

## HEAT POLICY ENACTED TO PROTECT ATHLETES

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Macon — It may be enough to satisfy state lawmakers, but some medical experts hope the Georgia High School Association's new heat policy is only the first step.

The GHSA executive committee on Monday unanimously approved a statewide policy regulating athletic practices in hot weather. While the rule requires all schools to have a written policy for conducting practices during times of extreme heat and humidity, the schools will set their own policies. It also requires schools to have a scientifically approved instrument that measures heat and humidity at all practices.

The association will request that the state board of education adopt the proposal as a state rule.

The policy comes nearly one month after the death of Rockdale County football player Tyler Davis, who died of heatstroke Aug. 1. He collapsed the day before during a voluntary football practice.

Association executive director Ralph Swearngin said Davis' death pushed forward the dialogue to establish statewide rules.

"We wanted to come up with a position that was strengthening our position, but still keeping our position, which is to educate how to make those calls [on when to practice]," Swearngin said. "But we want to make sure they have a structure so there is a consistent process for making those decisions, even if circumstances are different."

Georgia legislators, who had questioned the GHSA about its lack of rules regarding practicing in heat, called the policy a good first step.

"Certainly having that policy is a good one; implementing it is where the rubber meets the road," said Rep. Chuck Martin (R-Alpharetta), who spoke Monday morning at the executive committee on behalf of the GHSA legislative overview committee.

Sen. John Wiles (R-Marietta), who joined Martin in Macon for the meeting, said he's pleased the GHSA is taking action. He also said he plans to check with medical experts to see if the policy is strong enough.

Some experts said they would like to see statewide standards, and they wonder how the policies will be enforced.

Dr. Stephanie Martin, co-surgical director of the Children's Healthcare of Atlanta Sports Medicine Program, said she hopes the policy will be monitored and improved. Martin said she has dealt with a number of heat-related cases this summer and that Georgia has been fortunate to have had only one death.

"I'm proud of Georgia for establishing this, but they need to go the next step," Martin said. "Set guidelines. Maybe you have it graduated, which would take into consideration the southern counties. Maybe their cancellation [standard] is set a little bit higher."

A recent Atlanta Journal-Constitution survey of metro Atlanta schools showed that 91 of 123 schools were using some sort of device at practice to measure heat and humidity.

Cobb County became the first metro Atlanta school system to implement a heat policy, using measurements from a digital psychrometer to determine when it was safe to practice. The policy, which started in 2000, came after the death of Wheeler High School football player Marcus Ellison, who collapsed during a preseason workout in 1999. Schools in Gwinnett, Atlanta Public Schools and Clayton have been given psychrometers, which measure heat and humidity, and training on how to use the device.

When Davis died, Rockdale County did not have a heat policy in place or a heat-measuring device at practice. The county later put in a policy prohibiting teams from practicing when temperatures reached 95 degrees.

Dr. Jon Hyman of the Atlanta Sports Medicine and Orthopedic Center said other factors need to be considered besides temperature and humidity. He said coaches need to measure the athlete's body mass in order to plan a safe practice for each athlete.

He also wonders how the GHSA's new policy will be enforced.

"Leaving it to each school to make their own policy is fine, as long as there is enforcement and adequate resources to initiate that policy," he said. "A policy is just words."