



PBATS NEWSLETTER

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IN THE SPOTLIGHT: **NEIL RAMPE, M.Ed., ATC, CSCS, LMT**

World Series Champions – Amid a Pandemic

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The road to becoming an athletic trainer is filled with a variety of educational courses and clinical experiences to prepare one for patient care. Nowhere in this journey is anything taught about how to deal with a pandemic, yet that is exactly what Neil Rampe had to do in 2020.

Rampe, starting his fifth spring training season as the Dodgers' head AT, joined the rest of the team at Camelback Ranch in Phoenix as planned in mid-February of last year. Everything was going according to schedule with games underway, until mid-March, with the emergence of an unknown virus, COVID-19, that brought everything to a sudden stop. Little was known about this virus and the danger it possessed, so the Cactus League and Grapefruit League were shut down and everyone was sent home until further notice, not knowing if the season would take place. Soon the entire country was in lockdown as it became apparent, we were in a pandemic.

Without any idea if baseball would resume in 2020, Rampe immediately went into preparation mode. He, along with Ron Porterfield, director of Player Health for

the Dodgers, gathered their staff (virtually) and gave the direction to get creative, think outside the box and start collecting as much information as they could regarding this virus. "There was no need to reinvent the wheel," Rampe felt. "We decided to tap into our relationships with athletic trainers of other sports to learn what they were doing." Since restrictions related to the virus varied from county to county, they spoke with their counterparts from local pro teams in LA county, the Lakers, Rams and Kings, as well as physicians from UCLA.

"Nothing was ever finished, complete or comprehensive in 2020," Rampe admitted. "One question led to five more. From March through July, we really didn't know what we were dealing with."

Due to the high rate of positive COVID tests in LA County, Rampe and his staff had to create a reintegration plan and work with LA Mayor Garcetti to bring their players back to Dodger Stadium in waves, if baseball resumed.

In May, the Dodgers started bringing players back slowly and in small groups to Camelback Ranch in

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IN THE SPOTLIGHT: NEIL RAMPE, M.Ed., ATC, CSCS, LMT

Phoenix, as well as to Dodger Stadium, depending on where they lived. They started with a single player, then groups of three players, then groups of five players doing rotations between the training room, weight room, batting cages and field. Initially, players would arrive at the ballpark dressed ready for their workout, get escorted into the facility, do their workout, and then were escorted out of the facility to ensure social distancing.

“We started with a tight leash and loosened it the more we learned and the more our processes got refined,” Rampe explained. In May and June, when the team felt they had learned more, they started to allow access to different areas of the ballpark in larger groups, as long as their process was not compromised. Wear a mask, wash your hands, and social distance were daily reminders for everyone.

Once summer training officially began, the collaboration and strength of PBATS became clear. Imagine having to identify expedited PCR testing locations and logistics, transportation and hotel for quarantine should someone on your squad test positive for every city visited during the season. PBATS members decided to collaborate on this type of information within their own city, to share with all visiting teams. “This meant there was a lot less to worry about when on the road if a home team would take care of their own city and treat visitors as if they were your own,” Rampe explained.

Zoom calls were a weekly form of communication between teams’ medical staffs to learn what each was doing in specific situations, and to talk through each city/county/state restrictions and requirements. Teams collaborated on how to navigate these issues as well as new MLB rules. “We were all drinking out of a firehose that nobody drank from before,” Rampe recalled. “In addition to our regular safety and emergency protocols meetings with the visiting team’s medical staff before each series, we also had a preempted conversation for COVID-related issues. Player safety superseded any competitive advantage.” During these meetings they would identify their isolation room, the closest PCR testing location, where guys that tested positive would go and how they would get there. Rampe credits the bond that PBATS members have, for this type of information sharing to take place.

MLB decided to restart spring training on July 1, 2020. Each team would stay in their home ballpark, rather than the customary Arizona or Florida, and would have three weeks to prepare for a 60-game season starting July 23. As soon as these dates and parameters were announced, Rampe and staff were ready to go. “Leave your ego at the door was one of the first rules we implemented,” Rampe shared. Maintaining social

distance and following the MLB tier system that limited the number of staff in any given area, staff was repurposed to fill roles that were best for the organization. This often meant that a bullpen catcher or video coordinator would assist in preparing food.

By July 1, with the entire team in LA, Rampe and his staff felt they had already learned what not to do. “We tried to fail forward as fast as we could to hone in on our processes for this year,” Rampe shared.

