

# Union super wants to take back forfeited football semifinal. Others say no way

By [Mike Kinney](#) | [NJ Advance Media for NJ.com](#)



Davison Igbinosun of Union (2) does a dance during the closing moments of the football game between Union and North Brunswick in North Brunswick in October. His 17th-ranked Farmers had to forfeit a state semifinal game last week against Paterson Eastside due to positive COVID-19 cases. John Jones | For NJ Advance Media

Union Schools Superintendent Dr. Scott Taylor continues to proclaim that he will “move mountains” to get the NJSIAA to reschedule the playoff semifinal game that he personally canceled due to positive COVID-19 cases among team members.

There are others around the state – including the athletic director for a school that forfeited its playoff game for the same reason – who suggest that Taylor should now accept the consequences of his decision and just move on, and allow Paterson Eastside and Clifton to do so, as well, this Friday in the North 2, Group 5 sectional final.

Union (9-1), ranked No. 17 in the [NJ.com](#) Top 20, was top seed in the section and prepared to face fifth-seeded Paterson Eastside last Friday night in

Union. Taylor declared a forfeit on behalf of the team, but has since filed an appeal for emergent relief to the New Jersey State Interscholastic Athletic Association (NJSIAA). He had no word on when that hearing would be as of 1 p.m. on Tuesday.

"Sometimes you're wrong, sometimes you're right, but you have to look at the information you're handed and make a decision," Nutley athletic director Joe Piro said. His team accepted a forfeit against Old Tappan in the first round of the North 1, Group 3 after several Nutley players tested positive for the coronavirus one day before that Nov. 5 game.

"Then you have to stick by that decision," Piro said. "If the decision was to pull out of the tournament, then you pull out of the tournament. Once you make it, I do not believe you can put the genie back in the bottle."

That genie for Union may have escaped when Taylor informed the players last Friday morning that its semifinal game that night against Paterson Eastside would be canceled by his order, but also under the advisement of Union Township health officer Marconi Gapas, after four positive cases were determined among 22 of the team's unvaccinated players.

Taylor said on Tuesday afternoon that he was not fully aware of the NJSIAA's September mandate prohibiting makeups or modifications to the predetermined tournament schedule due to COVID-related cancellations, though also suspects that his ultimate decision would have been the same.

That despite the maelstrom of vitriol that's been hurled his way from all corners of the township since making that determination. On Monday morning, players and fellow students marched to the administration building to voice their displeasure and also call for Taylor's resignation.

"I'd have to think about it. I probably would (cancel and accept the forfeit), but I would have had my attorney do the work he has to do well in advance to fight that policy," Taylor said early Tuesday afternoon, four days after breaking the news to his team.

"At approximately 11:30 (Friday), I called the health official because I had heard he was changing his initial thinking about the game. Initially, he did think we could play the game," Taylor said.

"But then he spoke with the Paterson health official, who provided him additional information. When I asked him (Gapas) if he would be able to say yes, we could play this game, he said, 'No, I could not say that.' "

Those words of doubt from Gapas still ring more impactfully for Taylor than even the chorus of emotion-filled complaints he's heard since, from his office window and all over social media.

"God forbid I played the game against the health official's wishes and we had a spreader event...I'll leave it at that," Taylor said. "Football is a contact sport and I'd be putting not just my kids in danger, but a whole other community's kids in danger. Ultimately, my first job as an educational leader is to protect the physical safety and welfare of the kids. That's on top of everything."

In full agreement with that decision to cancel was not only Piro, but Paterson Schools Superintendent Eileen F. Shafer, among others.

"Union Schools Superintendent Scott Taylor made a very difficult decision last week and forfeited last week's playoff game, but it was the right decision because it put the health and safety of both teams' players and coaches first," Shafer released in a statement. "I understand how disappointing this is for Union High School's student-athletes, their families, coaches, staff, and their entire community. But the NJSIAA has its policies that must be

followed."



Prior to the formal appeal filed to the NJSIAA Monday by board attorney Lester Taylor (no relation), Scott Taylor forwarded a letter Saturday to NJSIAA executive director Colleen Maguire requesting that "you grant my rescission of the Township of Union School District's withdrawal from the 2021 NJSIAA State Football Tournament. The district is prepared to have its entire football team rapid PCR tested as soon as Sunday, November 14, so it can determine the viability of playing its previously scheduled game against Paterson's) Eastside High School."

Maguire acknowledged in a text Sunday morning that she had responded to Taylor's request, "which has been respectfully declined. No further comments," she wrote.

That's about the same we've-had-enough neighborhood that Eastside is residing in now in light of Taylor's emergent relief appeal to the NJSIAA.

"It's an unfortunate circumstance of what happened and what's transpired,

but we're on the other side of it. We've had to move forward with preparing for Clifton. We're playing Clifton on Friday. That's the approach that we've taken and that's the approach we will continue to take," Paterson Eastside athletic director Tororris Hill said.

Was Hill made aware of the appeal?

"I did a brief email, but the last thing I want to do is to notify my coaches and my players with any more distractions. It's sensitive to us, as well," he said.

"I feel bad for the superintendent because the community is on his back and we know they've got a big-time player (four-star senior standout Davison Igbinosun) that the community is standing behind. It's unfortunate for this man," Eastside heads coach James Magazine said.

