

UIUC Athletics Department Interview

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Randy Ballard, Associate Director of Athletics – Sports Medicine, Division of Intercollegiate Athletics, UIUC

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SPEAKERS

Jessie Knoles (Tech), Paul Gilbert II, Josh Whitman, Randy Ballard, Jeremy Busch, Kent Brown

Jessie Knoles (Tech) 0:01

All right. Let's get going.

Paul Gilbert II 0:03

All right. My name is Paul Gilbert. I'm a graduate assistant at the University of Illinois Archives. I'm interviewing Josh Whitman, Randy Ballard and Jeremy Busch, all members of the University Illinois Athletics Department, for the department's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The date of this interview is September 16, 2022, and I'm going to let each of the interviewees please introduce themselves and their full titles beginning with Josh.

Josh Whitman 0:11

Josh Whitman, Director of Athletics.

Paul Gilbert II 0:35

Randy?

Randy Ballard 0:35

Randy Ballard, Director of Sports Medicine.

Paul Gilbert II 0:38

And Jeremy?

Jeremy Busch 0:39

Jeremy Busch, Head Football Athletic Trainer.

Paul Gilbert II 0:46

All right, so we're going to begin with questions that are kind of for anyone in the group to answer. COVID-19 first appeared on our radar during the 2019-2020 basketball season, how

much of a concern was this to the athletic department as a whole? At what point did the severity of COVID-19 become acute?

Josh Whitman 1:09

[Me?] I think it came onto our radar early in the 2020 calendar year, um, candidly, I heard of it, I wasn't paying a lot of attention to it. I don't think any of us were necessarily. I remember very clearly being in the suite at a basketball game late in the season and we had the CEO of State Farm as a guest and he was talking about how they were preparing to take their agents off the road, how they were going to curtail travel from staff. I remember thinking to myself, wow, that's there's a lot more going on here than I realize. And then I think, like, the rest of the whole thing accelerated very quickly from that point. And so once we were in Indianapolis for the men's basketball tournament, we had athletic director meetings on that Wednesday of the tournament, that were scheduled to talk about a lot of other things and the entire day end up being spent on COVID. And um that night, I left Indianapolis and drove back to Champaign, because I felt like I needed to be here for what was about to happen. And the next day—well, that night was when [Fred] Hoiberg got sick on the sidelines of the basketball game, and everybody thought, oh my gosh, this is COVID, like we're just gonna have people fall over...he had the flu, he didn't have COVID. But everybody thought, this is what COVID is going to be. We're all just going to fall over each other instantly and we're gonna get so sick we can't even stand up. The basketball, the NBA basketball player, uh Rudy Golbert, tested positive. And the next morning, they put basketball teams out on the court to begin their warm-ups, and by the time the game was gonna start, they had made the decision to pull the teams and the tournament was over by the end of the day. Tournament was discontinued, the NCAA [National Collegiate Athletic Association] Tournament was canceled. And not only were the winter sports stopped, all sports were canceled early in the year. So that Thursday was a very eventful day. I believe it was March...twelfth.

Randy Ballard 3:35

Yeah, for me it was that February, we're talking about actually, every once in a while I come across the PowerPoint. We did a PowerPoint with the coaches at that time, with what little information we knew, having no idea it was going to head this direction. And every once in a while I look at that PowerPoint and I'm like, gosh, we had so much of this stuff wrong. But it was all based on what everyone was saying, even healthcare experts. And then actually I got a call from Todd Short with UIPD [University of Illinois Police Department], who oversaw Emergency Management, at the end of February and he said, "Hey, on Friday, there's going to be a meeting,"--like see, I always forget the acronyms, but the Chancellor's leadership group-- "someone from Athletics probably needs to be there, you probably should be there. This could be a big deal." And I just remember walking into that room and Awais [Vaid] from public health was there and Chancellor [Robert] Jones and Provost Andreas [Cangellaris] was there and from that meeting on and every meeting thereafter of that group, the seriousness and this is probably going to end up with kids going home and us shutting things down. Just the dial kept raising and then that Hoiberg game, I just remember I was watching that game, my wife was at work that night. I was watching the game and just thinking like, this is it, like, if we have this on national TV of like, assistant coaches slathering up with hand sanitizer while a head coach has his head down...this is it, like, they're not going to be able to keep doing this.

Paul Gilbert II 4:56

Going back to—this was the Big 10 tournament, an event you were in Indianapolis for that was canceled the day after you drove back—how much of a shock was that for you seeing not only see the Big 10 tournament, but March Madness itself be, be canceled?

Josh Whitman 5:18

Well, I mean, in hindsight, everything just happened so quickly. I, I think, like most of us, as we reflect back on that transition, you didn't really have time to sort of digest the enormity of the current situation—we were just, you were in do it mode...and so we were very much moving from meeting to meeting, conversation to conversation, how do we get this communicated out to our different stakeholders, the student athletes, coaches. And I do remember sitting—some of these guys may have been in the room—we were in our big conference room in our building. And this is, we had just gotten word that the term was cancelled and again, they went so far as to cancel all spring sports at the same time. Um, I remember we had an email composed to send to the student athletes, and I remember sitting at the table crying in front of everybody, because I just knew hitting send, what that meant to our student athletes. For all that they had worked for and what that signifies in terms of the end of that opportunity. And that was a big day, fast day, and it felt like we just didn't have a lot of control over...everybody reacted pretty quickly...and we landed where we did.

Paul Gilbert II 6:56

How much of a role did the coaching staff play at the beginning of this, this response to the pandemic? Or was this very much a top-down thing?

Josh Whitman 7:08

I think—and Jeremy or Randy can weigh in here—but I think the coaches primary role at the beginning was to be a sounding board and an emotional presence for the student athletes. Um, they weren't involved in a lot of the decision making at the beginning. It was more...because we were, we were all doing it. It was uh, it was a mass exodus. And so, how do we get people home, how do we get them situated. Uh, we're doing for ourselves, we're doing for our families, we're doing for our student athletes. And so we didn't ask the coaches to really be involved in a lot of the decision making, but we did expect them to be the emotional center for their respective teams.

Randy Ballard 7:58

Yeah—

Jeremy Busch 8:00

—Yeah, on that note, I would add to that, I think uh, we, we really leaned on the coaches to help support our student athletes throughout that time and they're the ones building some of those closeknit relationships and being able to help them through those times and those difficulties of their seasons being at that time canceled, not just paused, uh that was a valuable time for them to really step into, some of them to step into, some new roles as well.

Randy Ballard 8:29

Totally agree. I think for a lot of our coaches, and even some of like, our support staff, the academics or strength coaches, it's just a matter of, how do we keep tabs on where kids are going home, and how can we support them, because to Josh's point, like this has never happened to them before just to have sport completely ended, just like that and go home and it's over. Um, so absolutely just the need for coaches and others just to support our student athletes was such a high priority, and just something that people just jumped into.

Josh Whitman 8:59

It was difficult at that moment, because it's now become so pervasive, we have to put ourselves back but at the time...Zoom existed but none of us knew anything about it, and so we didn't have the capacity to get 500 athletes on a phone call, or 500 athletes on Zoom. It was, all we

had was email. And then we had to rely on the coaches to convey that message out to their individual teams. Um because, you know, the last thing we'll do is we're faced and that was bring 500 people together in one room. And it just wasn't practical in that moment. So it was a—unfortunately—it was a very impersonal communication at the very beginning because it had to be and then we had some technological limitations that we addressed pretty quickly from that point forward, but in that moment it we're going to use what we had.

Paul Gilbert II 8:59

So early on, the coaches were relied on primarily as being a bedrock support for student athletes because they were the ones who had developed these, these intimate relationships with the students in question. As March, April, and May turned into say, July, August, September, and sports are, are picking back up...how much of a role did they play in maintaining and implementing regulations, procedures, and protocols to keep the students safe?

