Early practice, summer temps mean more precautions

With average high temperatures last week well over 90 degrees and a heat wave that seems to have settled over Nebraska all summer, it certainly doesn't feel like football weather.

"Tell that to the NSAA," said Craig Haake, Gothenburg's head football coach. "When I think about Aug. 6, I sure don't think about the end of summer."

When the Nebraska School Activities Association took over football scheduling nearly a decade ago, it was forced to squeeze an eight-game schedule in for all teams.

To make that work, NSAA added an early game for 10 or 12 teams, calling it a Week 0 game.

"We were one of the lucky chosen ones to go early," Haake said of the first Week 0 season. "I hoped after we did our time in that first rotation that the early game would go away."

Gothenburg has played a Week 0 game ever since.

That brings summer to a screeching halt early for many fall athletes across the state.

Swede football and softball teams began official practice on Monday.

Other sports are conditioning this week and will jump in full force next week.

Gothenburg Public Schools doesn't have any specific rules pertaining to athletic practices and heat, says activities director Seth Ryker.

"Coaches keep close tabs on the forecast and plan accordingly," he said. "We try to get our football practices done in the morning while it's still relatively cool."

Ryker also said there are only three days of two-a-day practices this year, compared with a full week for previous seasons.

Haake starts practice at 7:30 a.m. to beat the heat and high humidity.

"I'm a little set in my ways, though," he said. "Other than a few more water breaks, the heat hasn't changed much about the way we practice."

In the old days, Haake recalls, "water breaks were for wimps. Now we're pretty generous with scheduled breaks and individually we let kids get water whenever they need it."

Swede softball coach Roger Neujahr said the heat has definitely changed the way he conducts practice.

"We're all spoiled," he says. "We're in the air conditioning all the time and when you're forced to be out in the heat, it really affects you."

Neujahr said his team does shorter drills with fewer repetitions during workouts.

“We’re all very careful,” he said. “The last thing we want is for someone to go down with heat stroke.”

While practicing in the searing heat isn’t pleasant for anyone, Neujahr said there is a positive side to the early start.

Nebraska is one of only seven to nine states that have high school softball in the fall rather than spring.

Neujahr said only two or three days of practice have been affected by weather in the seven years Gothenburg has had softball.

“You can hate the weather or you can appreciate the weather,” he said. “I guess I’ve learned to appreciate it.”

The first Gothenburg softball game takes the Swedes to Oxford for a game against Southern Valley on Thursday, Aug. 16.

Swede football kicks off on the road at Ogallala on Friday, Aug. 24.

It’s the earliest start to the football season in the past decade.

“You know I’m not real fond of this early game but I’m sure looking forward to getting the season under way,” Haake said. “It’s always exciting, no matter how hot it is.”