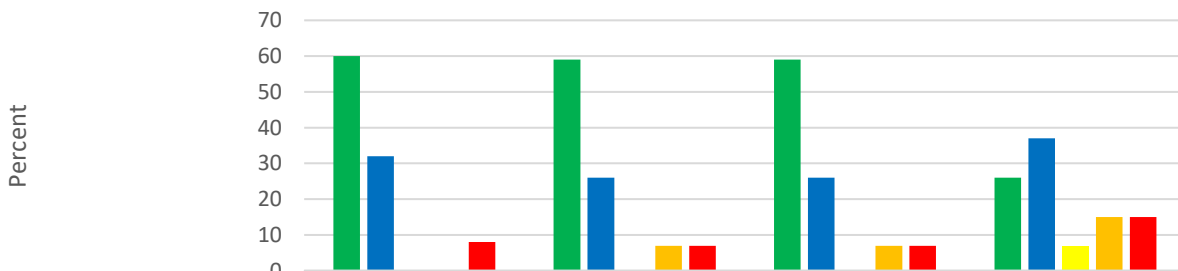
14U



	Practices	Local Games/Scrimmages	Local Tournaments	Non-Local Tournaments
Very Comfortable	85	59	53	29
Somewhat Comfortable	15	35	24	26
Neither Comfortable Nor Uncomfortable	0	6	6	3
Somewhat Uncomfortable	0	0	15	21
Very Uncomfortable	0	0	3	21

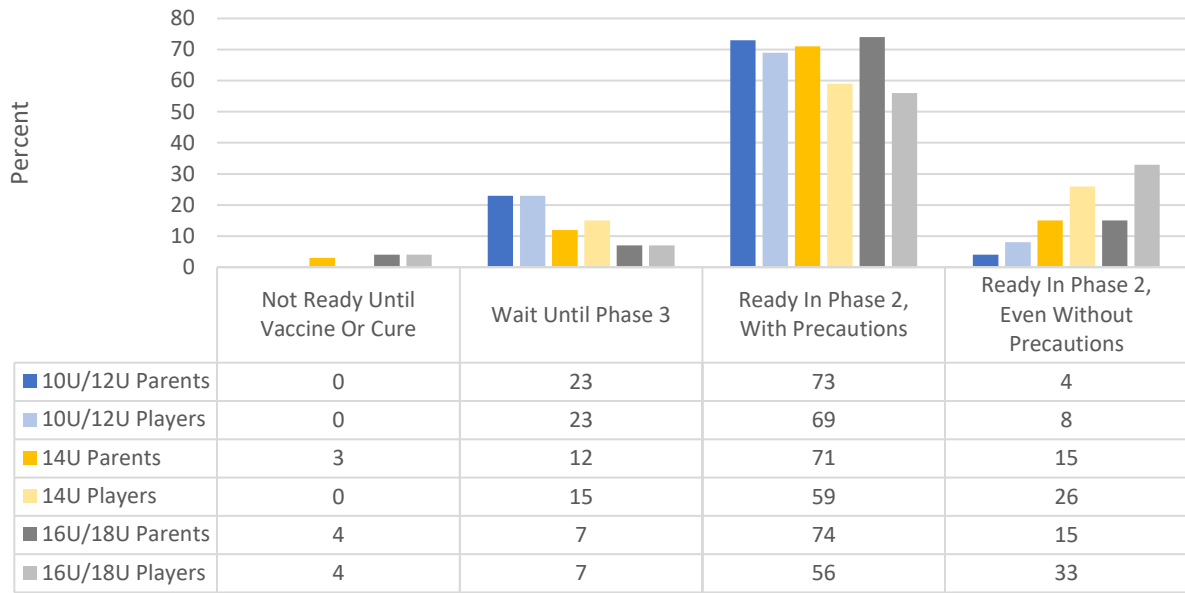
Once we are in Phase 2, how comfortable would you be with each of the following, assuming each incorporates safety precautions?

16U/18U



	Practices	Local Games/Scrimmage s	Local Tournaments	Non-Local Tournaments
Very Comfortable	60	59	59	26
Somewhat Comfortable	32	26	26	37
Neither Comfortable Nor Uncomfortable	0	0	0	7
Somewhat Uncomfortable	0	7	7	15
Very Uncomfortable	8	7	7	15

What best describes you/your child's current level of readiness to return to game play?



Parent Comments and Questions

Comments, questions, and other written feedback were provided on the policy in specific and the Firebirds approach in general. That feedback is provided here, along with the organization's response. Changes to Firebirds policy are **in bold**. Feedback has been edited to reduce duplication and for simplicity and clarity. The full text of all comments can be found in the full data report.