Josh Whitman 10:35

Well, I'll answer a different question, and Randy would be the right one to talk on that specific question you asked--but as, as I reflect back on that series of months, I kind of broke it into, I don't know, three or four segments, you know, there was a, a retreat, where we sent everybody home, when everybody's situated and everybody connected on technology, we tried to provide them with whatever resources we could so they could continue to train at home, then there was kind of the, the reassembly, right, so we started to figure out our plans to bring the first groups of student athletes back to campus, which happened for us on the front end of the entire university, we start bringing students back in June. And then there was the return to competition, which was in the fall. And so there were, and each one was two or three months in length. And, you know, in general, and Randy and Jeremy can talk to this one, but I think we just we, a lot of this was happening through our office, it wasn't really so much the coaches, it was...we asked the coaches to implement, execute it, we continue to ask them to be the emotional center of their teams. And we asked them, of course, to comply and execute on whatever plan we put in front of them once we returned students to campus. Um, but we weren't asking them to be the experts to determine what those processes should be...that was these guys and their colleagues.

Randy Ballard 12:23

Yeah, I think in terms of like protocols, in terms of all of those things...we're I mean, you started with kind of conversation with a talking about just the SHIELD team and all the things this university did, so between a lot of people on this campus, people at public health, people at Carle, even people that we got connected with at IDPH...Abbott Laboratories...a host of others. You know, at that time, you know, you had to find who knew the most or can point you to the right person. And so, uh, a lot of what we implemented was based on collaborative efforts and partnerships, and uh, finding out what campus was going to do and finding out what the Big 10 was going to do, finding out the NCAA was going to do, finding out what IDPH was gonna let us do, finding out what C-U public health was going to do and finding out what everybody's best recommendations were for testing or for tracking or for isolation. And so a lot of what we implemented was based on, you know, in a way, best practices that we are gathering from a host of different groups, and then implementing, sharing that amongst ourselves, figuring out how we implement that here, and then communicating that to coaches, to student athletes, to parents, to use Josh's word, all the various stakeholders. But a lot of that was us bringing in information and trying to be funnels, figure out what that looks like for us and then funneling that back out, but, I mean, we had some tremendous partners and some great connections, and—

Josh Whitman 13:58

That was probably one of the hardest parts that I remember, is I remember two things. One, you have to realize that we brought student athletes back to campus before SHIELD was even SHIELD. I mean, you know, there was no saliva testing when we first started bringing student athletes back, we were back before saliva testing existed, um and I think one of the most difficult moments or, parts of the experience in the early days was, it wasn't really clear who we were looking to for ultimate authority on some of these things, because there were so many layers you had IDPH, you had governor's office, you had CUPHD [Champaign-Urbana Public Health Department], you had University, you had Big 10, NCAA...there were all these layers, and these guys, to their credit, I mean, they just they wrote and created this exhaustive documents that we just sort of sent out to the ether space and sort of invited comment on and all sudden people started commenting on it and in some cases we accepted those comments, other cases were like, well, why are you telling us what we should do? Um—

Jeremy Busch 15:00

—then wake up and rewrite it all over again. [Chatter and laughter.] No seriously it's a lot of that. You write policy, write some procedures and go through it and then get that feedback and, or something would change and more knowledge would come in and...you're scrapping that one and moving on to your next one. In addition, I, you know, the coaches were great in terms of your question, and were great to echo uh, what we were trying to implement as well. And that, that called for a lot of patience on everybody's end, and especially from coaches who are typically very structured and having a plan of what's in place, and it's their plan—

Josh Whitman 15:45

They're in charge.

Jeremy Busch 15:46

—So to really stress them in different ways as well, uh, I give them credit to being flexible and buying into what we asked him to do, but then also echoing that to them, being an active participant and really creating that environment for all of our student athletes.

Josh Whitman 16:02

And just to put ourselves back in that moment, right—this is, these are the days when people are washing their groceries. I mean, this is when you're, you're leaving deliveries untouched in your basement for four days while the germs die off. [Group laughs.] You know, this is, this is when you know, our protocols were—we had people like, leaving their shoes in the entryway and, and changing, you know, they were taking their laundry home with them and showering, and it was...just to be able to get the athletes back on campus and to have a workout, was just this Herculean effort in terms of the number of steps that they had to go through just to put themselves in positions to walk into the weight room. It was, in hindsight...incredible.

Randy Ballard 16:49

One of the things that we pulled off, too, was the testing station at the stadium—I mean, at that time, the only place you could get tested was really at Carle, or they were just, they were just starting the drive-thru and they only had so many tests per day they were doing at the drive-thru at Marketplace Mall and so to be able to pull off a fully functional testing center like we did, with a lot of help from Carle, McKinley, and campus. And then to see to Josh's point, you know, like that point, there wasn't saliva test. And then they actually started, we started working with them, and I remember, shoot, the first day they brought up the tubes were five times bigger than the ones they had. And I think we drove them over to set in a gator. We drove over on one of our

gators to Vet Med to try and yeah, I mean, it's looking back, it is [laughs] still in there, but it's just unfathomable.

Paul Gilbert II 17:01

You keep talking about how critical it was that student athletes came back. Was there any pressure to bring student athletes back considering how much such sports acts as a form of escape from the trials and tribulations going on in in our lives, both from a spectator standpoint as well, from an athletic standpoint?

Josh Whitman 18:14

I didn't feel any external pressure to bring the athletes back. I think that, again, to put us all back in that moment, we all just longed to get back to doing whatever it is that we do. And for the athletes, this is what they do. This is their normal. And we knew at some point, we didn't know when, that the light was going to turn green and we were going to begin competing again. And we wanted to make sure—I remember saying this time and time again to our student athletes—when the light turns green, you gotta be ready to go. And we had a lot of really ingenious athletes who were home trying to find ways to stay in shape, jumping on trash cans and pushing trucks and, and lifting, military pressing a basketball goal over their shoulders. Just the things that they were doing...curling big water jugs, and um, but it wasn't the same. They needed to be here to have access to our staff and to our facilities.

Paul Gilbert II 19:26

And if nothing else, the camaraderie of being around a bunch of people working together for the same goal.

Josh Whitman 19:33

That was the rub, right, is that although they were all here, we still went to pretty great lengths not to have them around each other. And so that was—

Randy Ballard 19:42

—we brought them back, yeah—

Josh Whitman 19:43

What's that?

Randy Ballard 19:44

Once we brought them back—

Josh Whitman 19:45

I mean it was bizarre. So I mean, Jeremy probably knows this, the football court system...the biggest team, the one that's got the largest groups, and I don't know how many different groups we had throughout the day but it was—

Jeremy Busch 19:59

A lot.

Josh Whitman 20:00

—it was a lot...I mean they lived with their roommates so that they only were exposed to certain people—

Jeremy Busch 20:06

We did, so we would, we broke it into, I believe it was six lifting groups, and we would pair that into who was roommates with each other, or houses that may have lived in proximity, that may have some crossover. And then, at that time, they weren't changing in the building yet, so we'd send all their loops home with them. The next day, they dropped them off and we'd wash them, go through great lengths to keep them [inaudible], like I said, away from each other, not try to bring them all close in big groups. And we averaged them, in the beginning, I think we had groups of ten to twelve, if I remember correctly.

Josh Whitman 20:49

We had crews that went through between every lifting group and sanitized everything—

Jeremy Busch 20:53

Sprayed down everything.

Josh Whitman 20:56

It was wild.

Paul Gilbert II 20:59

One of you started to go in this direction earlier, but we didn't get a chance to ask the question, I didn't want to interrupt the flow...um, once events, spectator events especially, be resumed, were there any testing protocols for attendees? Because you mentioned that there was testing over at the stadium, but I wasn't sure that was meant for game days, or was that just a general testing clinic—

Josh Whitman 21:29

That's...shoot, we could talk for an hour about that. But there [Randy laughs], I mean, there were exhaustive testing protocols for the participants, for the staff who were directly involved with participants...there were testing protocols for all gameday staff. At the beginning, there were no fans. So we're...talk about a strange experience...I mean our first football game was at the University of Wisconsin which seats 85,000 people, and there were a hundred people in the building, outside of the teams. And so, and we did that for an entire season...it was horrible. And then it wasn't until the next year that we finally got back to having spectators for the Big—

Randy Ballard 22:16

Yeah.

Jeremy Busch 22:16

Yeah, that's right.

Josh Whitman 22:17

Um or was it—

Randy Ballard 22:19

Yeah because fall of '20, there was only football.

Josh Whitman 22:22

Yeah, that's right—

Randy Ballard 22:22

And it was so bizarre. You go to the game, and only certain people are allowed to go and it was it was I mean, to me, you would walk down a hallway and there would be no one else in the hallway. I think Spring of—

Josh Whitman 22:23
'21.

