

COVID-19 Causes Seniors to Think: Are They Still Student Athletes?

The empty Baseball diamond

March 11 was a pretty typical Ann Arbor day, at least weather-wise. It was cold, bleak, not a hint of sun anywhere. It all created an uncomfortable aura as the fears of COVID-19 hung in the air. Joe Pace, a redshirt senior for the Michigan Baseball team, sat in one of his lectures that day, but the content mattered little next to what was running through his head. His mind wandered just a few miles down State Street to Ray Fisher Stadium. Joe's home away from home and his sanctuary for the last five years. Amidst the commotion of uncertainty, Pace was distracted by the rumors surrounding the thing he cared about most, college athletics. He started to tick through the list of things that had already been disrupted by the pandemic.

The NCAA March Madness tournament had announced it would go on, but without fans in the stands.

The Michigan Baseball team would hold their games that weekend but was planning on only allowing two family members per player along with essential staff and media personnel.

The Ivy League cancelled the remainder of its spring sports season. It was the first Division I league in the NCAA to call the season. The list got longer and longer by the hour.

Denial began to sink in as Joe realized the severity of what was happening. "No way this is going to happen to the Big Ten" Pace thought to himself while refocusing on the new slide the professor had put up.

Then came the last straw. An email was sent out that night from the University of Michigan President, Mark Schlissel, that stated that classes for that Thursday and Friday were to be canceled. This was so that the university could work on moving to an online format until April 21st. Joe Pace had unknowingly attended his last undergraduate class at the University of Michigan.

The still water

The next day, Madison Byrd woke up and was unsettled by the events unfolding around the country, but "we didn't suspect that our entire season would be in jeopardy".

Byrd, as her teammates call her, is one of the driving forces behind the Varsity Rowing team. She helped her team win the Big Ten Tournament and place third in the NCAA Division I Tournament last year. With all that success, how could the season get canceled?

Byrd was expecting to head on the bus to the boathouse later that day, but her coaches texted the team telling them to come to the facility first. The pit in her stomach appeared as Madison knew something was up.

Before heading to the locker room with her team, Byrd went to get treatment for her back in the training room. Looking around the room she glanced at the TV. The bar at the bottom of the screen almost didn't seem real. "Big Ten Tournament canceled amidst COVID-19 concern". She went to join the team in the locker room and, seeing on social media that other conferences were canceling seasons, "some of the girls just started to cry silently by themselves." To Byrd, this all felt like a dream, like everything was moving in slow motion.

Her coaching staff came into the locker room and broke the news to the team. Their season would be canceled due to concerns about the coronavirus. That was when the fog was blown away and Madison realized what this meant for her. There would be no more morning workouts, rowing on Belleville Lake, or team dinners. What stung the most was her hopes for this season were crushed with one meeting.

By the end of the day Thursday, the NCAA had canceled the remainder of winter and spring sports. The college sports world had come to an abrupt halt. Senior college athletes were distraught and shocked. Questions of eligibility and graduation swarmed around teams and social media. No one had answers.

To make matters worse? On Friday, students were urged to go home if able. A senior's worst fear, ending college with one swift blow in a week. No more classes or parties and for the athletes, a season with their team was now destroyed.

The Michigan Man

Joe Pace has been a Michigan Baseball player since 2016, he is currently 23. Coming to Michigan was a no brainer for Joe, between the education and the growing program, repping the block "M" became a reality for him.

The promise of personal growth was almost as enticing as the opportunity to play baseball. As the title of a Michigan Man is most often talked about when talking about Michigan athletics, Pace says that is exactly what his Coach, Eric Bakish, expects from

every player on the team. “He really cares about each player individually” and that relationship has allowed Joe to become an extraordinary person, on and off the field.

Over the phone, Joe could be heard moving around his house in Ann Arbor but paused when he began to talk about his identity as a baseball player. “Baseball shaped me and I am grateful for that.” With a tough first two years on the team and thoughts of transferring popping into his mind during those years, the academics kept him in Ann Arbor. Grateful he stayed, the perseverance and growth are evident in Joe.

He took another breath as he told me what had just been ripped away from him, “people talk about what an honor it is to wear your uniform and when you find out that you can’t do it anymore you should be hurting...” He stopped for a second, seeming to put his next sentence into the right words. “And I totally get what people mean now.”