Overall Approach

- Who wrote the policy, and what kind of backgrounds do they have? It reads like it was written by a lawyer more worried about liability than ensuring health, safety and fun while returning to play.
 - The policy was developed jointly by the NVGSA Vice President for Travel and Firebirds coaches. Among them, there is a great deal of professional experience in public health, health care, and public policy. And, of course, they have significant experience with youth softball. Much of the content was taken directly from the existing guidance and policies listed on page 2 of the policy, especially the Ohio guidelines and CDC guidelines. Striking the right balance continues to be a challenge. We have to consider how to provide detailed enough guidance without being too restrictive, how to minimize risk as much as possible given that softball is an inherently risky activity, and how to make sure the policy was clear and practical. We would be lying if we claimed liability wasn't a concern. You entrust your child's health and safety to us. We owe it to you to make sure we know the best ways to do that. **We will develop a simple one-page policy "cheat sheet" for everyday reference.**
- The Firebirds policy should simply be to comply with the requirements of the state(s) where we play practice/play.
 - We really wish there was a standard set of guidelines. Instead, different federal agencies, different states and often different jurisdictions within states, different sports governing and sanctioning bodies, different sports organizations, and other types of organizations have all developed their own. They've released their guidelines at different times, and in ways that make clear they are not coordinating or collaborating. The Firebirds policy – which in great part, is simply a slightly revised version of the Ohio guidelines – had been mostly drafted before the CDC's youth sports considerations were published. And the Virginia Phase 2 guidelines – the first in the state to mention youth sports – came out two weeks after the Firebirds policy was published, which was also about two weeks after practices were allowed to begin.

We also needed to add some teeth to our policy. Most of what has been issued by states and the federal government is guidance; they expect organizations to adopt policies that conform to that guidance. CDC's "considerations for youth sports" are just that: things we should consider. In the end, we are responsible for your child's health and safety, and we need more than recommendations to guide us.

- It is too early to return.
- The policy is too restrictive.
 - We recognize that each family has a different level of comfort with the situation. The only thing we know for sure is that there is no level of activity that is perfectly safe. Each

time your child steps on the field, we are all accepting a level of risk to her health and safety. So this, in concept, is not new. What is new is the lethality of the covid-19 and the number of unknowns that still surround it. Everyone is at a different place with their experience and comfort level, with their willingness to accept risk. That is why we have not only prioritized safety, but made clear that it is OK if families are not yet ready to return.

Policy Specifics

- Virginia's [Phase 2 guidelines](#) mandate 10 feet of separation (not 6, as the Firebirds policy states) for sports activities. How can this be enforced on the softball field? How practical is it to maintain social distancing at games (e.g., baserunning, mound meetings, batter/catcher)?
 - **The six-foot rule in the Firebirds policy will be changed to 10 feet to be in line with the Virginia guidelines, which were issued after the Firebirds policy was published.** Virginia guidelines, as explained by the governor's staff, consider these elements – essential components of any softball game – to be “incidental contact.” While we think “incidental” is the wrong choice of wording, the guidelines intend to differentiate this from *sustained contact*, which is what they are trying to avoid. Of course, any close contact carries risk, but Virginia's guidelines (and those of many other states) consider the inherent contact in softball and baseball to be of limited risk as compared to the more ongoing contact in other sports.
- Allow the girls to be in the dugout together unless the tournament prohibits it.
 - The dugout is a setting with close quarters and lots of screaming and cheering. With (usually) well-defined entrance and exit points, it is also one of the easier settings to manage. While maintaining social distance at all times is impossible in a dugout, teams should strive to do so as much as possible. This may look different based on the actual facility.
- Some people (e.g., players with asthma) may have health concerns that make it difficult to wear masks. Asking coaches to wear masks at all times, and players at all times when not on the field of play, seems excessive. This may not be safe when it is hot outside.
 - Consistent with CDC and other guidelines, people who are actively exercising and people with health conditions that make masks dangerous or who are having difficulty breathing should refrain from wearing masks. **We will clarify this in the policy.** However, it is still recommended that coaches, who frequently are talking to players in close proximity and screaming instruction to players in the field (often with the other team's base coach walking by), wear them.
- Why are masks necessary when outdoors and if we are social distancing?
 - Social distancing is not always possible. CDC, and nearly all other, guidelines suggest wearing masks when there is a good chance social distancing won't be regularly maintained. We recommend the same (again, with an exception for players involved in the game).
- The optional face mask language should be stronger.
 - **We will edit the policy to better explain the purpose behind the strong recommendation.**