Randy Ballard 22:27
—there was all the other sports. But again, there wasn't spectators allowed initially, not till the very end of the spring season—

Josh Whitman 22:46
And then it was like—

Randy Ballard 22:47
Families only—

Josh Whitman 22:53
Families only, that's right.

Randy Ballard 22:47
And they were asked to sit far apart from each other. So no, there wasn't testing for fans. But in terms of all—to use the NCAA terminology—tier one groups, there was all kinds of testing protocols.

Josh Whitman 23:02
Yeah. And we were doing two different tests on every student athlete every day. For the entirety of that year. We're doing the University's tests and the Big 10's test. So we were, we were testing a lot. But yeah, because then in the spring, played all fall sports. So we had volleyball and soccer playing in spring, cross country ran in the spring. We had all the spring sports. But I guess it was, it was the Big 10 tournament in basketball when we finally had fans with the one that we won.

Randy Ballard 23:02
Oh yeah—

Josh Whitman 23:03
In 2021 in Indianapolis. We went into the bubble. Boy, there were...just partial fans.

Kent Brown 23:48
Missouri had some limited number of fans for their, like, in Missouri. [Inaudible chatter.] And there's a couple of states running as, being read that there were a limited number—

Josh Whitman 23:57
—that's right—

Kent Brown 23:58
But that was bring out all the real fans...[inaudible] Memphis.

Paul Gilbert II 24:04
We need to make a note in the record that, that Kent spoke up.

Kent Brown 24:07

Ah sorry—

Josh Whitman 24:07

Please speak up, Kent, by all means—

Paul Gilbert II 24:12

I mean, when Kent speaks up, we have to get his release, too—

Kent Brown

Whatever you got.

Randy Ballard 24:20

That was like, I guess for me, like that was when, like I remember I went to the championship game, and it was like it kind of actually started to feel a little bit more normal. Like there was actual people in the building.

Josh Whitman 24:33

But it was a small gathering. We didn't celebrate any close to everything. Everybody's wearing masks. I think there were, like, groups of people and then space in between them...it was still pretty wild. Yeah, the Missouri game was the first time we played in front of anybody. That was because it was in Columbia. Remember, we flipped the coin?

Kent Brown 24:52

Yes.

Josh Whitman 24:54

We lost the coin flip.

Randy Ballard 24:55

[Laughs]

Josh Whitman 24:57

Yeah [chatter]...yeah, we lost the coin flip so we played in Columbia and there were fans in the stands...some, not a lot...the boys were in masks.

Paul Gilbert II 25:10

Sorry, could you elaborate on what the coin flip story is? Because it seems to be a little bit of a sore spot.

Josh Whitman 25:17

It's not a sore spot, it's a, it's a—it's one of those things that we'll laugh about in history. Um...traditionally we have played our annual basketball game against Missouri in St. Louis...it's a central location, and it's become a tradition...um, the building is full, half Illini fans, half Tiger fans. And for a variety of reasons, um, mostly the idea that we didn't—neither school had control over the venue--we weren't comfortable playing a neutral site in the midst of that environment. And so, but, when we decided not to play in St. Louis, we needed to play somewhere. And the course of—we knew it was going to be a one time, well, we hoped it would be a one time, deal. So we couldn't alternate at one place to the other. So we flipped a coin on where that game

would be played, and we posted a virtual coin flip on the internet. On Zoom, Andy Cass, a sports reporter, flipped the coin—

Kent Brown 26:20

It was on Big 10 Network.

Randy Ballard 26:20

It was on Big 10 Network..? [Laughs]

Josh Whitman 26:24

That's right. And uh, there was this little pre-show and they flipped the coin and we lost...so we went to Columbia and we uh...one of the best teams in the country, and we got beat.

Kent Brown 26:35

Can I go back to football real quick? We did let parents in, didn't we, in '20, or not? Was it—

Jeremy Busch 26:47

No, we let coaches' families in, some—

Kent Brown 26:49

Coaches' families in? Was that the only people that—cause we had—[inaudible group chatter]

Jeremy Busch 26:54

Yeah we did, I remember my family being there.

Josh Whitman 26:56

Yeah, ok. Players' families were definitely not in.

[Inaudible group chatter.]

Kent Brown 26:59

Yeah, we had like 700, 600 people—

Jeremy Busch 27:06

—they tried to come down to the edge of the tunnel, we had to create that, uh, little barrier...[inaudible]—

Randy Ballard 27:15

Like that was the thing like at that time, right? Like you're paranoid of...we're testing all these people every day, we can't let them expose us—

Josh Whitman 27:22

—...consistency, that was always my big thing...[inaudible group chatter]—

Jeremy Busch 27:26

—their parents after the game short—

Randy Ballard 27:28

—Yeah, so we'd ask kids to avoid parents that had driven in from who knows how far away to stay away from their kids.

Josh Whitman 27:33

...way out in the stands...our athletes were awesome...they gave up so much.

Paul Gilbert II 27:44

I can only imagine, I can only imagine... so, this question is specifically for Josh. How much of an impact would you say COVID has had on your priorities as Director of Athletics?

Josh Whitman 28:00

Well, um, I guess I would reframe the question a little bit... while COVID was sort of raging, it was my only priority as the Director of Athletics. It completely changed my responsibilities in my daily life. And so, no, it was, it was the priority for eighteen months, along with the [inaudible]. And, you know, clearly we're not done with it yet. But for a while it was, it was the thing... felt like only thing... and then so, and then you still had your other stuff...some of it was minimized, because we weren't playing games for a while, it was different than what we were accustomed to, but um, COVID was the priority... the health and safety became the only thing that mattered more so than wanting some off-season [inaudible]—

Paul Gilbert II 28:09

--and, besides introducing yourself and, and the rest of the department to the wonders of Zoom University [group laughs]...was there anything else that you had to learn or otherwise adapt to in order to just do day-to-day things for COVID? Like, did you, for example, switch to a messaging app service for meetings instead of more casual in-person conversations?

Josh Whitman 29:43

Sure...I don't know that a lot of it is unique to the Athletic Program, but we had to relearn how to do everything. We...every--meetings, virtual, every conversation that involves more than one other person was scheduled. There was no opportunity for an informal discussion one where somebody could walk up the hall and grab somebody for five minutes. You know, I think it was always there, as we're all working from home. It was um...your office is right there. And when there just weren't enough hours because we're doing the COVID job, and then there's enough original job to still push on. And, you know, we found, we were, we did a weekly Zoom meeting every Wednesday night for... months... with our student athletes. That was in the evenings. And so you just, we had, we had a Big 10 AD [Athletic Directors] call every day for 125 days. And every one of them was an hour, between an hour and three hours long every day, seven o'clock in the morning. And, I mean, so it just totally transformed everything [inaudible] everything.

Josh Whitman 31:10

There's, there's this, some, I guess, maybe an article, paper, it asked different people every week, but what was the effect of COVID on your job, 1-10? [inaudible, laughter]...it was everything.

Randy Ballard 31:19

I do think, though, like, the Wednesday calls, I think, positioned us, I think, between what we did with the student athletes and what we did with our staff, just in terms of...I think we invested and made those things such a priority that maybe other places didn't, that I think as we brought people back, they trusted us, student athletes came back, as parents sent them back. They knew who we were, even though maybe we hadn't shook their hand, they felt like they knew who we were. At times, it was a little bit on the...you'd be on edge. Because like, they could just ask us anything. I mean, here we are on Zoom, Kevin's dad would post something in the chat box, um, or ask a question and you just had to answer at a time, you'd have to say, I don't know, Wolf, we're gonna have to figure it out. But I think those, those weekly calls that we did it, and

did it was draining...you'd get off of them and just...and you've already worked all day, you already been on Zoom all day to then just take a thirty minute break, eat dinner, see your family, and then get on a Zoom call and get, you know, question after question thrown your way...it was a lot, but I think as we brought student athletes back, as we put our plans in place, I think they knew that we cared about them and we were doing everything we could to keep them health and safety. And I think that positioned them to be more willing to do what we were asking because we had shared everything we knew, we had shared what all of our plans are going to be, and we invested the time and energy to build that trust and social capital to get through the process. And so initially, I remember thinking like, we're going to do this, like, for a month, and then the next thing you know, it just kept going. But I think that time and that investment, the dividends that that paid, and just even the comfort that it gave our student athletes and their parents, we couldn't put a price on that or talk about how much value that had, because I think it paid huge, huge dividends for all of us.