A whole new world

With Madison, her identity as a student-athlete started on the volleyball court, a world away from the water she found herself on in college.

The volleyball court was her second home in high school and as the reality of college loomed closer, the realization that she would not be playing volleyball struck her. She found another option in her friend’s older sister who rowed at Iowa who informed her there were a lot of Big Ten schools giving scholarships. “I knew I wanted to continue to compete in college so when I got into Michigan I emailed the [Rowing] coach.” With the knowledge of walk-on spots open at Michigan, Byrd decided to try out the first two weeks of school.

The rest? Well, the love wasn’t mutual until Madison’s sophomore year at the NCAA tournament. Surrounded by some of the fastest schools in the boats next to her, the feeling of appreciation for the sport she had given so much time to finally sunk in. The time, sacrifice, and love all hit me at that moment. “I knew I could not be having a better college experience [through rowing for Michigan].”

Perspective amidst the chaos

“Lots of athletes are struggling, especially the seniors who got their last season taken away from them,” Dr. Jason Novetsky of Champion Mindset Group expressed to me over the phone. As a sport and performance psychology coach, he works with all levels of athletes to work on their mental side of the sport. As he is working with athletes

through this uncertain time, “perspective” is something that he is trying to emphasize to them.

Yes, their seasons have been canceled, but this is a time to change their perspective. “I tell them that this is a time to train harder, to get mentally and physically stronger for that moment they can play in the future.” This is the only thing that Dr. Novetsky can do as the uncertainty of the sporting world continues with each day. With this shift in perspective, he hopes these athletes can take this situation and make something positive out of it.

Byrd paused for a minute over the phone, “It’s crazy to think that you go into college expecting to finish out the semester and get that Big House graduation... now it’s been taken away,” For her, if she would be given another year of rowing, “I would want to come back, but I would have to weigh the pros and cons.” If she came back she would have another year of school, but if she moved on to the “real world” then she would never know what could have been. The internal battle between moving on and going back is a difficult one and one that many other athletes are making during this time.

Being a student-athlete has given her a purpose at Michigan and now, at home, “it’s weird”. Between taking classes online and spending time with her family, Madison is stuck in a weird place. Like a fever dream that she would love to wake up from. At her home in Fort Wayne, Indiana, Byrd stays active, but nothing will make up for the lost practices and races she would have had. “It is nice to be around my family,” but the circumstances are less than ideal.

Moving forward

With the NCAA granting spring-sport student athletes another season of eligibility, a decision remains for many athletes during this time. For Byrd, she could have another year with her team on the water. But for Joe, he had already used his redshirt and had a difficult choice of whether or not to move on for good.

“Oh COME ON!” The somber tone of talking about the cancelation of baseball was quickly interrupted by the shout in the background. Joe laughed and apologized for the noise as he explained it was his roommate playing a video game in the adjacent room.

Still, in his house in Ann Arbor, Joe tells me about adjusting to life without baseball. Online classes are weird to get adjusted to and not having a strict schedule is different than his normal routine. To compensate for the lost practice and workouts, his housemates (also his teammates) had made a makeshift workout facility in their small

backyard. "It is pretty sad, but it works," he commented on the few weights and baseball equipment his housemates and him could collect from the facility.

Trying to hold on to those last moments he had with his team is what is getting Joe through this. "After we got the announcement from Coach about the season being canceled we did the only thing that felt right." He laughed a little and I could nearly see him picturing the scene in his mind as he sat at his kitchen table.

"We all sat there for a while and then decided to just go sit out on the baseball diamond." The team went out and sat in that empty baseball stadium on State Street, still in their practice uniforms. Sitting there until the sun went down, Joe and the team soaked in the last moments with their second family they had created at Michigan. Unsure what the future held, but at that moment, just enjoying each other's company was the only thing they could do.

With a difficult choice to either move on from the sport he loves and the school he called his second home or come back as a Graduate student, Pace remains in Ann Arbor to take in those last weeks of the college campus and the company of his teammates. Even an impromptu graduation ceremony was held for him and his teammate to make the situation less somber.

Although Joe is still deciding if he will play one last season with his team, Madison can... and will.

Edit: Both Joe and Madison have decided to come back to the University of Michigan and compete for their respective teams in the 2020-2021 season. Good luck to both athletes.