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COVID and Its Impact on Athletics

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Dr. Greg Harris enters his 20th season as the head coach of the women's soccer team in 2020. Harris also coached the men's team from 2001-10. Harris took over the Harding soccer programs in 2001. He is a six-time conference coach of the year, including four in the Gulf South Conference and two in the Great American Conference. Harris then enrolled at the University of Louisiana at Monroe to work on his Ph.D. in marriage and family therapy. He received his degree in the summer of 2006. Harris is married to the former Anissa Campbell of Omaha, Texas. Greg and Anissa have a daughter Kadyn and a son Kaynan.

COVID AND ITS IMPACT ON ATHLETICS

By Dr. Greg Harris

On March 10, 2020, I was blessed to attend a Memphis Grizzlies basketball game with my family. That night the Grizzlies were taking on the Orlando Magic. The excitement was high because we had tickets downstairs that would allowed my son to see the players up close, and to get autographs before and after the game. As a family, we were considering becoming season ticket holders.

It was on that evening that I knew things were going to change. We heard the buzz surrounding the COVID virus, but no one knew how it would affect our lives. There were ropes downstairs that did not allow us to get within 10 feet of the NBA players. The NBA was already in precaution mode in protecting their players. I remember looking at my wife, as the players were coming off the floor for halftime, to tell her that the NBA is getting ready to shut down. Not sure what it was, just an eerie feeling.

The next night in Oklahoma City, Rudy Gobert (member of the Utah Jazz), did not show up for his game against the Thunder. Gobert had contracted the coronavirus. Word spread around the league and the world, instantly. The Oklahoma City versus Utah game was cancelled, and other games began to be postponed. On March 12, the NBA and the NCAA started to shut down games out of uncertainty of the virus. Schools began shutting down and going virtual on March 13. The whole world changed!

March 5, 2020 was the last soccer match that we played here at Harding. It was the day before we let out for spring break. We were all excited to get away for a bit, but more excited to get back and to begin working on our team for the fall of 2020. Little did we know that it would be 11 months before we would play our next match.

Heartbroken with unanswered questions described the world of athletics. When or will we ever be able to get back on the field again.

Zoom meetings became our way of communicating and meeting. We looked forward to just being able to see each other's faces. As a coach, I struggled answering questions for the women on our team. "I don't know" became a redundant answer to many of the questions the team brought up. Their focus was on getting back to school and being able to play again. I just wanted to make sure that they were healthy, and still being optimistic about the future.

As athletes and coaches, we long to be a part of something. For so many people, being a part of a team fills a void that some are not blessed to have in the homes where they grow up. We call it FAMILY! Our teams become our family, our quiet place, and a place where we can be ourselves. Love and acceptance are two huge factors of why people choose to be a part of a team. COVID took that away from us. For months, we worked out on our own. We would post videos for our teammates because this was the only way that we could somewhat be together and share our own experiences. We no longer had the locker room and meeting rooms to share our stories. Again, Zoom meetings became the hangout place for us to have devotionals, prayer time, meetings, and talk about the many things that happened to our world in 2020.

Our sports world grew weary of no action. We binged on watching past games and events, but we longed for LIVE events. As events slowly began to take place in May, we hoped that our lives would be somewhat back to normal. The protocols and provisions that lay in front of us was like nothing that we could ever imagine. Not being able to use our locker room, the hub of all family gatherings, had an enormous impact on our teams. Our team was not allowed in the locker room for a couple of months after our return to school. We practiced in groups of eight or nine for the first several weeks. It was about a month and half into the semester before each person had an opportunity to have practiced at least one time with every member of our team.

The protocols have been different. The locker room is fogged every day, the team can have no more than six people in the locker room

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at a time, and we have been COVID tested often during this spring semester. It is worth it! We just want the opportunity to play. On February 6, 2021, we took the field again for the first time since the start of the pandemic. Since then, we have missed games due to rain, snowstorms, and quarantine stoppages. This has been a tough time for all of us.

We were able to complete our seven game spring season after spring break. God is so good! In the midst of so much negativity, doubt, and suffering, we were able to come back and be a part of something that we love. To be a part of our team again. To be back with our family. That has been a beautiful blessing! There is no doubt that we took for granted what we had. I pray that we will never again take for granted what God has given back to us! Thank God for sports! Thank God for team! Thank God for family!