Josh Whitman 33:29

But it was, I think back. I don't know, at some point, I guess it was intentional. But, I mean, there was a central theme to our COVID strategy. It was communication. We just, in talking to some of our colleagues and other schools. I think that is something that differentiated us from other places. The transparency, yeah, we just communicated exhaustively, with our head coaches, with our full staff, with our student athletes, with their parents, with our recruits. And we, we worked really hard to make ourselves available. Like Randy said, we didn't always have great answers, but at least they knew we were there and we were hearing them, we were trying our best, and I think that was a big deal in hindsight.

Paul Gilbert II 34:21

On the subject of communication, um, Randy, can you talk more about your supervision of athletic training staff and how, how things have changed from pre-pandemic to the height of the pandemic, compared to this semi-normal state that we find ourselves in currently?

Randy Ballard 34:44

Yeah, I mean, I think it's been a lot. You know, I think obviously, there was a lot of tension on doctors, nurses, health care providers as the pandemic went on. I think absolutely, that's completely warranted--I'm married to a nurse, I know what she lived. Josh talked about taking your clothes off--I'll never forget, like, being on a Zoom call one morning and getting a text from my wife and she had worked that night, getting a text saying, "Can you leave me clothes by the back door? I took care of--" for the first time, she had taken care of a COVID patient. And so she wanted to change in the garage. And so I leave Zoom, I go get her clothes, and then the kids are like, "What are you doing?" So then I have to explain to my kids that mom took care of a COVID patient, so then they're worried and then I need to go get back on the Zoom call. But for our athletic trainers going back, you know, Josh really did a good job of talking about kind of those segments, that first segment of retreat, it was really just making sure our, our staff had what they needed at home, be it computers, phones, whatever, to stay engaged with student athletes. And so, you know, we were asking our staff, depending on if someone was in a rehab process, or if someone we knew maybe had mental health challenges, other things, we kind of started stratifying, how frequent our staff should be checking in. And, you know, yeah, my role says Director here, and Jeremy says, Assistant Director, but me and Jeremy were working, just hand in hand as co-, just trying to manage things through all of that. And so that first phase was really just trying to help our staff. Yes, we weren't doing rehabs in person, but we had staff trying to send rehab plans via email and even FaceTiming at times or demonstrating an exercise through FaceTime. So student athletes know what to do, we were figuring out how our mental health providers can do telemedicine when none of us had ever done telemedicine before. And

so in a way, the role completely changed. It was still the same, it was to support student athletes, but the way you did that completely changed. And then that next phase of, I don't remember what you call it, um, but from retreat then to bringing kids back. You know, we were kind of, I mean, we were the jack-of-all-trades, yes, we were putting the protocols in place. Yes, we are helping with cleaning, yes, we jokingly got called the, you know, the COVID sheriffs and everything else, because we are the ones who are having to make sure kids were doing things. And so it was hard, because we were trying to support them, but also trying to keep them safe. And so athletic trainers, sports medicine providers, took on a lot of different things, have taken on a lot of different things. From, you know...I joke that I probably could have got my PhD in epidemiology or public health over the last three years...a lot of those things we just had to figure out, you know, because really, our job is providing for the health and wellbeing of our student athletes. And in case of a pandemic, that changes from injuries to, you know, inj—or, virus mitigation, and—

Josh Whitman 37:48

You know, just think about all these things that we've learned in terms of all stuff that we now kind of take for granted, I mean...PCR tests, antigen tests, incubation periods, and just all the stuff that went in COVID that some people had to, kind of understand a little bit...but you guys have become experts in it. And you were the ones that we all looked to in, [inaudible group chatter]...in being able to answer questions from parents about, you know, does it live on a surface...just it was—

Randy Ballard 38:24

[Inaudible] Like, we're also trying to figure out things for twenty-one different sports, right? Like I remember, I don't know how many hours I spent and how many different people I talked to on this campus about, how do we disinfect gymnastics equipment? Can this chalk, can a virus live in chalk on a bar? Do we have to clean the high bar after every kid does a practice routine, like? Do we do UV, like, what, what do we? And the great thing is, and I know you got a question here about technology for me, like, it wasn't about technology. It was completely about relationships and collaboration. I would call someone I knew on this campus, typically it started with Craig at Shield or Mike D. or somebody and say like, do you know somebody that knows something about UV that I can find out...can you, could we use UV to disinfect a high bar? And then next thing I know, I'd have five emails, I'd email people, and then they'd call me or I'd call them, and we, you know--and that was just for gymnastics...it was like figuring that out, for each sport, of what that looked like. And so, yeah, it was, it was not what we were taught in athletic training, but it was what we did because I think we all cared so much about the kids and wanted to do the right thing for them.

Paul Gilbert II 39:44

We talked about this very briefly with the telemedicine stuff, but then we initially phrased this as just being towards you (Randy). But, as I've listened to conversation, it makes more sense to broach this for an entire group—How much of an impact did COVID-19 have on the mental health of the student athletes?

Randy Ballard 40:08

So I've said this a lot during—

Josh Whitman 40:12

We'll let Jeremy answer this one...so he can add to the conversation.

Jeremy Busch 40:16

I think immensely, quite honestly. You're taking them out of a routine, and their comfort level, and truly shaking that globe up. And then asking them to adapt to all these changes, and constant changes, every day posed a new challenge, a new set of rules we may need to follow and go through, whether that's testing twice a day and sitting there patiently waiting, or if they have any signs or symptoms of...sending them away and telling them, "We finally brought you back to campus, but now we've got to keep you away for two weeks." And the patience and trying times of when those quarantines and isolations change, like, "why did he get two weeks and now I, changed again, and now I have seven days and...or ten days...and then seven days, right? And going through those headaches of being isolated away from everybody. And that posed its own mental health challenges. So it's trying to get our mental health providers, our athletic trainers, to constantly be involved in that process was of the utmost important to us as we went through it, making sure, if somebody is in isolation, we're not just leaving them there for fourteen days, but checking up on them and going through them. So we did see an uptick in, in mental health cases and appointments. I have the exact numbers on that. But uh—

Randy Ballard 41:51

—I think it's important too, that like the mental health challenges were already, like there was already a mental health pandemic in the US society before the COVID pandemic. And so this just heightened things.

Paul Gilbert II 42:02

Fueling fire, so to speak.

Randy Ballard 42:05

Yeah, like, to Jeremy's thing, right? Like, the other thing is like, can you imagine the thing that matters to you most, like, let's say it's a football student athlete, like I...I got sent home before spring ball ever happened. I was lifting basketball goals, I was jumping, I was doing all that I could to be ready. And now I've gone through all of this stuff, one, my season gets canceled, and then it gets brought back...so we had that in there. And then you get back and you have to walk into a room and get your nose swiped. And you have to sit there twenty minutes waiting for the result to find out for sure I'm actually going to do what I've been wanting to do for the last six months...just the stress in that. I just, we would all just be waiting for Jeremy to text us, like all clear, all of the student athletes pass their antigen tests on game day. Because everybody was on eggshells waiting for like, you could go from here's your starters to like, five guys are out.

Josh Whitman 42:59

—you can plan and think you're gonna go out and be a prominent part of the game and all of a sudden you're home, right, you're not even part of the—

Randy Ballard 43:05

And then you went from going home, to going home for fourteen days and not being allowed to see anybody. And so—

Josh Whitman 43:10

And oh, by the way, you might take your roommates with you, who don't even have it, right—

Paul Gilbert II 43:15

That was a situation like the Broncos where everyone either got COVID or was a close contact so they had to replace someone out position—

Josh Whitman 43:25

Moving quarterbacks...they had like five quarterbacks who were pos—[inaudible chatter]...well, yeah, he was talking about the mental health priority, the original—Randy, touched on it, like—the decision to cancel the season...that was in the middle of training camp. That was like a week before the first game, or two, whatever it was—

Kent Brown

—more like a week and after practice was started—

Jeremy Busch 43:49

Ten days of camp. And then, uh, and then they canceled the season—

Randy Ballard 43:52

That, that, how hard was that for you, Josh? We had what, three meetings in the stadium with soccer and football. We had to meet with them and tell them it was done and—

Josh Whitman 44:03

How bizarre, right? Like we had to meet in the stadium because we couldn't sit anybody inside. And we asked them to spread out in the bleachers and told them that their seasons weren't gonna happen. And they'd already come here—[inaudible comment from RB]—yeah, they'd already come here, and practiced...and—

Jeremy Busch 44:19

And then it flipped the switch and—

Josh Whitman 44:21

—then fire it back up again—

Jeremy Busch 44:23

Right back up again—

Josh Whitman 44:25

I mean, it was just—

Paul Gilbert II 44:27

A real rollercoaster of emotions there.