- We need clear guidance on dugouts – mask use, social distancing, etc.
 - Given difference in dugout design and location, it would be difficult to create specific guidance for dugouts beyond what is already included in the policy.
- Players and coaches should consider wearing batting gloves while in the field to help prevent contamination from balls, etc.
 - While wearing gloves is not prohibited, as a general rule, we do not recommend it. Best practice for wearing gloves as protective equipment requires a detailed method for taking them off and disposal of the gloves after they come into contact with potentially infected surfaces. We believe that frequent hand washing and sanitizing is a more effective, efficient, and safe practice.
- The daily symptom assessment sheet seems excessive. If the policy requires players to not attend if they have symptoms, why do you still need a daily form?
 - It is going to be a while before we are at a point where daily symptom checks are not needed. And it can become so easy to get out of the habit that we believe it is important to maintain a practice to ensure the symptom checks get completed each day. The forms also serve the purpose of keeping a record of who attended each day, easing contact tracing if necessary.
- How can players who drive, but are under 18, provide a signed daily symptom check if they drive to practice without seeing their parents first?
 - In these cases (or others in which a player will not see a parent ahead of an event to gain a signature), coaches should work with players and parents to develop a shared system that includes an accurate and complete symptom assessment and parental consent. One possibility would be for the coach (or another parent) to take the player's temperature, obtain consent from the parent via text message, and note that consent on the form.
- The daily symptom assessment should ask for the player's measured temperature. Anyone with a temperature of 100.4 or higher. should not play that day. A "no fever" checkbox is not sufficient.
 - **The assessment form will be amended to ask if the temperature is 100.4 or higher, to ensure a common definition of "fever." Coaches will ask anyone using the old form to clarify the temperature was below 100.4.**
- Have a structured check-in and processing of players, coaches and others prior to practices or events.
 - As long as they are following the guidelines, teams can structure their arrivals as best suits them and their teams. Coaches are in regular contact with each other to share what works and what doesn't. We know one team has developed a check-in station that ensures only players with no symptoms get close to the field; this is a great example of something that is being shared for all teams to consider.
- We should allow teams to travel to tournaments if everyone is in agreement.

- We feel it is necessary to have a policy that is grounded in science and commonly accepted best health practices. It is also important to ensure a policy that limits the ability of social pressure or emotion to have too great an influence on our organizational decision making. The policy entrusts decision-making on tournaments to the full team, but still respects and requires adherence to public guidance and regulations.
- Exchanging lineups without exchanging any physical documents with coaches or players seems excessive and more complicated than necessary.
 - We feel it is simple enough for everyone to take a picture of a lineup card that exchanging paper lineup cards should not be necessary. If paper lineup cards are required, teams should do as much as possible to limit the number of people touching them and the number of times they are exchanged. For example, the scorekeeper can fill out the card and give it directly to the umpire (as opposed to the coach filling it out, giving it to the scorekeeper to enter in the book, who then gives it to the coach to give it to the umpire).
- How should umpires deal with exchanging balls with players? Should foul balls be sanitized before being returned to the field?
 - Multiple people touching softballs is an inherent part of the game that cannot be eliminated. However, there are practices that can help minimize risk. For example, the defense can supply the balls each half inning, so that it is primarily their team touching them. Base coaches can refrain from handling foul balls. And everyone can use hand sanitizer between innings.
- The recovery policy should require a number of consecutive days without fever.
 - The policy currently requires anyone testing positive for covid-19 to remain away from others until at least three days after the end of the fever.
- The prohibition of seeds, spitting, and probably gum should be mandatory.
 - **We will amend the policy to prohibit seeds, spitting, and gum in dugouts and near fields.**

Accountability

- What type of accountability will there be for coaches and players who do not follow the policy?
 - Of course, we expect everyone to comply with the policy. We believe everyone associated with the Firebirds has the same intentions and the same desire to protect the health not just of their players, but of their families and other loved ones. We also know that it is pretty near impossible to fully comply with the entirety of the policy at all times. We expect everyone to do their best and will deal with non-compliance in each instance we are made aware of it. Consequences will be in line with intent and severity of the offense. Possible consequences include warnings, suspensions, and removal from the Firebirds program.
- Who can we notify if we have concerns about coaches, players, etc.?
 - If you are not comfortable contacting your coach, please contact Jesse Ellis, NVGSA Vice President-Travel, at travel@nvgsa.org.

- The guidelines seem difficult to enforce.
 - It will be difficult to enforce all the guidelines at all times, but we are counting on all Firebirds coaches, players, and families to help. We recommend each team identify a parent to help monitor players and enforce the policy, so that coaches – who still have to coach – don't get overburdened.
- How can we be sure other parents, teams, tournament directors, and others are following guidelines and requirements?
 - We can't. The best we can do is to manage our own behavior, model what we hope to see in others, and play just in tournaments and games that have established guidelines. Part of the risk calculation is knowing that others may not follow the rules.

Other Considerations

- Will the Firebirds provide cleaning products?
 - We have ordered cleaning supplies, extra masks, and hand sanitizer refills for teams to keep on hand. Unfortunately, with current supply and demand as it is, we don't expect to receive shipment until late June. Teams and families should be helping to supplement supplies until then.
- How long will the season run?
 - August is usually an off-month for most teams. However, many cancelled tournaments have rescheduled for August. Whether or not teams play into August, and to what extent they do, is up to each team and should be a decision made jointly by coaches, parents, and players.
- Field sharing for practices will make social distancing difficult.
 - Practice schedules for the summer (through August) do not include field sharing. We will seek to minimize sharing as much as possible in the fall. However, the lack of daylight and limited lighted fields may require some sharing.
- It will be important to find other teams with similar attitudes on this to scrimmage/play since many of the precautions are recommended and not required.
 - In arranging games and scrimmages, coaches should agree with their opponents on an approach and a set of guidelines. And, for tournaments, we require a set of guidelines be in place for the Firebirds to participate.
- Play ball!
 - Trust us, we all agree: We want to play! We look forward to a time when we can all do so again without reservation. Until then, we hope our approach is the right mix of softball and safety.