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## Lamorinda athletic directors look back ... and forward

By Jon Kingdon



Mike Matoso Photo SMC Athletics/ Tod Fierner

When the novel coronavirus first hit in March 2020 there were a lack resources and information was unclear about transmission, so local schools and most of the nation was forced to shut down. Such was the case with the Lamorinda athletic departments. Campolindo had their state championship camp canceled and Jordan Ford, a basketball player for Saint Mary's was five points short of surpassing Matthew Delavedova as the career scoring leader and saw that post-season canceled.

The coronavirus was a nightmare for the athletic directors. "The end of the year couldn't come soon enough," said Ray Meadows, Campolindo's athletic director. "There was so much uncertainty and unknowing, constantly confronting new situations. We were dealing with things that we did not have a blueprint for while not knowing what was around the corner."

It wasn't until March 2021 when the Lamorinda schools began an abbreviated season for all of the team sports to at least start the ball rolling in hopes of a more normal fall 2021 season. Those hopes were met with complete seasons and playoffs, and all seemed right with

the world.

When the Omicron variant arrived toward the end of last year, there were concerns from many that it was going to be an athletic season that, in the words of Yogi Berra, would be "deja vu all over again."

However, this time the schools were not caught unprepared. "During winter break when we were getting ready to return to school and league competition, we expected that there would be an increase of the virus and the surge was coming," Acalanes Athletic Director Randy Takahashi said. "Everything that we were hearing from the health officials was that the surge was going to hit fast and hard and will drop off fast and hard, and that is what we are seeing now."

It has been a constant learning experience since the initial outbreak of the coronavirus. "From March 2020, our plan has been to figure out what we need to do in the present," Takahashi said. "Things got more strict and then less strict. Once things were put in place, then something else was taken out of place. It's just been a moving target. Now we're back to normal and even though there are some limitations, we as athletic directors and coaches talk about it, but it is far better than it was last year and certainly better than being shut down as we were the year before."

While COVID initially led to cancellations, the Omicron variant has only caused some game postponements and limited the number of spectators that are allowed into the indoor events. "Obviously, we were able to have a lot of success in the fall, but things have required us to evolve and take a different approach at different times this year," Miramonte Athletic Director James Lathrop said. "As cases have increased everywhere, we've had to adjust. We limited the capacity in the gym, but we're excited that we still get to have all the parents be spectators and that's great."

For Takahashi, limiting the number of spectators last year made it easier to implement attendance restrictions this winter. "After last year, we knew how to do this," Takahashi said. "It's not as restrictive as it was when it was just two family members per player for indoor sports. It's more open this year though limited to all immediate family members. The games that we have had, everyone has been responsible, respectful, thoughtful and courteous."

For Saint Mary's Athletic Director Mike Matoso, it was a learning experience for him and his department: "At this point in COVID, we've seen the curve balls, knuckle balls and sliders that have been thrown at us and I feel we can handle any pitch that's thrown at us. We knew that last January and February there would be tough times, and everybody is saying the same thing the last three weeks in that we've seen that more people have tested positive than in the last two years."

Last fall, Saint Mary's teams did not miss a single game in soccer, volleyball, and cross-country matches. Since Jan. 1, the men's and women's basketball teams each had three games that were postponed.

With the vaccinations and boosters and current knowledge of the virus, the athletic directors are able to handle each case individually. "We're getting back into the flow after a pause on the men's and women's

side and we're anticipating that we'll keep going the rest of the year," Matoso said. "Last year when you had one person that tested positive, you put the program on pause. This year, that's not the case. You can hold out one person and you can keep going as a team. That first year we were more scared about how we were going to travel, how we were going to get on a plane and how we were going to test everybody. This year, we've known what the guidelines are and what we have to follow. We do have to make a lot more judgment calls though because if someone tests positive, you have to determine whether he can play or not. There have been more difficult situations."

The Gaels athletic department of coaches, staff, and student athletes numbers around 400 and over 390 of them are vaccinated which has enabled the school to require fewer tests. "Once you're vaccinated, unless you have symptoms, they are not required to be tested," Matoso said. "We've taken that approach and stayed in line with the NCAA guidelines."

It's the ability to react quickly that has kept the teams from grinding to a halt. "We're still optimistic and we're pushing on and hopefully we'll get through this and make sure that we have championship events for our winter sports," Lathrop said. "We're still rescheduling a couple of things but we've gotten a lot better at figuring out how to roll with the punches and adjust on the fly. There's been a lot of collaboration within our school district with the other athletic directors within our league to find solutions to keep our sports going and creating the best competitive environments for all of our student-athletes."

Takahashi concurred with the importance of communication for all of the schools: "As a district, we're very fortunate in that we have constant communication with our district administration, so we are aware of all of the changes that are coming through and how they affect our schools and athletics."

For Lathrop, it's more than just paying lip service to spectators. "As an athletic director, working with the coaches and student-athletes, one of the things we also do on campus is work with our students like the sixth man group for the basketball team. We put in budget time in the meeting with that group and brainstorming in supporting their efforts and getting more students out at the games and creating some fun opportunities for students to participate in half-time activities and things of that nature, some fun stuff for high school sports that we hadn't been able to do in the last year, though we're still limited this year as well."

Saint Mary's has not limited the number of fans allowed into their arena but have required those attending the games to wear masks and show a negative test or vaccination card to gain admittance. "It can be hard because you have people that have strong feelings either way on it," Matoso said. "My staff can be put in no-win situations. With people that push back on it, we tell them that we are following county guidelines. There has been a lot of reminding people to put their masks on and for the most part, everyone's been great. We have a very special environment on game day and it's a huge home-court advantage for us."

Even with all of the cancellations for Saint Mary's in 2020, the Gaels athletic department is in good shape financially, partially due, ironically to the virus. "Most of our revenues are pretty much back to normal this year," Matoso said. "Our fundraising has been way ahead of schedule from the usual number. We also saved a lot of money having virtual events in lieu of banquets, since we didn't have the usual costs of serving dinner and paying for catering with those types of events. We were just doing every one online and taking donations. From that respect, we did really well on our events last year."

With all of the adjustments that the administrators have had to make, the priority that James Lathrop has put on the program is one that everyone has gotten behind. "There have been different challenges this year as compared to last year, but our goals remain the same which is to put our teams in the best situations that we can while keeping everyone in a safe spot."

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