Josh Whitman 44:29

Yeah it was, and, and like they said, I mean, every morning...these are college kids, you know, I mean...they're, they're coming and testing at 6am every day, for the entire season. And they may get sent home, they may not, they may get caught up in contact tracing from roommates, teammates...um, it was [inaudible]—

Paul Gilbert II 44:55

So, I'm assuming that, kind of, many of these services that students came to rely on during the pandemic, were already in place. There was some level of access to mental health care, for example, but were there any ways that these resources either changed, or were further supplemented during the pandemic? Especially when students were sent home?

Randy Ballard 45:23

Yeah, I was gonna say, it probably depends on that phase, you know? Um, a great example, okay, so like we, you know, we provide at least some-- one meal a day, two meals a day--to our

student athletes. Well, we had to figure out how are we going to do that because we're not going to sit in a cafeteria. And so yes, a lot of our services we had to offer more of, or in different ways, but we had to completely change how we offered it. You know, either it was grab and go, if we're going to use a nutrition example, or, if a kid got put into isolation, or contact, or uh, contact tracing, quarantine, you know, that's another thing, like, the way staff chipped in, like, we had staff who really had enough, no direct contact, typically, with student athletes who we're recruiting, they were delivering meals to kids in isolation, or in quarantine, or, we had staff, you know, student athletes would pull up and they'd hand them their meals for the day. And so, yes, we had all these services, but how we delivered them, for the most part had to completely change, depending on which phase we're talking about, especially those first two—

Josh Whitman 46:34

It was really staff, all of a sudden were, their responsibilities were pretty low, right? So our ticketing staff...we're running spectator-less events...so our ticketing staff, there's not a lot going on, you know, our, the managing staff, although we still needed them in our games, we didn't have the need to manage 50,000 people in Memorial Stadium. And so we repurposed a lot of people. And then they started doing things that weren't in their job description...I think it's on those statistics, but, how many meals did we deliver? Like 30,000 meals? 45,000 meals?

Randy Ballard 47:10

Yeah.

Josh Whitman 47:11

I mean, we delivered an extraordinary number of meals to student athletes who were in isolation or in quarantine, through our in-person staff.

Paul Gilbert II

Is there any chance we can get—

Randy Ballard 47:20

23,000 meals to quarantine or isolated individuals. Right? Like you don't think about it anymore. But like, we literally had someone at the door of all of our facilities that were open, like scanning temperatures, logging who's coming and going. We had kids at the time scanning into the weight room so we knew who was in the weight room, so if we had to contract trace who they were around, so we had staff pitching in on so many fronts of things that, you know—

Paul Gilbert II 47:52

I mean, on a related note, this was something that I noticed happen from time to time in professional sports leagues, where people would actually try to undermine or circumvent the contact tracing. I mean, I brought up the Denver Broncos example where, the reason why the QBs had, never had to turn to the wide receiver as their quarterback against the Saints, because one player tested positive for COVID. And the other ones had tampered the contact tracing to make it seem like they were further apart than they actually were. Were there any instances of student athletes trying to circumvent protocols in order to either continue to practice or for playing games that they otherwise would be forced to sit out?

Josh Whitman 48:40

Sure. [Group laughs.]

Jeremy Busch 48:42

Yeah to be quite honest —

Josh Whitman 48:46

They weren't problems, though.

Randy Ballard 48:49

...We had situations. But I think going back to what we said...two things: one, they trusted us, they knew we were doing everything we could do to let them do what they love to do. And then two, at the same time, we outlined, like, here's the accountability, if you aren't being honest, here is, like, you can be suspended. You can, like we, they had the ramification, there were consequences. They knew if we're doing everything we could to be honest with them, we were going to then have expectations to help keep them and their teammates safe. So yeah, there was some occasions, but it wasn't prevalent of, you know—

Josh Whitman 49:26

And we related them on sort of their accountability to their teammates and understanding that, what, as much as we hate to lose you, if you avoid the protocol, then you're putting the rest of your teammates at risk, and then all of a sudden we're in a disadvantaged position. So, most of the time that mattered to them—

Randy Ballard 49:46

But yeah, try contact tracing an apartment party in the middle of preseason. I mean, I remember—and here's the thing, too, right? Like, this, I mean, these were all, like these, you were living this 24 hours a day, and so at the time, so we would do PCR testing. Again, it's kind of hard to fathom now because like, I could go test at the Union and hear in four hours and have my result, but like, and keep in mind that we're spitting in a tube now versus getting a thing tickling your brain when I mean, we're doing the full NPs [nasopharyngeal tests] when we brought ourselves and people back. But you know, we would do a test in the morning, and it was getting delivered to, at that time, at Carle Lab, we were doing full NPs and if we had a positive, this wasn't getting, you know, it wasn't coming through the SHIELD app, Carle's lab would call me at two or three in the morning, and at that time, like, there was paranoia like, this person is out in the wild spreading it and we've got to find them, we've got to track them down. And so, you know, I remember one instance in August, I got a call like three in the morning from the lab saying these two people were positive. They're football student athletes. I at least let Jeremy sleep till probably 5:30, and I knew he'd wake up probably by about 5, 5:30, and I call him, and by 6:15, he's calling me back to say, well, two nights ago, it sounds like there was a little bit of a social gathering, an apartment, and here's who other people may be involved. And then you spend the next eight hours...of course kids are saying, oh, I wasn't there. And then this one saying, oh, this person was there. No, I wasn't there. And so, yeah, it was—

Jeremy Busch 51:22

—or we'd spend time watching film, breaking down...who's area during practice... so it's—

Randy Ballard 51:30

Yeah, watching practice.

Paul Gilbert II 51:32

Oh, man, imagine doing film study not to see like student athletes' technique—

Randy Ballard 51:40

—oh no, we had trainers watching football, basketball practice—

Paul Gilbert II 51:42

Just to see who, who's engaging who...

Josh Whitman 51:46

Well it was just, I mean, it's just such, you know, so it was like, what...within six feet for fifteen minutes? I was like, well is it...fifteen consecutive minutes? Like, is it fifteen aggregated minutes? So over the course of football practice, like okay, I'm blocking you for seven seconds, and then we separate, and then thirty seconds later, we get together and we're head-to-head for seven seconds. And you add all that together, maybe all those seven seconds combined add up to fifteen minutes, does that count? You know, those are the kinds of banal questions that we're trying to answer in the middle of all this.

Paul Gilbert II 52:20

That's...the CDC definitely wasn't putting their creative energy to try to answer...

Josh Whitman 52:27

Well, they weren't thinking about sports [inaudible].

Paul Gilbert II 52:34

Okay, let's see, I had a question I wanted to ask Jeremy. Piggybacking off of the football stuff...oh, now I remember...so, I remember reading stories about several NFL players recovering from COVID and how they lost significant weight and it took a while for them to get back to Game Day shape as a result of that. What steps did you and your staff take to assist student athletes who did test positive with COVID in terms to make sure that they were ready to go once they fully recovered?

