

NFL | TRAINING CAMP

Fans return, must deal with restrictions

BY STEVE MEGARGE

Associated Press
GREEN BAY, Wis. — Pro Bowl running back Aaron Jones and his Green Bay Packers teammates have resumed an annual preseason ritual after a pandemic-imposed hiatus by riding bicycles to training camp workouts.

But at least for this year, the players can't borrow those bikes from young fans.

The Packers' change in protocol reflects how the NFL has adapted its training camp policy while welcoming back spectators, who weren't allowed at workouts last summer. Fans can't interact with players and must remain over 20 feet away from them.

The changes are particularly apparent in Green Bay, where fans have been loaning Packers players bikes to travel to practice since the 1950s.

"I love the tradition," Jones said. "It's special."

That tradition was tweaked this year. No longer can fans loan their bicycles to players. The Packers instead have new Schwinn bikes they can use.

Similar changes have taken place at other training camps.

For instance, Matt Anderson of Richfield, Minnesota, brought his 14-year-old son to the Minnesota Vikings' first workout. That typically would have been an ideal setting for the teenager to seek autographs from his favorite players.

Not this year. The Vikings have compensated by conducting autograph sessions with Hall of Famers Carl Eller, Randall McDaniel and John Randle, plus other former players. Anderson says he still got a taste of what makes training camp special



Green Bay Packers' linebacker Rashan Gary rides a bicycle to training camp July 31 in Green Bay, Wisconsin. Matt Ludtke/AP

even under the current restrictions.

"The opportunity to get close to them, even (this year), you could give a shoutout to a player and get a reaction from them," Anderson said. "That's a unique thing from a football perspective, to have that proximity to a player and get that interaction with them."

NFL officials say about 1 million people attended various training camp workouts across the country in 2019, the year before the pandemic. About 200,000 fans attended training camp sessions July 31, a day the NFL billed as "Back Together Saturday."

Players appreciate the fans' presence after going through training camp without any spectators last year.

"We talked about how people are giving up vacation time to come watch us practice," Vikings quarterback Kirk Cousins said.

"That sums it up right there. Honestly, it makes coming out to practice on a 95-degree day feel like a privilege, when you realize that's what fans are doing."

They like hearing the applause again.

When Packers quarterback Aaron Rodgers threw a ball about 50 yards into a 2-foot hoop in the end zone Thursday, fans roared their approval.

Only teammates would have been able to cheer that type of play a year ago.

Packers officials said Thursday they have averaged about 2,100 fans per practice session and indicated it was slightly below their pre-pandemic figures. They noted the 2018 and '19 attendance totals were higher than usual because of Packers Experience, a festival featuring live music and skills activities that wasn't possible this year due to health protocols.

But the biggest change in Green Bay involves the bike tradition. In previous summers, a player often would use the same kid's bike throughout

2020 Hall of Fame class enshrined in Canton

CANTON, Ohio — From bone-rattling tacklers Troy Polamalu, Steve Atwater and Cliff Harris to hard-charging runner Edgerrin James to the pass-catching brilliance of Isaac Bruce and Harold Carmichael, the Pro Football Hall of Fame class of 2020 has something for everyone.

Add in blocking dynamos Steve Hutchinson and Jim Covert, Steel Curtain stalwart safety Donnie Shell and such as leaders as former NFL Commissioner Paul Tagliabue and coaches Bill Cowher and Jimmy Johnson.

They all entered the hall Saturday night, a year late due to the COVID-19 pandemic, yet just as rewarding.

"If you told me after I graduated from the University of Michigan that I'd be excited standing in Ohio in the middle of August," Hutchinson joked, "... To me, there's no place better than Canton, Ohio."

Certainly all 12 men enshrined on this night felt that way. "I am humbled and honored to wear this gold jacket," Atwater said before looking around at the other Hall of Famers on the stage. "What a group we have up here."

The 2021 Hall of Fame class will be enshrined on Sunday. — Associated Press

training camp. Players built friendships with the kids who loaned them bikes.

"My bike rider, I'm still super close with him," Jones said. "He's always out there at practice. I see him all the time."

Now the Packers have posted messages on the bike path reminding fans that players aren't allowed to "take a selfie with you, play catch, provide an autograph, fist bump or even high-five."

"I understand them," said Ben Hurley, a 14-year-old Packers fan from Ashwaubenon, Wisconsin. "We've got to keep the players safe and have them ready to play, especially with the strict rules and the fines they can get. But it's a little frustrating."

Colin McCabe, a 19-year-old Packers fan, has attended training camp since he was about 12 and let players ride his bike to practice when he was younger. His 11-year-old brother, Liam, started loaning his bike to players at the age of 4.

"It's so different," said McCabe, who lives about four blocks from the Packers' practice fields. "I'm glad that it's somewhat normal where we

get to see the players walk down and ride bikes, but the whole tradition of players interacting with the kids and the fans, it's way different."

It's not the same as before the pandemic, but at least it isn't a repeat of 2020.

Many NFL teams didn't play any home games in front of paying spectators last year. They love seeing fans back and look forward to playing preseason games in front of crowds.

"After everything that we went through last year, it's great to see fans out there today, and it'll be great to see them this year," Denver Broncos quarterback Teddy Bridgewater said after a practice last week.

Having fans at training camp sites represents one giant step toward normalcy. Maybe next year the players and fans will be able to interact a little more.

"I really hope so, especially for my brother's sake," McCabe said. "He looks forward to this every season. He'll wake up at like 4 in the morning when it comes to Packers training camp and be like, 'Oh, we get to go today.'"

"It's better than Christmas for a lot of kids."

Durant

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Durant finished with 29 points, just off the 30 he scored in the last two Olympic gold-medal games. The four-time NBA scoring champion is in the discussion as the best player in the league.

