

- Speaker 1: It's a great explaining time. It's good to see a bunch of fellow ticket holders around
- Speaker 2: Family and friends. The stands are like our 12th person on the field. The
- Speaker 3: Atmosphere is absolutely electric.
- Speaker 4: It's great to have fans back at our games. We have a lot of support from our student athletes. Now that everyone's back on campus,
- Speaker 5: Having the bleachers failed after a year of them empty, it's just such a special feeling. And I'm so grateful for all the funds of turnout every weekend to support roped off that ex
- Speaker 6: [00:00:30] Welcome to on the pandemic. I'm Mary Marquetta O'Dowd. As with most things in our lives, the sports world was turned upside down by the pandemic play came to a stop. Athletes found themselves living in literal bubbles and fan seats were replaced with cardboard cutouts, leaving us all dreaming of the day. We could be together again. Now the stands at Rutgers are filling up and the cheers are back on the banks to talk about the road to get here and where we [00:01:00] stand. I'm here with pat Hobbs, athletic director at Rutgers university. Hi Mary. Thanks for joining us. Athletics has been in some form of operation throughout the entire pandemic here on campus, but this year's homecoming must've felt really special and like a real milestone for where we've been when, what we've been through for the past year and a half. How did it feel?
- Speaker 7: I mean, you don't really understand how it's going to feel until you don't have the fans, [00:01:30] right, until people aren't there in those venues. And last year was very strange. Um, even though we were pumping in fan music or, you know, voice music and those things, uh, to not have people there really was very, very different. And, uh, not that you ever forgot what it was like, but when you had that moment, that first moment against the temple, when we played temple and, uh, coach Shanto came out of the tunnel with our student athletes and you heard the, I think we have 48,000 [00:02:00] people there. Uh, it just felt like we're back. I think that's what we're, I'm not a sociologist or an anthropologist, but I do think there's something about gatherings, um, as humans and that's what we're supposed to do. And, uh, I don't know if we're supposed to be what we're supposed to be cheering on, but, um, it was, it was really good. And I know our student athletes were just, uh, they just felt that they were overwhelmed by it. Um, and I could see them looking around and saying, you know, there you are again. Uh, so it was a great feeling
- Speaker 6: That sounds really special. Um, [00:02:30] and just like positive energy when we listened to the voices of the athletes and the fans, it just, you know, sort of sends shivers down my spine about where we've been and, and coming back. Um, you know, we've seen a lot of different approaches to opening up sports among other gatherings in the past a few months, everything from mass requirements to different forms of social distancing for Rutgers fans coming back, what are some of the new rules that they should be prepared

Speaker 7: For? Yeah. So, um, in the football stadium [00:03:00] itself, it's an outdoor venue. So we follow all the state's CDC guidelines. And so we've encouraged, but one, we encourage everybody to be vaccinated. Uh, two, if you are in a close environment, whether it's the restrooms, whether it's on the concession lines, whatever that happens to be, we encourage folks to wear a mask and people have been great. Um, sometimes people show up without a mask and we've been able to provide mass for them. Now, as we move over to basketball and wrestling, um, then we're going to be in a, in an environment that's, um, obviously [00:03:30] much more packed in, uh, and will require everybody to wear a mask. Um, probably the early game or two will accommodate and help people and provide some masks. But eventually we're going to send them back to their car and go, you probably have six or seven in your car, like I do.

Speaker 7: Uh, so, um, and we're looking forward to it. And so again, we're going to follow the state and CDC guidelines right now. And the other good thing is the, um, the, the rate of vaccination here in the state of New Jersey is extremely high, obviously here at Rutgers university, all of the students that were required [00:04:00] to be vaccinated. So we certainly know our students section, uh, will be a hundred percent vaccinated. And I think most of the arena will be. And we were also told people if they don't feel comfortable being in that kind of environment, we understand that. And we understand that some people will choose not to come. And I think we've already had that in football. Um, but, uh, but it'll be a great environment. And, uh, we already have a sell out for the Lehigh game, which is the first game, which is where we're going to hang that banner that took us 30 years to get. So we're pretty excited.

Speaker 6: So [00:04:30] the weather just changed. We're moving back into winter sports, we're going inside. What are your expectations for the winter season for all the different sports, um, based on what you went through last year?

Speaker 7: Well, first of all, let me talk what I expect to happen on the floor and on the mat. Um, we're going to win, uh, we're, we're pretty excited about both our men's and women's basketball programs coming back really strong. They're really well positioned for, uh, to repeat on the success that they had last year wrestling. Uh, we've got some new guys who've come onto the team, so we're pretty excited. [00:05:00] So on the floor, we're excited about what's going to happen in the stands. We're just excited to have our fans back there, you know, as we talked about, uh, we'll be careful. Um, and one of the good things we talked about earlier today with our medical staff is we're not seeing a surge, uh, that's come out of, in, uh, being in football stadiums, things like that, some of the outdoor gatherings, where there was some concern about what was going to happen, we've not seen it. So that's a good thing. And again, I think it speaks to the level of vaccination that's [00:05:30] out there and the care that people are taking, whether it's with masks, whether it's, you know, hygiene things and all credit again, to our docs and our trainers for getting us through last year and taking care of our athletes this year,

Speaker 6: You've been pretty proud about what happened last year, too, and talked a little bit about, you know, how you kept playing. Can you elaborate a little bit on that?

