

The team behind the teams

It was just a few months ago when I wondered if Fort Hays State University Tiger athletics would happen at all during the 2020-21 season. However, not only did our student-athletes take the field, they did so in a safe, winning fashion. Although the fall sports were delayed, all of our student-athletes have a chance to compete this semester. Competition, at least safe competition, would not be possible without the guidance and the hard work of some key individuals – those who comprise the team behind the teams. This includes, among many others, our team doctor, athletic trainers, coaches, facilities staff, and of course, the student-athletes themselves.

Since the fall semester, our team administered more than 1,300 COVID-19 tests for athletes alone. Only 1.3 percent of these tests were positive. Thus far, during the second semester, our test results have been below 1 percent positive. From Feb. 22 through the end of the semester, we project another 2,200 tests of athletes, coaches, trainers, and team managers.

Spring testing protocols include requiring members of the men's and women's basketball, men's and women's indoor track and field, and wrestling teams to test their entire rosters weekly. The "travel party" that accompanies our teams is also tested the week of their scheduled departure. High-risk sports, such as football and volleyball, also test their entire rosters during the week of competition. Medium-risk sports, such as soccer, baseball, and softball, test entire rosters when traveling and utilize surveillance testing when not traveling. Low-risk sports, such as track and field, golf, and tennis, test the entire roster prior to traveling.

The testing protocols, when warranted, are followed by contact tracing, isolation, and quarantine. Testing is supplemented with numerous cleaning protocols, training and practice protocols, and a lot of open and regular communication with many partners. Our partners include FHSU student health, Ellis County Health, the athletic and medical staff of our rival universities, and MIAA and NCAA personnel.

Leading our team behind the teams is the truly remarkable Dr. Wally Wallstrom (Doc Wally), who works with the university through a cooperative agreement with Hays Medical Center. While we have always been grateful for the time and expertise of Doc Wally, his ongoing leadership and recommendations have clearly been the driving force behind our successful winter and spring seasons. Clearly, Doc Wally's oversight is the reason we have the privilege to gather in the name of Tiger athletics.

"I can't say enough about Doc Wally's guidance throughout this process," said Curtis Hammeke, FHSU athletics director. "We have turned to him repeatedly since last spring. He has consulted with Jason Kennedy, the Ellis County health director, and created protocols for us to follow from the weight room last summer, throughout the fall, and into the competitive winter seasons. He has made himself available on a regular basis to address issues in a timely fashion. We have always appreciated all he does for our athletes as our team doctor, but I don't know how we would have navigated these challenges without him."

Hammeke also noted that he is equally grateful for the tremendous effort the FHSU athletic training staff and Student Health have made to keep our athletes competing this spring. They have done everything from 5 a.m. daily health screenings of our student-athletes to supporting our coaching staff in maintaining appropriate protocols.

“While the entire athletic training staff has gone well above and beyond their normal responsibilities, associate athletic trainer Dustin Bradstreet has taken the lead on organizing and implementing the weekly testing,” Hammeke said. “Dustin has been unwavering in his commitment to the safety of our student-athletes and coaching staff. He has willingly taken on a considerable amount of responsibility with great professionalism and ethics. He is a great example of those throughout the country who have stepped forward to address these challenges head on.”

There are so many who deserve a spotlight in this article – too many to mention – but let me add just a couple more statements of praise through the eyes of our student-athletes.

“It’s definitely been good to get a full season in,” said Jared Vitztum, the leading scorer and rebounder for the Tiger men’s basketball team. “I attribute the success of our testing program to our training staff and the MIAA protocols. Dustin Bradstreet, our trainer, has been a big part of the success,” added Vitztum, a graduate student from Hays. “He is the one making sure we are wearing masks on trips, really keeping us tidy with the rules to follow on and off the court, and obviously all the coaches do their part as well.”

Whitney Randall of the Tiger women’s basketball squad agrees. “Our athletic trainers have been really great during the testing process,” said Randall, a senior from Alva, Okla. “I’m grateful for Carlee Lindsey and Dustin Bradstreet, because they are very knowledgeable and on top of things. As a team, we really appreciate all they do in being part of our success. The coaches and staff have also done a great job of making us stay on top of things through the process.”

Indeed, the team behind the teams works tirelessly to monitor and maintain the health and safety of our athletes, coaches, and staff. Responsible for our success story this winter, that team is also keeping FHSU athletes in the game this spring.

Several Tiger student-athletes participating in winter sports are still enjoying success this month and will be in action this weekend. The women’s basketball team won the MIAA regular-season title and qualified for the NCAA Division II Tournament as the No. 1 seed in the Central Region. Four FHSU student-athletes qualified for the NCAA D-II National Indoor Track and Field Meet. And senior A.J. Cooper earned the No. 5 seed in the 285-pound bracket of the D-II National Wrestling Championships.

As we work toward what I would call an “adjusted normalcy,” we continue to proudly cheer on all our student-athletes. Go Tigers!

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