Jeremy Busch 53:16

Good question. So we didn't really see a big drop in their weights or anything in that respect. During that time, what we did do, again—Randy touched on it earlier—we supplemented them with their meals, so we would drop off all meals for them at that time. And unfortunately, at that time, they were told they can't work out for that period of time while they were in isolation as well. So we did spend some time on the backend and thankfully, the Big 10 was nice enough for us to mandate cardiac testing coming out of that [group laughs]. So we had a period of time that we needed to do EKG echo and a cardiac MRI. So that also gave us a little bit of time where we can spend in condition, or recondition, our student athletes and football players to get back to playing shape rather than taking them out of isolation for fourteen days and just putting them back into activity. That's a recipe for a lot of injuries and we wouldn't do it for anything else, especially during this time as well. So we didn't have a lot of time where we saw the dropping of weight loss because of our food supplementation. Then we also were very cognizant of any soft tissue injuries coming out of that and use that time that we had to do our cardiac testing to be able to work on our condition before—

Josh Whitman 54:29

It was essentially a 21 return, 21-day return cycle—

Jeremy Busch 54:33

—pretty darn close— [inaudible group chatter]

Josh Whitman 54:41

—fourteen days of isolation and a seven day re-acclimatation period—

Paul Gilbert II 54:52

Were any of these changes unexpected in terms of having to, say, do the cardiogram testing or that seven day re-acclimation period, compared to other injuries and illnesses that football players have been dealing with before the pandemic—

Jeremy Busch 55:15

It was unex—all of it was unexpected. [Group laughs.] Yes, was it unexpected? Yes, I'd say so, because from our side of a medical perspective, you look at that and say, we don't mandate what that return to play looks like coming off of an ACL injury or a hamstring injury, right. And now we're mandating of [inaudible—"one size fits all"-JW] for a COVID-19, right. So there might be some that have some severity of symptoms that may last longer, and maybe there's a case that has no symptoms at all, and they're, and they go through their reconditioning aspects, and we have some that are very genetically gifted that bounce back quite quickly. So, are we holding them for an additional maybe five—three, four, or five days—because that's what the Big 10 mandated. So was that unexpected? Absolutely. It was all unexpected. Absolutely.

Randy Ballard 56:09

I think, too, just hitting green light, we had told our kids, you know, we were giving them plans and other things but the reality is we had no idea what they had access to. So I think our bigger concern was like when we brought them back how fast we ramped them up, because like, if you looked at, we looked at data from like the NBA lockout season, and—

Paul Gilbert II 56:28

—ah, Disney World bubble—

Randy Ballard 56:31

Well, at this point that quite hadn't happened yet. Whatever season that was like back in '94, when the NBA locked out, and then when they brought them back, they had a really short ramp up to their competitive season, and they had more ACLs and Achilles injuries during that time than they typically would in a preseason. And so everybody was looking at some data sets like that, trying to figure it out...and communicating with coaches, string staff, athletic trainers, like, hey, we don't know, yes, they're telling us they're working out, but we really, truly don't know what they're doing. And so we got to be smart about how we ramp them up once we—

Josh Whitman 57:06

—well really, for a while there we were doing the re-entry quarantine reviews, right?—[inaudible group chatter]—whenever we brought them onto campus, we forced them to stay in the room for five days for six, whatever—

Jeremy Busch 57:16

—and we would test them, and then quarantine them, and then test them again, make sure they came out of that. And then—

Josh Whitman 57:21

—and then we would start to trace —

Jeremy Busch 57:29

—but we were...we did a lot of talk, there was you know, we worked...I was on a national committee that had conversations with both the CSCCA [Collegiate Strength and Conditioning Coaches Association] and then NSCA [National Strength and Conditioning Association], working on what is, what are those recommendations look like from a strength and conditioning,

athletic training side of reentry back into activity, and how do we do that properly. To your point of what we were trying to do is look at what do we need to be aware of potential risk of injury on this backend of it...which had nothing to do with—

Paul Gilbert II 58:03

Is there anything in your background and experience that remotely prepared you for the challenges of taking care of student athletes during a pandemic? I mean, the closest thing—and I'm grasping at straws here—would be either responding to a student athlete with the flu or maybe the SARS outbreak in '03, that had people in a panic.

Jeremy Busch 58:33

Or, we had swine flu in what was it... '0...?

Randy Ballard

...11?

Paul Gilbert II 58:36

I think it was 2011.

Jeremy Busch

Yeah, swine flu was one, but that doesn't come close to this.

Josh Whitman 58:51

I don't know, I mean...

Paul Gilbert II 58:53

I mean, I thought that was going to be the answer, but it was worth asking. I mean, Randy said earlier that by the end of it, he feels like he could get a PhD in epidemiology. So I mean, the epidemiologist has spent years and years waiting for the big one to see the how they respond under pressure, so, [laughs] I mean, in a morbid way this was their Super Bowl.

Paul Gilbert II 59:27

Did you receive any assistance—technological, budgetary, etc.—from the University in terms of getting athletics back going, such as maybe being an early guinea pig for the SHIELD testing?

Josh Whitman 59:44

Yeah, so we were very fortunate to have a great partnership with campus and SHIELD from the very beginning. And I think that we were the first group to begin using the saliva testing, and then it began to ramp up from there as the student body at large returned to campus. But, you know, we didn't—I mentioned the different testing that was happening—but University testing, we never paid for that, the University absorbed all of those costs, which was the right thing to do, they were charged—you know, they were testing everybody, we were just taking a more complete advantage of their testing than some other pockets of campus. We paid for the Big 10 testing. We, the Athletic program. So, you know, we were—but it was as much collaboration, cooperation from the campus that helped us. We were in a position to get priority results. We set up our own testing location in one of our facilities where our student athletes could come every day and get their saliva tests in the morning and have their results by early afternoon. So that we, for those teams that were practicing in the afternoon, they can have the confidence of what [inaudible]. So they were very accommodating on things like that. They helped us in terms of game day testing. We had great collaboration with Carle, who helped us a lot on some backup testing when we had positive antigen tests that would come through. PCR at [inaudible]

University, individual, the cardiac MRIs...we were, as Randy said earlier, we were very fortunate to be in a lot of really, really good partners throughout this, some who were local to campus and some of them weren't. We were very lucky.

Paul Gilbert II 1:01:52

All right. So Josh, one of your roles as the Director of Athletics is the hiring and removal of coaching personnel. Coach Lovie Smith was relieved of his duties in December of 2020. And Coach Bielema—did I pronounce that correct—

Josh Whitman

You did.

Paul Gilbert II 1:02:20

—was hired shortly afterwards...How was that coaching search different from the ones you previously conducted, considering everything going on in the world at the time?

Josh Whitman 1:02:29

Um, it wasn't as different as you would think it would be, just because I— for a position of that prominence and with that level of importance for the overall health of the athletic program—I was going to make sure that we had as much in-person interactions as we could. Probably the biggest change, there were two [inaudible] changes, I would say. Number one was we did do some first, or early conversations, with people via Zoom, which we never would have been able to do before. And secondly, when we would go to see people, depending on the circumstance, we would sometimes be wearing masks in those settings. It's hard, right? It's hard. It's hard to, especially when you're meeting somebody for the first time, you're both wearing masks, and trying to learn about somebody else, you lose all of that sort of unspoken communication. And so that was, that was difficult. And it's something that we were—because it was hard, because those searches happen in very intense periods—and so, you may be with three other people one day and other three people in two days. And so you don't want to be the one that's shuffling this virus around one person to another and—but yet, you want to be able to have meaningful interactions—so it wasn't, it wasn't for all of us, as you met people, this kind of delicate process of, if you're comfortable, and you're sort of trying to figure out what everybody's preferences were and wanting to interact with people to make everyone feel safe and comfortable. And safe so—

Paul Gilbert II 1:04:23

I figured as a pretty big football fan that serious candidates would still be flown out because there's some things, such as any multimillion-dollar deal, that I don't want to just do over the internet. And I imagine that you feel the same way.

Josh Whitman 1:04:44

Yeah, the only correction I'd make is that in those kinds of searches, most of the time we'll fly to them. And so rather than fly them to us, we'll go see them just because the confidentiality involved with their candidacy doesn't really allow for us to bring them here. And so to avoid that, usually we'll take our little rally van and go to wherever they are, it allows us to...usually go to their home or in some other discreet location so that we can do our conversation in private without having the eyeballs of the Illini family on us despite...their best efforts to find us.

Randy Ballard 1:05:30

—[inaudible] still knows your UIN [University Identification Number] though because we'd have to test you when you got back.

Josh Whitman

Yeah, that's right.

Jeremy Busch 1:05:36

[Group laughs] We've got a lot of information on you.