Speaker 7: So it was incredible. And in some ways I still marvel that we were able to pull it off and that our, and everybody that was involved in our testing regimen [00:06:00] were able to do what they did every day. I wish I had a dollar for every time. I had a nasal swab up my nose. Um, but, uh, uh, it was, it was, it was a little bit crazy in a way. I mean, you go in and we had testing both in the RWJ Barnabas health athletic performance center, uh, and later in the Rodkin building, when we opened the Rodkin building and to see sort of whole teams come in, go through that testing every day, if you were in competition, you were testing every day. Uh, and we got through it. And as [00:06:30] I said, our teams were on the floor, our teams were able to compete and we had very few cancellations due to COVID. So, um, I've got a really good team behind the team.

Speaker 6: That's excellent. I think another lesson that we've all learned through this pandemic is not so much well, in addition to how difficult it was and the discipline of the athletes to get through last season with the testing, with the isolation, but also how important sports are, um, how they're so important [00:07:00] for everyone. And, you know, I observed this with my kids, getting them outside, getting them playing when they finally were able to play with other kids and do sports organized sports, it was really uplifting. And it got us, all me too, I'm in a better place, but I think college athletes, student athletes at the high school level, getting back in the game, they're really benefiting from it, not just the physical exercise, but the emotional and social aspects of it. And that transcends to our fans as well. [00:07:30] How do you think sports should be used to help with the recovery from this pandemic

Speaker 7: For our student athletes, getting back to competition, getting back to training together was cathartic. And it wasn't me. It was a mental health issue for them. There's no question about it. The number that came up to me and said, thank you. I'm just so glad to be back. And if you think about it, we had no winter sports except for football. So those young men and women who play soccer, it was probably the first time [00:08:00] in 15 years that they did not compete in the fall training in the fall. And there was a training, they were home, it was completely remote and they will tell you that it weighed heavy on them. Uh, and, and it did for us too, right? We all came through that a little COVID exhausted, even if we got out and we walked a little bit and everything else, um, if you're an athlete and you're a world-class athlete, and if you're competing in the big 10, you were among the best athletes that we have in the country, in the world to not be able to do that was a mental [00:08:30] health issue. And we've actually been pretty proud of the services that we provide on the mental health side to our student athletes as well, which was necessary during that last year.

Speaker 6: So you just talked about what a big deal it is to be a big 10 athlete here at Rutgers. And it really is. But in addition to playing at that level, you're also in one of the largest media markets in the world. And so even in the best of times, it can be intense. What, you know, what have you seen [00:09:00] from the athletes? How are they holding up, you know, through all of this time? Yeah.

Speaker 7: Yeah. I mean, you, if you come to Rutgers, you'd come to a big 10 institution. I think you come with some expectation that the spotlight will shine on you a little bit more than where you were before. And, um, not all of them are prepared for that. And we have to

work hard to try to help them and let them grow. You know, I always say to parents when their kids are coming to Rutgers, there's sort of three parts of their experience. There's a part as a student in the classroom part as an athlete on [00:09:30] the field. And then there's the human growth that happens over that four year period of time. And for a student athlete, they're in the spotlight during the glare, I always tell our student athletes first day, I invite them back to campus. I say, you are in many ways, Rutgers greatest ambassadors, because you're the ones everybody sees, whether it's on television, whether it's streaming, however it is, they see you compete and they ascribe certain things to you as a result that maybe you're unprepared for.

Speaker 7: You say, that's not who I am. Um, but we get them there. And by the time [00:10:00] they graduate, um, where they've gone from sort of this, maybe quiet freshmen has come in the door to a real leader. Um, and somebody prepared for the world, not just the playing fields, but the world, the world of business, or be it, whatever they're going into, that's a big part of the experience, but it can be overwhelming and not everybody sort of wants that. So I think sometimes some recruits choose, you know, what I, I think I want to be in a little different place with a little different glare.

Speaker 6: So you brought up the issue of mental health and [00:10:30] the intensity for our athletes. And I think during the Olympics that came out pretty strong with the experience that Simone Biles had, where she stepped back, you know, from her sport at the top of her game, in some ways, and in an intense moment, you know, in the world history and our students are going through something similar, not necessarily at the Olympic level, but not too far away from that. Um, you know, is the mental health of our athletes generally, and especially now a concern for universities.