"But like my AD has said, it's like you're showing no regard now for the safety of our kids."

Before Nutley made its decision to forfeit against Old Tappan, both the health of the all involved and the playoffs themselves were both taken into account, according to Piro.

"Every decision we made came down to two things:

Number one, first and foremost, was the health, safety and wellness of our student-athletes and the student-athletes of Old Tappan and everyone that was involved with that tournament game. We felt as though we were making the right decision based on the information we had, the positive cases we had as well as the close-contact parameters we had.

"The second thing we took into consideration was the integrity of the tournament. Had we played Old Tappan and they beat us, then their kids might have been infected. Then they wouldn't have been able to move

forward. Or, if we beat them and then had to shutdown midway through, West Morris would get a bye right on through to the final. You have to look at the integrity of the tournament and the health, safety and wellness of the student-athletes."

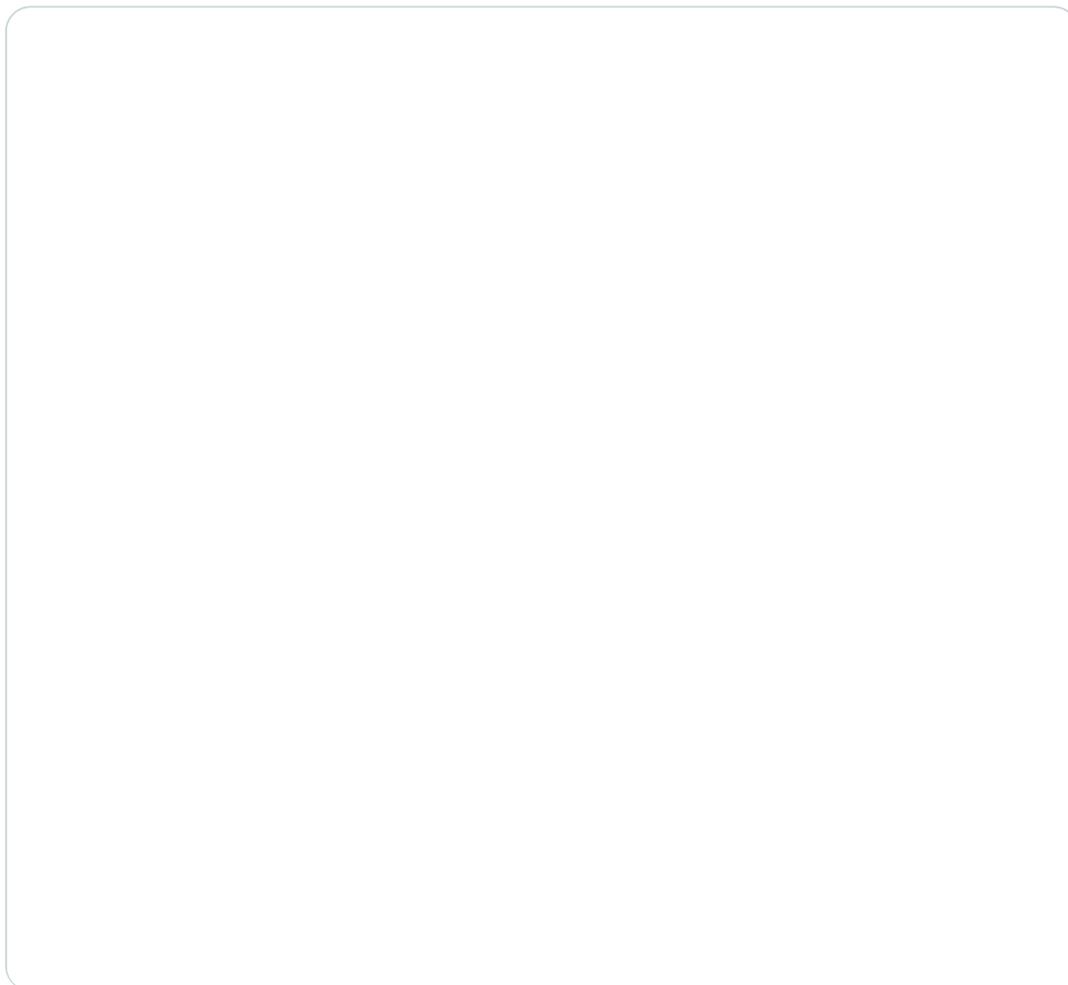
Since we're on the subject of integrity, Taylor made it a point several times during Tuesday's conversation to applaud the integrity and responsibility displayed by the Union High students during this ordeal.



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"Throughout this entire event the kids have been professional, articulate, smart about the way they've been presenting themselves," Taylor said. "I know they're mad and I'm the focus of their anger, but they've been holding themselves high.

"One of the things I'm struggling to have my community understand is I'm a huge high school and college football fan. I wanted to play this game desperately, and I'd move mountains to get this game rescheduled."

What's the next step for Taylor should the NJSIAA deny the appeal?

"I'd have to consult the board attorney to see what our next step would be," he said.

Lester Taylor's office was contacted Tuesday afternoon in hopes of a comment, but the call was not returned.

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