

What's Happening in the Floorball World – October 2020

Darryl Gross – 10/20/20

This has been a crazy year due to COVID-19. How has it affected Floorball in the United States and around the world? In this article, we summarize where we've been, what is the current status and what is the outlook for Floorball for the next 3-12 months.

What Happened in the First 9 Months of 2020?

The floorball community started 2020 with lots of optimism and we were looking forward to exciting tournaments and special events in the United States. USA Floorball was fresh off the most successful and well attended U.S. Nationals in history held in Lynchburg, Virginia last summer in conjunction with State Games of America. This was followed by an exciting Golden Gate Cup in San Jose, California. Everybody was looking forward to next Nationals which were to be held in Birmingham, Alabama as a leadup to the World Games the following summer.

Floorball in Special Olympics also started strong. After laying the groundwork in 2019, the first Special Olympics Texas Floorball Tournament was held in San Antonio in February and the winner was to be one of two teams to represent the United States at the next World Games in Europe. Plans were made for a team trials/development camp in Colorado later in the year to get Texas and Arizona ready for international competition. There was increasing interest in floorball for Special Olympics from across the country and Jukka travelled to Jamaica in January to run a very successful coaching clinic on behalf of Special Olympics North America.

In addition to U.S. Nationals and the Men's U19 Qualification Tournament to be held in Birmingham in August, other scheduled national tournaments included the Texas Open in March, Youth Nationals in Utah in June and the Golden Gate Cup in November.

The arrival of COVID-19 in February changed everything. With lockdowns starting in March, everything came to a screeching halt. The Texas Open went off as scheduled the second weekend in March despite some last minute team cancellations. It was a particularly difficult time. The Board of the North Texas Floorball Association (NTFA) met multiple times on the day before the tournament to consider whether to cancel the event. After polling the out-of-state teams, the decision was made to proceed and the tournament went off without a hitch. The highly anticipated live broadcast did not happen since the media company elected to not travel from Michigan. Despite the travel restrictions, several MU19 European players were able to make the trip and the Texas Open was as competitive as ever despite the absence of the always favored team from Menlo Park in California. All of our European friends made it back home and there were no reports of virus issues from any tournament participants. On Monday following the tournament, the facility was closed and organized floorball in North Texas joined the rest of the country on hiatus.

As the effects of the pandemic were felt across the country in March, April and May, and the realization that closures would continue, postponements and cancellations were announced. Youth Nationals in Utah was postponed from June to July then cancelled. The Summer Olympics 2020 in Japan was postponed a year and will now take place in July-August 2021. With that postponement, World Games 2021 to be held in Birmingham was also postponed by a year and will now take place in July 2022. As the host country, Team USA will be competing as floorball is now an official sport of the World Games. The 2020 U.S. Nationals and the Men's U19 Qualifier to be held in Birmingham at the end of August was cancelled due to facility closure. There was talk about moving this tournament to San Jose in conjunction with Golden Gate Cup in November but continued closings forced the cancellation at that location. Plans were made to hold the event in North Texas the second week of November but with the ongoing closure of the US/Canada border and inbound flight restrictions from Europe, the decision was made to postpone until January 2021.

The International Floorball Federation (IFF) has moved all of its scheduled competitions. The Women's U19 WFC was to be played in May 2020 and is now scheduled for May 5-9, 2021. The Men's World Championships has been postponed from December 2020 to December 3-11, 2021 in Helsinki just a week before the Women's World Championships in Uppsala, Sweden. The Men's U19 WFC will be held April 28-May 2, 2021 in Brno, Czech Republic. The Men's U19 Qualifier between Canada and USA is now scheduled for January 8-9 in Arlington, Texas and the Women's WFC Qualifier will be held in Toronto on January 29-30, 2021.

The closing of schools and colleges in the Spring not only ushered in online learning, it ended PE and athletic activities. Public and private facilities were shuttered and with that went floorball pickup and scheduled league play.

There have been some bright spots. With social distancing, work from home and cancellation of school activities, people began to look for alternatives. On the floorball side, we focused on Floorball at Home, especially for kids. A stick and a ball can provide hours of fun along with needed physical activity. Kids were playing in garages, driveways, streets and basements. Adults continued to work on skills and we saw countless posts on Facebook showing deft stickhandling and

impressive shots. Since we couldn't do in-person training, we focused more on training videos and emphasis on basic skills. We wanted to be ready when the sports world came back to normal.

