

Sports

Coronavirus leaves Oregon sports fans wondering: What if?

These past 72 hours have been eventful to say the least. The NBA opted to suspend its season as Rudy Gobert and Donovan Mitchell of the Utah Jazz were tested positive for the COVID-19, also known as the coronavirus.

That was the first domino to fall. After discussing restrictions such as not allowing fans to even attend games, other organizations like Major League Baseball, NHL and even the NCAA suspended all of their sporting events for the time being.

No March Madness. Life without sports. It feels like a nightmare on a continuous loop. However, we need to see this with a bigger perspective. Every precaution that is being taken right now is justified. We don't know how big of a monster this pandemic will be.

Remember — sports are suspended for the time being, not completely over.

Still, it's easy to find yourself reflecting what might have been — especially here in Oregon.

The Oregon Ducks women's basketball team was having a season of historic proportions. Sitting at a record of 31-2, they just hoisted the Pac-12 championship in Las Vegas after beating the Stanford Cardinal, 89-56. The Ducks were eyeing the NCAA tournament with arguably the best player of the nation.

Senior Sabrina Ionescu was wowing basketball fans all over the landscape with her style of play. Returning for her fourth year, it shocked many. She averaged over 17 points with nine assists per game. The Ducks were set to make a real threat for the national title, but as of right now we won't know.

The Oregon men's team was also a lock for an NCAA tournament berth.

And the Oregon State men's team still had a chance to earn a bid had it won the Pac-12 tournament.

The Oregon State men's baseball team, a perennial threat to make a run towards the College Baseball World Series, and three-time national champions, are off to a rough start with a 5-9 record but they still garner interest from the national spotlight due to past success. We won't know if they can return back to Omaha, as even though it is three months away, the College Baseball World Series was canceled.

Though having quite an up and down year, the Portland Trail Blazers were knocking on the door of the NBA playoffs. Though he suffered an injury prior to All-Star break, star point guard Damian Lillard was encouraged to help lead the team into the playoffs. Now the Moda Center doors will remain locked for at the very least the next 30 days.

We can sit here and continue to go down the list of what this pandemic has ruined in the sports world but that would be counterproductive. As someone who is passionate about sports, I feel like as fans we need to remember who these athletes are first.

They are human, just like us. These athletes are fathers, mothers, sons and daughters. As we prepare to ride out how long this pandemic may be with our families, we need to understand that these athletes need to be with theirs. This virus can be spread through human contact, and stadiums can be a launching pad of a huge outbreak.

Athletes have made their opinions known to the public, saying with only three months into 2020, this definitely isn't our year. The one person whose perspective I align most with in the sports world happened late Thursday night. It came from a twitter exchange from Golden State Warriors head coach Steve Kerr.

"It's going to take all of us to commit to social distancing in order to turn the tide and get the virus under control," Kerr said on Twitter. "Please explain this concept to everyone that you know."

So as sporting events are closing, we are witnessing so many other norms are taking precautionary steps as well. It's OK to be frustrated about what could have been, and how our daily routine is slowly being disrupted.

Keep this in mind, though — there isn't a scouting report in this virus. We don't have any film to go over, and we have never fought against something like this before. Let's make the right steps and hopefully bring back our sense of normalcy.



COREY KIRK

CLASS 4A GIRLS STATE BASKETBALL TOURNAMENT CANCELED

Bulldogs' state title defense ends suddenly, shockingly

By Jayson Jacoby
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Mat Sand was driving through the darkness Thursday night when it struck him that he was supposed to be somewhere else at that moment.

Not following his headlights down the black maw of Interstate 84 toward Baker City.

But beneath the bright lights of a gymnasium 300 miles away at Forest Grove High School, watching his Baker girls basketball team on its quest to win consecutive Class 4A state titles.

"I looked at the clock, it was 8:15, and I thought we should be tipping off right now," said Sand, who finished his fifth year as the Bulldogs' coach in a most unexpected way.

About 11 a.m. Thursday Sand and his fellow coaches learned that the Oregon School Activities Association (OSAA) had canceled the 4A, 5A and 6A girls and boys state tournaments.

"It's kind of a surreal moment," said Sand, who guided the Bulldogs to the 2019 championship, the first for a Baker girls team.

Sand said he immediately drove to Baker's team hotel, about a 25-minute drive away, to tell his players.

"It was disappointing, for myself and my team," he said. "My heart just goes out to the seniors."

Those seniors are Sydney Younger, Anna Carter, Lauren Benson and Isabella Nemec.

Sand said the season's end, which in effect happened in a team meeting in a motel room rather than on the court, was unsatisfying because it lacked the definitive conclusion of a win or a loss — both of which the Bulldogs have experienced during Sand's tenure.

"You go in there with the expectations, and the opportunity to do it (win a state title) again," he said. "This has such a different feel to it. Being the defending champion, we were extremely excited, extremely confident that we were going to make a great run at it."

Younger, the Bulldogs' senior point guard and most experienced player, said she was disappointed when she learned late Wednesday that the OSAA was banning spectators from tournament games but, as of that time, the games themselves would happen.

"We got together as a team and said we can do this, we've got to be loud on the bench," Younger said.

But then on Thursday the final verdict came in — there would be no games at all.

Younger said she was alone when Sand, on his way to the motel from Forest Grove, phoned her with the dismal news.



Kathy Orr/Baker City Herald

Baker's Lauren Benson drives against La Grande's Alexys Chamberlain in a game earlier this season.

"It was the biggest blow I think I've gotten in a long time," Younger said. "It was really heartbreaking, actually."

She said she felt sorry not only for her teammates but also for competitors such as Greater Oregon League rival La Grande, which also qualified for the state

tournament.

But rather than wallow in sorrow and simply disperse, never again to share a bench, Younger said the Bulldogs got together and decided that if they couldn't play basketball together again, they would at least conclude their trip to the state tournament in a positive way.

They initially thought of a trip to the Oregon Coast, but they ended up having lunch at Camp 18, a roadside attraction in the Coast Range between Portland and Seaside that includes a logging museum.

"It was a blessing in disguise," Younger said. "We all ended up having so much fun. I think we really finished on a high note. It was a last hurrah for everyone."

Sand said his disappointment at the abrupt end to a state tournament — indeed, one that never actually started — is tempered with the reality that coronavirus is a serious matter, and one that transcends sports.

"I don't think anybody knows the magnitude of this thing," he said. "As a nation we're taking precautions, and it's better off to default on the side of being extremely protective, which I appreciate."

"I'm not questioning the decision that was made. There is a lot of emotion, but I told the girls that that's some of the things we have to deal with in life."

If nothing else, Younger said, the 2020 state tournament — the one that never officially happened — was in its own way as memorable as the 2019 event in which the Bulldogs achieved a milestone.

"We made history last year, and we're in the middle of history this year," she said.

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