



Junior Women's Basketball player Malia Bambrick receives a Covid test on Campus

Preparing Athletes for Competition: Covid-testing within Pepperdine Athletics

The one-year anniversary of Covid lockdown is approaching in just a few days and the Pepperdine Athletic department has had time to reflect.

The past year has been nothing short of unusual, and the world of collegiate sports had to adapt to new ways of training and competing. From a medical standpoint, student-athletes wouldn't be able to compete during this time if it weren't for the weekly Covid tests they get.

“There was one point where we were getting tested every other day for two weeks straight,” said freshman Women’s Basketball player and Sports Administration major Isabel Montoya. “But on average, I’d say [we’d get tested] about two to three times a week.”

There has been lots of research and preparation by Athletics in order for student-athletes to compete in their sports. The thing about Covid-19 is that it can be hard to navigate, according to Associate Athletic Director Kevin Wright.

“A lot of people, in general, don't have symptoms,” said Wright. “So it's very hard to track if they're not having symptoms, which, to be honest, most of our athletes that have had it are asymptomatic, so you can't tell that they're sick unless you're testing them.”

Although student-athletes generally follow a strict Quarantine, those positive Covid tests can’t always be avoided. The Pepperdine Women’s basketball team had to cancel a few games this past season, including their first preseason game versus UCLA.

“Somebody on our team tested positive,” Montoya said. “So immediately, the other team had to turn around. And we had to stay in our rooms away from our roommate and quarantine until further notice. And then we get a call from student health. They tell us [to] pack your bags, you're going up to the villa, our hotel on campus. And you're going to be up there for two weeks.”

The fear of getting Covid combined with the anxiety of waiting for test results has impacted the mental health of student-athletes on campus as well as team chemistry outside of their sports.

“It was always like, you're questioning well, do I have it? Do I not have it? Am I putting my team in danger? Should I take my mask off? Should I actually keep it on?,” Montoya said. “Anytime somebody’s test wouldn't come back in time, even if it was a negative, but it was just taking longer, we’d had to cancel practice or that person would have to isolate until they got their test results. And so it definitely played with our heads.”

The COVID tests taken by student-athletes and staff varied. According to Wright, there were two main types of tests: the Antigen test and the PCR test. The Antigen test, also known as the rapid test, has a turnaround time of 15 minutes making it a little less accurate. Tests weren’t just limited to one method, student-athletes and staff experienced the different kinds of tests, nasal swab, saliva test, mouth swab, etc.

“The one [test] we rely on the gold standard for our testing is a PCR test,” Wright said. “That PCR test is a saliva based test. So you spit in a little vial, and then we send that off to the lab. Generally, we'll get those results in about 12 hours.”

The NCAA assigned frequency of testing to be based on the risk level of the sport, leaving staff members the job of organizing how these tests are distributed.

“We were in charge of helping coordinate the testing schedule for the teams that were assigned to you,” said Director of Rehabilitation Nicole Elby. “So based on when the games were occurring, and when you know the timeframes we would help coordinate those times and also administer some of the tests.”

As far as risk level goes, the NCAA broke it down into three categories: high transmission risk, medium transmission risk, and low transmission risk. High transmission risk included sports with more contact such as basketball and football, medium transmission risk sports included sports that were outside and more open like soccer, and low transmission risk sports included sports like golf and tennis where you have more separation from others.

400-500 Covid tests are distributed in the athletic department both to student-athletes and staff weekly, and this is not cheap, according to Wright and Elby.

“We are blessed that the university has, has really taken a lot of that [expenses of tests] on because it's the only way we can compete,” Wright said. “It's the only way we can keep our athletes safe and certify that they are safe to compete. By the time it's all said and done. It's probably will approach about a million dollars, I imagine.”

Wright went on to say that both the Antigen and PCR test costs about \$24 per test, a big change from the beginning of the pandemic where each test cost about \$124 per test.

Changes in jobs

In addition to student-athletes and faculty getting tested frequently, staff members who work in the athletic department have had to restructure their jobs completely.

“The CDC says that you become a close contact with somebody if you're within six feet for more than 15 minutes within a 24 hour period,” Elby said. “So we had to change our treatment strategies, and really try and keep our treatments under that 15-minute limit. So we had to kind of think on the fly and figure out what treatments are going to give us the biggest bang for our buck.”

With the uncertainty of this viral disease, there is no such thing as a typical workday in the Pepperdine athletic department. In fact, work hours have increased quite a bit.

“Before the pandemic, I was working about 60 hours a week,” Wright said. “Since January, my weekly work hours have increased to 80 to 90 hours.”

We’ve all learned something from this pandemic, and Elby shares that from both a professional and personal standpoint, being able to adapt to any situation is crucial now more than ever.

“Being adaptable to everything that's constantly changing is extremely important. Just learning how to, or practicing thinking on the fly, and just be willing to totally change your week schedule your daily schedule at a moment's notice.”