While most facilities remained closed, innovative people found ways to keep the spark alive. Young Keene Addington in Chicago, a member of the MU19 National Team, ran several youth floorball camps outdoors which were very successful and well-attended. Youth hockey players were kept off the ice but found a fun alternative in floorball. Some facilities in various states opened for limited activity in June. NTFA ran a successful summer season with a modified 4v4 schedule which featured different teams each week.

Where Are We Now?

I've surveyed many of my contacts and here is where we stand as of today in various regions of the country:

TEXAS: NTFA is currently midway through its Fall floorball league season featuring a 4v4 plus goalie format, regulation goals, and referee pairs. Players and referees on the floor are not required to wear masks though others in attendance do wear masks per city policy. Flower Mound CAC re-opened in September and there is twice weekly floorball played by youth and adults. Austin Floorball Club is not currently playing and the City of Austin is not allowing rec sports until at least January.

FLORIDA: The Orlando Vikings have continued youth floorball play and they are preparing for the November youth tournament in Colorado.

COLORADO: Discover Floorball in Colorado Springs has weekly pickup. They ran a small youth and adult tournament in October and are hosting a Youth Floorball Tournament in November with teams expected from Utah, Orlando and Chicago.

CHICAGO: Indoor sports facilities are closed within the city limits and there is no regular adult play. However, floorball for kids is growing with practices at various outdoor locations. The Chicago Bulldogs youth team from Chicago will be travelling to Colorado in November for what promises to be the largest youth floorball tournament of the year. The adult Chicago Dogs will be participating at U.S. Nationals in January.

UTAH: Adult and Teen floorball leagues are on-going. Between the fall break, they will be running 5 weeks of elementary floorball (grades 1-2 and 3-5). They will be sending a youth team to Colorado to compete in November. Some of the youth players in Utah have now grown and are attending college where they continue to promote floorball with the expectation of arranging a University-only tournament in 2021.

WASHINGTON: David Crawford has just started floorball kid classes on Saturdays in Lacey, WA. He is planning for December sessions.

MINNESOTA: Minneapolis floorball is on hiatus until 2021.

CALIFORNIA: Facility closures and lockdowns have prevented organized floorball.

VIRGINIA: RVA Floorball has been playing weekly in Richmond since September.

With schools and colleges opening again, we're starting to see an uptick in orders for floorball stick packages. We're also fielding more and more questions from PE teachers and coaches from across the country and in Canada about starting floorball programs. Students at Vanderbilt and SMU are arranging floorball pickup sessions on their own. Special Olympics North America continues to plan floorball training for next year and we're seeing dialog with Special Olympics Latin America with more teams forming in Mexico and Central America.

Floorball Outlook Next 3-12 Months

The expectation is that once we get through the latest surge in coronavirus cases and when vaccines and other therapeutics become readily available, Floorball will get back to normal. Most organizations are planning to resume normal or close-to-normal activities in January 2021.

The Men's U19 Qualifier and U.S. Nationals are scheduled for January 8-9, 2021 in Arlington, Texas. If the border closure between Canada and USA extends to the end of the year, the Qualifier will not happen and Team Canada will represent North America at the Men's U19 World Championships in April-May.

The 2021 Texas Open is scheduled for March and we are hoping to host a multi-day Special Olympics training event for Texas and Arizona at the same time. NTFA is planning for a normal 5v5 Spring League season to begin in January.

Most floorball leagues are planning normal operation in 2021.

Next summer's U.S. Nationals is expected to take place in Birmingham as a warmup for World Games 2022 though there hasn't been any official announcement regarding this event.

Perhaps the most exciting development for Floorball in the United States is the planned inaugural season of the North American Floorball League (NAFL). Announced in August of this year, the NAFL is the brainchild of Ryan Connor from Austin. The purpose is to bring floorball at the highest level to the United States as a spectator sport. With a mix of top level players from Europe and North America, this will give folks in this country the opportunity to see floorball as it is played on the international stage. The semi-professional league will commence play in June 2021 with a condensed season spanning 6 weeks with multiple games on consecutive weekends. As of this writing, the NAFL has three committed teams, the Fort Worth Panthers (Fort Worth, TX), Cleveland Buc's (Cleveland, OH), and Texas Tornadoes (Austin, TX). More team registrations will be following soon and teams will be starting to fill out their rosters in the coming months.

While 2020 has been an extremely difficult year and we've experienced setbacks throughout the floorball community, people continue to work behind the scenes and at the grassroots level. Enthusiasm is starting to build once again and I fervently believe that the best years for our sport are just ahead.