

# Mercy Athletics Program Supports the “Whole” Student

In late February, when news of the emerging coronavirus (COVID-19) was barely on the horizon, Mercy College was already alerting the community about the virus spreading across Asia and Europe. By mid-March, classes had moved online, the campuses shut down, and all activities, including the 2020 spring sports season, were canceled.

The news came as a blow to student-athletes whose season ended abruptly and whose future was now uncertain. Yet then, as now, the safety and health of all members of the Mercy community were of paramount importance. Without knowing how long the crisis would last, the Department of Athletics moved quickly to offer support. By late March, they had developed a plan to help student-athletes stay in top form — physically, mentally and academically.

The plan included a series of staff meetings via video chat to address the emerging situation. Coaches and trainers, PACT mentors, faculty liaisons and members of the student-athlete advisory committee regularly gathered for connection, strategic planning and mutual support.

Danny Leon Jr.'14, M.S. '19, head coach of the women's soccer program, remembers focusing on the big picture. “Everyone thinks coaching a sport is just playing the game,” he said. “We wanted to make sure our student-athletes were not so focused on the game that they neglected other critical areas. By providing a circle of support, we know if someone's going off track, and we help them.”

## PHYSICAL AND MENTAL CHALLENGES

For an athlete used to regular conditioning, practices and drills leading up to a season of competition, the sudden shift to zero activity is disruptive and potentially harmful. “A decreased capacity for cardiovascular endurance affects stamina and overall fitness, making an athlete more prone to injury,” said Dan Steinberg, Mercy's assistant strengthening and conditioning coach. Studies have shown that missing workouts and practices can affect an athlete's mental outlook and motivation,

setting a repeating cycle in motion.

Mercy student-athlete Sydney Cooper is a case in point. The psychology major, set to graduate in 2022, plays center defender on the women's soccer team. She embarked on a semester in Spain just before the pandemic hit. When Spain issued stay-at-home orders, Cooper learned she would be housebound for weeks.

“Playing my sport is the most important thing aside from school, and not having that outlet is extremely frustrating,” she said in April via video chat from Barcelona. During the peak of the pandemic, students were prohibited from leaving their housing, even for exercise. “Never in my life have I been unable to play,” Cooper recalled. “If it hadn't been for Dan's video workouts, I don't know what I would've done for all those weeks on lockdown.”



Mavericks stay engaged and fit on Zoom.

## COMMITTED TO CONNECTION

Cooper avidly followed the weekly conditioning videos sent out by Steinberg and colleagues, and later the live workouts on Zoom. Several coaches prepared advanced, team-specific workouts to keep students engaged and fit.

Steinberg invited the entire Mercy community to take part. “Athletics is a communal activity, so isolation is a huge detriment — for

everyone, not just athletes,” said Steinberg.

Georgia Efthaltsides'06, head coach for women's volleyball, concurred. “Those online workouts really played a pivotal role in keeping our athletes focused” she said. “They not only helped everyone stay connected, but they also kept our players focused and motivated.” Other forms of team connections proved just as important. “Our team has a regular text thread, holds weekly meetings and pairs players for peer support,” she said.

Efthaltsides is not new to coaching during a crisis. She recalled when Hurricane Maria struck Puerto Rico, which was home to the families of several players. “We were all on campus for the pre-season, and many of the girls couldn't contact their families,” she said. “We got through it by sticking together and keeping their spirits up. We were much closer as a team after that.”



Men's soccer team wins the East Coast Conference Championship.

Photo by Stephanie Escala



Women's soccer team advances past Southern New Hampshire in the first round of the NCAA Tournament.

Photo by Carlisle Stockton



Photo by Carlisle Stockton

Pedro Velazquez '12, head coach of the men's soccer team, has played soccer all his life. Taught the game as a young boy by his father, he knows the intrinsic value of committing to higher goals. "With athletics, you're always chasing something — a win, a championship, a division tournament. Good athletes are naturally driven to improve, to compete against themselves, to keep reaching higher," he said. "But student-athletes should also be well-rounded and that requires support. You can see that support coming from everyone at Mercy, from President Hall to the coaches to the students themselves. We really are all in this together, and we will come through."

## A BRIGHTER FUTURE

Now, as college campuses prepare for reopening in the fall, many questions remain about how collegiate athletics will accommodate social distancing guidelines that keep players and coaches safe.

On July 17, Mercy announced that it would postpone the fall sports season until the spring of 2021. The decision came after weeks of meetings between members of the Department of Athletics, the East Coast Conference and

the Northeast 10 Conference, which governs Mercy sports organizations.

"We didn't arrive at this decision lightly," said Matt Kilcullen, director of athletics. "It's a disappointment to everyone who had been looking forward to a return to competition, but our first obligation is to the health and safety of our student-athletes, coaches and staff."

Kilcullen pointed out that Mercy is fine-tuning a more specific set of guidelines for a phased reopening of athletics, beginning with training sessions and workouts. These closely align with the College's OnCampus Plus guidelines and those recommended by the NCAA as well as local, state and federal governments.

Yet there is a bright side to this long spring of uncertainty and restraint. "Our student-athletes had our best overall academic semester since I've been at Mercy," Kilcullen said. "It was our biggest concern going into this transition, considering we could have no in-person contact. We wondered how everyone would handle it all, but everyone did well. It took collaboration, communication and dedication. Mercy Athletics came through with flying colors."