Speaker 7: So, [00:11:00] absolutely. I mean, you, you talked about Simone Biles and the Olympics, and I know Naomi Osaka, the winning is women's tennis players sort of stepped away from the sport. Um, I know there was a golfer, one of the golfers on the PGA tour stepped away. And so we're always paying attention to that. Um, you know, it, it seems like the mental health challenges faced by young people are growing. Uh, I think part of that is social media, uh, and where they go for sort of affirmation of their success or [00:11:30] their lack of success. We try to get them to avoid it to not after a contest, go to social media and look at it and see what some person says. Some snarky, you know, anonymous person online. I'm pretty good at my age of not paying attention to that stuff. But, you know, they grew up there, I guess they call them digital natives, right. They grew up in, they always had that. So they look to that and they look to social media and that creates some real challenges for them. Uh, and we try to help them navigate, you know, one of the wonderful [00:12:00] things when Anthony Asheville won the national championship, uh, just two years ago at this point, he swore off social media for the year. And he talked about the importance of that for his mental health. I wish more athletes could adopt what he does, but it's addictive and it's meant to be addictive, right? Yeah.

Speaker 6: Yeah. One of my rules of thumb is, you know, when someone's going through a tough time publicly, don't read the comments. You can read the paper, but don't read the comments because it's really, it's brutal. It's really brutal.

- Speaker 7: [00:12:30] I never read the comments. I never go to the message boards for those who are listening to this, I write this stuff. So you do read it. I'm sorry, I don't go to message boards. And when somebody says, did you see what's on the message board? I hold my hand up and say, not interested.
- Speaker 6: Yeah. What, what sort of services or supports beyond mentoring does the university and other universities provide to students to help them through this? And in particular given sort of the social isolation that they've gone through in the last year.
- Speaker 7: So we're really fortunate and we have [00:13:00] a trained psychologist and Dr. Peter [inaudible] and the team that he works with, who worked directly with our student athletes, he puts on regular programming, but then he also sees them individually. And he has a team of people that work with him. So I actually think we're at the forefront in terms of universities, in both recognizing that there are these mental health challenges out there and making sure that we provide services so that they're addressed and that they don't suffer alone. And it's another, the other thing we do with, uh, I do this on our orientation [00:13:30] for new student athletes coming in is we say, listen, life doesn't stop because you came to Rutgers university, things will happen. Um, they may happen in relationships. They may happen in your family. And if there's a crisis, then we want to know about it. And I tell them if you're not having the crisis, but you see a teammate having that crisis, we want to know about it because we can help.
- Speaker 6: That's really, really important. I think the more we make this, um, you know, mental health and resiliency services consistent and available [00:14:00] for everybody, the better off we'll be because there's still so much, um, you know, shyness about some of these issues. And, and I think it's really important that, um, everyone openly talk about these challenges that we have in life and, and seek help, but let's talk about the other side of it. Um, you mentioned, you know, for many of these athletes, this is a bit of celebrity for them. And I have noticed that some of them use it to positive, um, social, uh, efforts, one in particular, close to [00:14:30] my heart as a public health person was, um, Jaylin Miller. Who's a new Rutgers basketball, um, athlete and student. And he was taking to the media advocating for vaccination for COVID 19. And talking about the reality of the illness and really encouraging his community, um, back home to get vaccinated, you know, are you encouraging your athletes to get involved in this kind of a public health campaign or anything else like that?
- Speaker 7: And I love seeing [00:15:00] our students find a voice, uh, during college that's part of the growth. That's part of the experience, whether it's on issues around vaccination and COVID and safety or social justice issues. And not everybody may agree with them and there may be sort of pushback, but we encourage it. It's part of finding your voice. It's part of being an American and they have a special place. So people say, oh, you know, there's Jalen and he's, that's what he's talking about, or there's geo baker. And, um, that's what he's pushing. [00:15:30] At least it gets you thinking and talking about it and maybe going to get more information. So while we're now in a world where they can monetize their name, image, and likeness, a lot of them are also choosing to use their name, image, and likeness to promote public health issues and other issues. Uh, and I think that's great.

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Speaker 6: Thank you so much for being with us here today. Pat, are there any other comments that you want to share?

Speaker 7: I just want to say anybody who's part of Rutgers, uh, these young people, [00:16:00] um, they're very proud of being Rutgers student athletes. They're very proud of being part of a great university and they're proud to represent this university and we're going to do a lot of winning in the years ahead. One of the things that my team always hears me say is together. We're going to write the greatest chapter in Rutgers athletics history, uh, and everyone at Rutgers can celebrate that. So thanks. Thanks Mary for having me on today.

Speaker 6: That's great. Thank you, pat. Thank you for listening to this episode of on the pandemic to learn more about Rutgers [00:16:30] athletics, visit [Scarlet knights.com](#).