

The Commonwealth Games of 2020 were obviously unlike any other. The girls' fastpitch softball competition was actually better than previous years.

John McPhail is the Fastpitch Softball coordinator for the Games, giving him the task of heading up a competition that has 98 teams playing in five age divisions. In the age of Covid, this could have been a herculean task, but it came off without a hitch.

More importantly, it came off without a single case of COVID-19 transmission being linked to the Games.

McPhail, a board member for USA Softball and the junior Olympic coordinator for Virginia, had the protocols of USA Softball and VAS, then worked with the Virginia Department of Health, the governor's chief of staff, the Lynchburg Department of Health and Lynchburg's city administration to make sure everyone was on the same page.

"We started working with the state once the Governor put us in Phase 2 and we could have 50 people together, which allowed us to play. We then went into Phase 3, so that was even better," McPhail said.

The Games required every participant – or parent of minor players – to sign a paper each day attesting to being symptom-free.

More than 1,000 athletes took part in more than 200 games without a Covid-related problem.

"We had no issues with policies and procedures. Everyone was just happy to be back playing," McPhail said.

Mask wearing is not required in dugouts in Phase 3, McPhail said, but social distancing was still encouraged.

Protocols called for coaches to maintain six feet distance from players, even during conferences. Warm up areas and dugout transitioning between games was spelled out in a USA Softball list of guidelines.

Among the protocols was one that said the softballs cannot be handled by anyone other than the defensive team. Normally the umpires keep the softballs and put a new one in play when a ball is hit out of play. This year the balls had to be kept by the team in the field.

"We gave each team three balls at the start of the tournament and they had to use those three when they were in the field. No umpires touched the ball or anyone from the other team," he said.

The event used 21 fields at seven sites that spanned 61 miles, from Lynchburg to Amherst to Thaxton in western Bedford County. That's seven site supervisors, 63 umpires, three umpires-in-charge and hundreds of coaches and competitors all spreading out to play and managing to do it without a major hiccup.

"All the extra stuff that went into having games this year was warranted and it was fine but it will be nice to do this next year in a way that's back to normal," McPhail said.

This was the third year USA Softball has partnered with the Games to put on the tournament. The number of teams was up by about 30 from last year and marks the most teams registered in the three years of the current arrangement.

Despite the pandemic, 2020 was a success story for girls' fastpitch softball for the Games. McPhail believes the future will be even brighter.