Paul Gilbert II 1:05:40

I guess that's one of the myriad of ways that things are different at the professional level because my primary frame of reference is the NFL network style of publication where they'll go, they asked for permission to interview Coach So and So of the SO and SO's and he came in to view the practice facility and was there for X amount of hours interviewing. Well, I guess both from an intensity standpoint as well as a confidentiality standpoint, you would have to modify by that process a bit. Otherwise well, as rabid as sports fans can be, they find out someone is in the process of being interviewed, they either will react very, very jubilantly on Twitter or tell you off and do god knows what.

Josh Whitman 1:06:38

Well, they do that anyway. [Group laughs.] And in the absence of real information, the Twittersphere will make up fake information, which happens too, so, it's uh...yeah, it's a different process in the collegiate ranks, because in the NFL, their contracts are ironclad. So if you're a head coach for one NFL team, you don't have the opportunity to go be the head coach at another NFL team.

Paul Gilbert II 1:07:04

—Without that team getting compensated in some way—

Josh Whitman 1:07:08

That's right. And in college, it's very, very different. And so there's a lot of backroom dealing and conversations that happen that people want to avoid seeing the light of day. So it's—and you got 130 schools that are existing in that space, maybe—

Paul Gilbert II

—that's just the Dean 1-level?—

Josh Whitman

—maybe thirty of them have a head coaching vacancy in any given year, as opposed to the NFL where there's 32...maybe there's six or eight of a given year...so there's just so many more schools, so many more jobs at this level.

Paul Gilbert II 1:07:49

Jeremy, did you or anyone on your staff take on additional or unanticipated roles during the pandemic?

Jeremy Busch 1:07:55

[Group laughs.] Yeah, absolutely...uh, Randy, hit on it earlier—

Paul Gilbert II 1:08:02

—I mean, you mentioned earlier about you knowing Josh's UIN by heart now because of number of times you tested him.

Jeremy Busch 1:08:13

So I became, I was the point person, for obviously, all of the testing with everybody that touched football, whether you were on our tier one, which was our student athletes and our coaches, support staff, or our tier two, our game day operations or anybody that was at a football game. So yeah, I was the bearer of hopefully the good news to let you know that you passed, or the bearer of bad news of passing on that you did not pass that COVID test. Randy touched on it earlier, becoming an epidemiologist and going through and writing and rewriting policy every night, to becoming a delivery service, whether that's transporting every COVID positive, making sure that they're all settled in to their appropriate—

Randy Ballard

—setting, location—

Jeremy Busch

—wherever that may be, setting them all up and then doing the follow-up care, right, going in and checking on them and doing their temperature checks afterwards and making sure that they, their symptoms remain what they were the day before not worsening, right. So all of the follow-up care with that. Then trying to figure out creative ways to either do telemedicine and rehab remotely or trying to create an environment where we can lend, what ten to twelve people at a time, or rehab three to four or five people at a time, in our facility. We, at that time, think about it—we had just moved into a brand new facility, and they say “gotta stay away”...don't get to use this giant nice, shiny new object here, right with everything, all the fun toys...and just say, “hey, gotta stay away.” And then, communicating with parents all the time. I think that's part of my job anyway. But the difference though, and I think this is where those Wednesday night meetings, we had many, many team meetings that we included with our parents as well. And then just talking to them what that looks like throughout the entire process and being open, we touched on earlier with the transparency, with trust. That went a long ways and what we did on a daily basis with both our student athletes, as well as their parents.

Randy Ballard 1:10:29

I think the other piece, Jeremy was on a lot of these, you know, I think one thing outside the collaboration and just partnership we had with some of the groups we met earlier is that, you know, Josh talked about being on the AD [Athletic Directors] call every day. But another thing I think that really served us well, me and Jeremy have talked about this a few times, is like, we had the right people at the right table to have the information. So, you know, Jeremy could probably talk—he was on probably three or four different committees, either, you know, Big 10 Sports Medicine committees, or NETA [National Exercise Trainers Association] committees—I was on a host of committees. And so, it was like each night of the week you had a different committee call. But that helped us, like [inaudible], know who to ask questions to, and so there was a lot of other assignments or roles on committees and subcommittees of subcommittees—

Jeremy Busch 1:11:17

I felt like we would re—the three of us would reconvene after each one of those. The one I was on the is the Big 10 Sports Medicine executive committee. And this is what we're talking about, this is where getting warrants going, and this is what we've talked about it and now we have the AD meeting, and Randy's pulling in another meeting, and so, I think we created, I can't remember how many different subcommittees within DIA [Department of Intercollegiate Athletics]...our Return to Campus, our Return to Sport...we had so many different of our own committees that we reconvened on, truly felt like almost every night for a long time... to really come up with our best plan.

Paul Gilbert II 1:12:03

You've hit on this at a different couple points, but I want to make sure that we touch this directly. So let's go back to fall 2020, the college football season after lots of back and forth, is going to happen for the football team. What was that like on a day-to-day basis for each of you in terms of make sure the student athletes were safe, coming up with regulations on who could and who couldn't attend games, and just the process of returning things back to normal, or as close to normal as we were allowed to do with what we had available to us.

Randy Ballard 1:12:52

Well, Jeremy, tell him about your day...you got there at what time to set up testing?

Jeremy Busch 1:12:56

So my typical day...I walked through the door about 4:45[am] and setup. Really kind of, before you touched on, you said something in particular, really I think our goal was trying to create an opportunity to get as close to normal as possible. And then we've kind of worked off of that whatever we had to do. And that was...it was a lot every single day...getting in, prepping in about 4:45, getting testing ready. First people to walk in the door were our coaches and support staff, our Tier One, so we tried to let our student athletes sleep in as much as possible. So they would start filtering in about 5:15 and getting that first wave through, our student athletes through, and then we had different holding areas and tried to—I had them all scheduled out and I'd rewrite the schedule every single night. [To Jeremy and Randy] You guys are probably cringing thinking about that again...where you had to go, or where you were seated for your post-test waiting so...timed it out where you take your test and this group is going to exit by the time the next group's coming in, so I don't have all 104 of our student athletes at that time sitting in a room together. And then they could filter through...and then coordinating with our facilities...I give a lot of credit to our facilities crew coming in, coming around the back end, cleaning through our testing space but then also once we're through the facility and going through and cleaning our locker room. We split locker rooms, if you remember, we had a locker room at the Smith Center and we had a locker room down in Memorial, so they had twice as much to do...need to go through and clean both areas and then try to get them off the practice field. There's guys...they're in their routines, typically right, we have, "I want to get in the cold tubs," "I want to do my recovery methods," and "I want to get into the training room,"...I've got to give them a Heisman [sports award with arm sticking out] and say, "well hold on a second," right? "You can't do that just yet." And then these are things...sending them back away and having them shower at home and dropping their loops off and coordinating that aspect of it as well. So every day was an adventure, every day—

Randy Ballard 1:15:24

—and call and check on the ones in isolation—

Jeremy Busch 1:15:29

Spending an entire afternoon either contact tracing somebody or...yeah...or running meals and doing your follow-up to your serial exam on isolated individuals or communicating with our call radiology team, again...Randy touched on this, CARLE radiology team was phenomenal about working us in and getting us appointments for those that were COVID positive, so I could get those EKGs, those echo[cardiogram]s, those cardiac MRIs...so typically they're low, they're buying, they may do six to eight a month, we were requesting significantly more than that, not just football, but across our—

Paul Gilbert II

—Entire line of sports—

Jeremy Busch

—That's right. So it was truly a big undertaking, not just a DIA thing. But community wide. And Carle were great partners with us in so many different respects.

Josh Whitman 1:16:22

It's crazy, you know, to think back...if you had told us in the beginning, "Here's what the next eighteen months is going to require. Here's what you are going to do"...I think we would have said, that's impossible. We can't do that. You're telling us this is all the things are going to be necessary in order for us to train the team? We would have all looked at each other and said "We're out. We can't do that." So now that we've lived it and got through it, it's really pretty amazing to sit here and recount and reflect back on...if you told us on the front end, we would have said there's no way...

