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Chase Estep
Linfield University

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Sports in the time of COVID-19

By Chase Estep

- STEP 1:** Disinfect the surface where you will open the collection kit. Remove and lay out contents of kit. Read instructions before starting specimen collection.
- STEP 2:** Wash hands with soap and water. If soap and water are not available, use hand sanitizer.
- STEP 3:** Remove the swab from the package. Do not touch the soft end with your hands or anything else.
- STEP 4:** Insert the entire soft end of the swab into your nostril no more than $\frac{3}{4}$ of an inch (1.5 cm) into your nose.
- STEP 5:** Slowly rotate the swab, gently pressing against the inside of your nostril at least 4 times for a total of 15 seconds. Get as much nasal discharge as possible on the soft end of the swab.
- STEP 6:** Gently remove the swab.
- STEP 7:** Using the same swab, repeat steps 4–6 in your other nostril with the same end of the swab.

Linfield coaches and staff repeated these steps more than 900 times in the past year, administering COVID-19 tests to student-athletes. They did all these tests – in addition to temperature checks, rigorous cleanings and more – in the hopes of bringing back athletic competition to Linfield.

Ultimately, their efforts were not in vain. After 320 days of quiet courts and fields, physically-distanced practices and months of uncertainty about whether competition would be allowed, the Wildcat men's soccer team took the field Jan. 22 and dominated start to finish in a 3-0 win over Multnomah University. That turned out to be the first competition of a spring that would see portions of fall, winter and spring athletic seasons wedged into a single semester, with 14 sports competing in more than 200 games or meets over four months.

And all of it took place under COVID protocols, which made practices and competitions significantly more complicated.

"Seeing our student-athletes return to competition after such a long layoff was truly uplifting," Sports Information Director Kelly Bird said. "It symbolized the start of better days ahead."

Entering lockdown

Shortly after classes moved online due to the COVID-19 outbreak in March 2020, the remainder of the spring sport seasons were canceled. No timeline was announced as to when students could return to the campus or to the fields, courts, tracks and pools.

"Heartbreaking," said Ella Maliska, head coach of the women's tennis team. "There was so much buildup to the season, and then to have it end so abruptly was hard for all the students and coaches."

Athletic staff spent the summer preparing for the return of competition in the fall. It didn't turn out to be that simple.

Rising COVID cases across the Northwest Conference's geographic footprint led the nine universities to cancel the fall season, as well. Constantly changing pandemic policies based on the guidance of the Oregon Health Authority (OHA) made practicing in the months that followed difficult and ever-changing for Linfield coaches and athletes.



Athletic Director Garry Killgore administers a COVID-19 nasal swab test on volleyball player Raelynn Hammock '23.



Pitcher Jordan Bennett '23 came out of the bullpen to make 15 relief appearances this spring. She finished with a 4-0 record and earned one save for the Wildcats.

Returning to the field

Finally, in December, the conference announced plans to return to competition in January 2021.

“With 526 of Linfield’s students competing in at least one sport, it was really important for us to make sure to have as much of a normal season as possible,” Athletic Director Garry Killgore said.

That required teams to follow not just guidelines from the Northwest Conference, but also protocols from the CDC, OHA, Yamhill County Public Health and the university.

“We were doing everything we could to keep our student-athletes and staff safe and healthy,” Killgore said. “Before each practice or competition, there were temperature checks, sign-and-symptom checks, spraying down of benches and port-a-potties – and ensuring that every visiting team was following the same guidelines.”

In the end, Linfield sponsored spring seasons for men’s basketball, women’s basketball, volleyball, men’s soccer, women’s soccer, men’s golf, women’s golf, women’s lacrosse, baseball, softball, swimming, outdoor track and field, men’s tennis and women’s tennis. Football played a pair of scrimmages on successive weeks, simulating game situations.

“The 2-½ hour indoor practices with masks, not having team meals before matches and not having parents and spectators at the events were the most difficult,” Maliska said. But even with those

hurdles, the Wildcat tennis team went on to win 11 straight matches, finishing the season as conference champs.

The tennis team wasn’t the only one to find success. The softball team was briefly ranked No. 1 in the nation, won the conference title and played in the NCAA regionals. Track and field sent three athletes to the national championships, and two ended up on the podium as All-Americans. The men’s basketball team finished 10-2 behind All-American guard Dempsey Roggenbuck ’21 – the Wildcats’ first All-American since 1978. Women’s lacrosse rebounded from an 0-2 start to win seven of its final eight games.

Lessons learned

While many of the COVID-19 protocols were cumbersome and costly, there were silver linings. For one, the production of the livestreams improved, including covering sports that had not been streamed previously such as track and field, swimming and tennis.

“The livestreams have been a great way for parents and fans to watch the matches,” Maliska said. Bird agrees, adding that it’s something they plan to continue in the future.

And the bigger life lessons student-athletes received this year – both on the field and off – will last far beyond their time at Linfield.

“Because of the challenges of the past year, our athletes have shown that they can adapt and be successful with change,” Maliska said. “I see that being a lifelong skill.”