As for the best player in Olympic basketball, that debate seems to have ended in Japan.

"That's a special, special man, and he carried this team like we needed him to, like he's supposed to coming back for his third Olympics, all-time USA scorer," said U.S. forward Draymond Green, Durant's former teammate in Golden State. "There's been a lot of great players to don this jersey, and he's No. 1 and that's a special thing."

Durant, who passed Carmelo Anthony earlier in the Olympics to become the leading scorer in U.S. men's history, joined Anthony as the only three-time gold medalists in men's basketball.

Durant couldn't choose which Olympics is the most special, because to him they all are.

"I'm just happy to be here," he said. "I'm happy to be part of this group for life."

It might have been a group of silver medalists without Durant's greatness. Unlike his last two Olympics, when he played with Anthony and other experienced superstars, this was a team filled with international rookies, a team with a roster

that wasn't set until shortly before the tournament.

While Durant could largely focus on being a scorer in his previous Olympics, the Americans needed him to be their leader this time. He showed his teammates what it took, with coach Gregg Popovich saying watching him was like "osmosis" for them.

"He's not special because he's so talented. It's the way he works on his game is more impressive, the relationships he builds with his teammates," Popovich said.

Durant was a constant comfort during nervous times for the Americans throughout the tournament. When the U.S. struggled early Saturday, Durant scored 12 points and had 21 by halftime.

"I think he's the best scorer in basketball and he's going to do what he does, especially on the biggest stage like the Olympic games," France center Rudy Gobert said.

Durant takes tremendous pride donning the red, white and blue. And his commitment to USA Basketball has been invaluable.

Another flurry early in the third quarter after France cut it the deficit to four provided a double-digit lead, room it turned out the Americans would need to hold on for their fourth straight gold medal.

"Kevin Durant has been one of the great players ever to play for USAB," outgoing managing director Jerry Colangelo said, getting choked up and adding,



United States' Kevin Durant (7) drives around France's Rudy Gobert (27) during men's basketball gold-medal game at the Olympics Saturday night in Saitama, Japan. Charlie Neibergall/AP

"he's very special."

Colangelo recalled meeting Durant while the forward was spending one season at Texas in 2006-07, inviting him to the U.S. training camp that summer. Durant quickly accepted.

"He said, 'I'll be there,' and it's never changed," Colangelo said.

That's partly because Durant loves playing with guys he can only watch and compete against during the NBA season. He said each team he's been on — including a gold medal-winning squad in the 2010 world basketball championships — builds a bond that always remains.

It's unknown if he could have played had the Olympics been held as scheduled in 2020. Durant had ruptured his Achilles tendon in the 2019 NBA Finals and sat out the 2019-20 season. He was working his way through rehabilitation when the Olympics were postponed

Bonding

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When spring turns to summer, both men return to the 57-year-old ballpark off Wilson Avenue in Bend, as has been the routine dating back several decades.

Foster, 56, has been a mainstay at the ballfield in the summer for nearly half a century.

At 7 years old, Foster began selling programs for the American Legion ballclub the Mid-Oregon Motormen, which played its game at Bend Municipal Park, before it became Vince Genna Stadium. He did the same for the Timber Hawks and the Bend Phillies (short-season Class A affiliates of Major League Baseball's Oakland A's and Philadelphia

Phillies, respectively), before performing just about every job for the Elks, from washing uniforms, to passing out programs, cleaning up the stadium, and just about any job asked to do — a responsibility he still holds today.

"They keep bringing me back," said Foster, who is the oldest worker for the Elks. "They want me and the fans want me back. And I keep coming back because of the fans."

Monroe has been coming to Elks games since he was an infant. But it was when he was 8 years old that he first met Foster and their friendship began to blossom.

"He really looked up to Rod," said Monroe's mother, Vickie Monroe.

"I love sports, especially when I have a partner like this. He just makes me laugh."

— Rod Foster, speaking of his Special Olympic bocce ball partner and friend John Paul Monroe

Perhaps spending time at the ballpark while still in diapers was a glimpse into how Monroe would spend seemingly all of his time.

Like Foster, absences from Elks' games are rare for Monroe. If he cannot make it to the ballpark, he live streams the games from his home in Powell Butte. If the Elks are not playing, Monroe is turning on a Seattle Mariners game, or just about any other sport that is on.

"He was only 5 years old, living in Hermiston, and we had

cable TV," said Vickie Monroe. "He was just a little boy and he would just sit and watch baseball. Then when we moved back we had to get a big satellite dish so he could watch his baseball teams."

It was through the Special Olympics where the pair's friendship really began to take off. They competed in just about every sport, including track and field, golf, bowling, basketball and snowshoeing.

Foster estimates that he has won nearly 500 medals between local, state and national

competitions through his athletic career. He has traveled as far as Canada and Iowa to compete.

Five years ago, they finally teamed up and became bocce ball partners. It was a natural pairing and they quickly became a formidable team, winning a silver medal at the 2019 state games.

"I love sports, especially when I have a partner like this," said Foster wrapping his arm around Monroe's shoulder. "He just makes me laugh."

Now the duo is looking forward to making another run at a gold medal as soon as bocce ball and the Special Olympics return due to the COVID-19 pandemic. They are both eager to return to playing their now favorite sport.

"We just like to focus on our game," Foster said. "It is a team effort when we play bocce ball."

And it does not appear the friendship is ending any time soon.

Foster jokes that one day he might "get fired" as Monroe's bocce ball partner. Monroe is quick to make sure to put an end to that rumor.

"You are hired," Monroe immediately responded.

Baseball, bocce ball and breakfast have been simple yet effective ingredients to a lifelong friendship.

"That is what it is all about," Foster said. "Us being together and having fun. He makes me want to keep coming back. I don't want to leave him ever."

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