Jeremy Busch 1:17:07

This whole thing...we touched on it earlier...so, you talk about what other universities did and didn't do. We were the leaders. We were the leaders in testing, leaders into how we brought our kids back to the campus, we had zero student athletes that missed a Big 10 game because of COVID. None. I take a lot of pride in that. We all take a lot of pride in creating that environment. We were able to do that. That's incredible of a thing. And then now, you fast forward even through that demand [in the?] pandemic and you start to see athletic staff members quit. And it's hard to retain. And I think those, not just a student athlete meetings that Josh ran, but the DIA meetings we had, brought people back to—you got to, in time of crisis, you got to know you got to communicate and be very open about what was going on. But you got to let them know you care. And I think that's where those meetings went a long ways and keeping the cohesiveness of this department together. Where others saw people say, "I'm looking at this, I'm not doing that. I'm not going to devote that much time and energy this." And we did. And we were the leaders in it, I give them a lot of credit, because if you don't do those things, you don't create that environment, it doesn't happen.

Paul Gilbert II 1:18:37

Have we returned to some semblance of pre-pandemic normalcy in the Athletics departments? And if not, do you think we'll ever reach the point where things start back the way they were? That can be either for the better or on the converse.

Josh Whitman 1:19:04

We're obviously back to—

Jeremy Busch

—I think so. I think for the most part, we're back to a normal, pre-pandemic period. There's some things that we've changed, that we do that we've adapted, that I think are for the better, that we've added to what we do, whether it be telehealth with our mental health providers or others, I think that's a great benefit to us. And even sometimes our physicians may come on Zoom at times to be able to see a student athlete [attendance?]. So I think that's a great benefit.

Josh Whitman 1:19:40

Some of the biggest changes is our use of technology. I think we're—whether it's in sports medicine, fundraising, staff meetings—we certainly aren't using online means exclusively, but it's a new tool in the toolbox that we can use to supplement a lot of in person interaction. So where we need to create some efficiency from a travel perspective or a timing perspective,

that's available to us and something that we'll continue to utilize. That's probably the biggest lingering change.

Paul Gilbert II 1:20:18

Josh, you hit this on the head earlier about how much resilience was needed in order to get us to the point that we currently are in. What were some other strengths—and this question is being broached for the group—what are some other strengths that you either weren't fully aware of or didn't fully appreciate about yourself as an individual that you've come to rely on since the pandemic began?

Josh Whitman 1:20:50

I don't know much about me as an individual, I mean, I'm much more comfortable [inaudible]. Plus, it's a group of individuals [state?] that you have the biggest resiliency or ingenuity or creativity in how to reshape our work and the work of our athletes. [Inaudible for roughly twenty seconds.]

Josh Whitman 1:21:28

It's just a whole new level of care and concern for your colleagues or your student athletes. You know, the sacrifice, the level of sacrifices required to do not only your own job, but to step in and create this parallel job in COVID, it was necessary in the way that so many people stepped up to do it. Taking temperatures and delivering food and just stuff that none of us ever would—show up at 4:45 to set up testing sites. It just required a remarkable amount of sacrifice and selflessness. So I think there was, in some sort of weird, twisted way, kind of a renewed spirit, when people invited us [inaudible] and care about each other so much. And I think it helps to kind of reprioritize things in a healthy way. During the pandemic, winning and losing truly is at the back seat to surviving...not literally necessarily for most of us, but sort of persevering through and providing the healthiest, safest environment that we could...Yeah, see, you did. You learned a lot about all of us, just about how deep the wealth was and how much we were capable of in moments of crisis. That was pretty exciting to see.

Paul Gilbert II 1:23:19

I think that's all the questions that we have to ask.

Kent Brown 1:23:23

You know, it'd be good to touch on the fact that—Jeremy barely touched on—but we were the only school that had no contest missed, canceled because of COVID. [Inaudible.] We showed up at every—because of these guys, what they did—we were able to show up at every game, and no one else in the Big 10 can say that. And so I don't know if that's, that's not really a question.

Paul Gilbert II 1:23:56

That's not a question, that's something that Jeremy could have [inaudible]. [Group laughs.]

Jeremy Busch 1:24:04

No game was missed in the 2021...2020...2020-2021, that year.

Josh Whitman 1:24:15

We were the only school in the Big 10 that didn't have any self-imposed pauses that caused us to miss competition...that doesn't mean we didn't have positive cases. We had plenty of positive

cases, but we were able to contain it in a way that never got out of hand and allowed us to keep working.

Paul Gilbert II 1:24:38

Well, this isn't so much a question for the interview to transcript but just like a housekeeping one...you keep mentioning the fact sheet that you brought of key things you wanted to either make reference to or bring up during the interview. Is there any chance that we could receive a version of this for inclusion and in the overall project, because I'm sure there's things on there that we didn't get a chance to talk about that the department is very proud of achieving.

Josh Whitman 1:25:12

What do you think, we could just read it into the record if you want? I don't know what you've got. Just the talking points I use with them. Just some of those statistics, rattle them off. I don't really have any—

Randy Ballard 1:25:27

—So essentially, yeah. So, looking at the academic year '20...[chatter]...academic year 2020-2021. In that year, we just kind of synthesized some talking points for a roundtable Josh [and I did?]. So, we estimated that we probably did 105,000 or more COVID tests across all of our student athletes. 66,000 of those are PCR tests and another 39,000 were antigen tests. The Big 10 required antigen testing, that's why we used those, so. At least 63,000 of those were SHIELD Illinois tests. 63,000.

Paul Gilbert II 1:26:07

Oh, um, the recorder timed out. Do we still have the backup going?

Jessie Knoles (Tech)

Yeah, it's still going.

Paul Gilbert II

Okay, continue.

Randy Ballard 1:26:20

Anything else? [Inaudible.] 122 student athletes tested positive that year. Over 350 quarantined individuals...and so, we talked about checking on him and all those things. So, over the course of that year, we quarantined—now obviously some kids—talk about mental health challenges—getting told that you have to go back in a room for 10 days when you just got out.

Josh Whitman 1:26:50

Two weeks earlier, three weeks earlier...

Jeremy Busch 1:26:52

We had a couple that were playing, were quarantined out a couple of days and re-quarantined...two individuals in particular, one back-to-back, they were in four straight weeks.

Randy Ballard 1:27:12

In a hotel room. You know, I think—to Kent's point outside of us not missing anything—probably the most the thing I was grateful for...we had zero really significant cases. We didn't have any cases of myocarditis. We didn't have any hospitalizations...very grateful for that. At one point, we were operating three different testing centers, one in Smith, one at [inaudible] and one at

[Feist?], or at Memorial Stadium. And over the course of that year, that staffing included 15 to 20 different [?] staff, 25 to 30 different nurses from the community that were used for the Big 10 testing, and a host of others, of our own DIA staff and our sports medicine staff. We mentioned over 23,000 meals got served to quarantined and isolated within individuals. Our mental health providers provided the highest number of clients in any academic year that year. And you know, you also have to remember, we talked a little bit about there being the ongoing mental health pandemic, but the reality was that over the course of that 18 months, we had a mental health pandemic, a global pandemic, and social justice endemic in which we saw the death of George Floyd. And so, our student athletes were facing and dealing with a lot. And then to Kent's point, the biggest thing was, the buy-in cooperation from our staff and student athletes, coupled with the SHIELD testing program, allowed us to achieve something that very few did, maybe no one else was able to do and the power of five, and that's across all of our sports—we didn't have to cancel a competition due to politics in our own program. We had other schools...I mean, I remember the lead-in to the Ohio State football game in which they canceled with us...but we didn't ever have to make a phone call and say we're canceling this game because of—and a lot of that had to do with the testing and the protocols that were put in place, because we knew when kids were getting on the bus, when coaches were getting on the bus, they weren't bringing anything with them. Any viruses with them...they're bringing their baggage and stuff, but—

Jeremy Busch 1:29:20

—That's a credit to that SHIELD testing. Their PCR testing was much more accurate than the antigen testing which I truly think that saved us more than anything.

Josh Whitman 1:29:30

No question. We were the envy of the conference, because our test was revealing positives two or three days before the other tests at the Big 10 was showing positives, and so it allowed us to isolate athletes far earlier and avoid the risk of transmission...72 hours in some cases before the Big 10 test revealed something that's positive, so that was a big [advantage?].

Paul Gilbert II 1:30:00

Do you have any questions for us?

Josh Whitman

I think you can stop it there.

Paul Gilbert II 1:30:08

[To tech] Yes, you can stop.