The high positive COVID test rates in Los Angeles may have played in favor of the Dodgers. “Living in an area hit hard by COVID forced us to have early learnings with our policies and procedures,” Rampe admitted. “We had great leadership and a team executing their plan right away, to keep players as safe as possible.”

From the start of spring training until the last regular season game on September 27, every player and staff member had PCR saliva testing every other day, per MLB regulations, with daily screening via questionnaire and temperature checks. This increased to daily testing in the postseason. “We could not have done this without Ron Porterfield and Andrew Otovic,” Rampe said. “They came in and coordinated and executed all the daily screening, testing and associated logistics.” This routine was just one of many changes every team went through this year.

“The season was so cognitively fatiguing. Nobody has a clear idea what it took to get through the season,” Rampe shared. “In the training room we practiced social equity, constantly asking each other, how are you doing, how is your family? Staff checking in on staff. That was very important.”

“We knew we had a good enough team to win it. We just needed to not take the opportunity away from us by making good decisions,” Rampe recalled. “We had to be a good teammate. Do the unselfish thing that leads to the team’s success.” Players were only allowed in the ballpark five hours prior to first pitch, instead of the traditional six to seven hours, which forced them to be more purposeful with their time. This even extended into determining what daily treatments players truly needed versus what they may just want. Get what you need and get off the table so a teammate can get what he needs, was a new way of thinking. Removing a couple of treatment tables from the training room to allow for proper social distance was also necessary. Rampe feels fortunate to have great clinicians in Andrew Hauser, Yosuke (Possum) Nakajima, Thomas Albert and Jonathan Erb to provide medical treatment for the players while he was pulled off the floor to manage COVID issues.

Adaptability became a huge trait in 2020. Baseball is usually very routine with the day planned out to the minute. What was consistent in previous seasons, was the unknown in 2020. When is batting practice? When is the plane leaving? It became survival of the most adaptable. “We felt that the team that had the most adaptability had the best chance of being the last man standing in 2020,” Rampe said.

Rather than gathering in the meal room to eat and socialize, players would order their food choices each morning using a team app. Once their food was prepared, it was taken outdoors for players to pick up and consume outdoors. Feeding 100 people daily, while maintaining social distance and avoiding common touchpoints, was a tremendous challenge that Rampe credits team dietitian and chef, Tyrone Hall and assistant Kristen DeCesare, with executing beautifully.

The MLB Playoffs in 2020 also took on a different look. The first round of games were hosted by the higher seed, where the Dodgers hosted Milwaukee for two games. Then MLB adopted a bubble, similar to what the NBA had done to help reduce the opportunity of exposure to COVID. Four ballparks were selected as bubbles for the Division Series and Championship Series, and Globe Life Field, for the entire World Series. Having played the entire postseason on the road, the Dodgers won the World Series on Oct 27!

Generosity of Dodgers ownership allowed players to have their families with them during the entire postseason, while staff members’ families joined the team during the Division Series. All staff families had to first quarantine in a hotel in Palos Verdes before gaining access to the team plane. Having family around was invaluable to everyone. Not only was there COVID to deal with, but our country was battling social injustice and an upcoming tense presidential election. There were things going on much larger than baseball and it was important that everyone respect each other. The team was the one constant for everyone.

Staying in the same hotel from the Division Series through the World Series allowed the team to settle into their environment and get into a bit of a routine. Everyone found what daily “rituals” helped them get through the day, whether it was a walk around the hotel property, taking a swim with their kids, or enjoying a cup of coffee on their patio. Players and staff held a “Bubbleween” on Halloween for the kids, on their patios to resemble community and normalcy. Controlling the controllable and being adaptable were key attributes for the team.

“If you asked any MLB athletic trainer involved in the 2020 season, they will tell you it was an absolute roller coaster, emotionally, mentally and physically,” Rampe stated. “They would tell you they felt like they went through a 200-game season instead of a 60-game season. We condensed a 162-game season’s worth of

resources into a 60-game full-court press with less manpower.”

The postseason of 2020 was clearly different than any before. No home-field advantage due to limited or no fans at a neutral site. No celebration or parade. Not one single bottle of champagne was popped throughout the Playoffs. Although the Dodgers managed to stay clear of any positive team COVID tests all season, the one positive test 30 minutes before winning the World Series, resulted in team COVID testing for an additional three weeks. This one positive test also required extensive conversations between the Dodgers and local public health officials to allow their team plane to return from Dallas and land at LAX.

Rampe hopes that the asterisk next to this World Series refers to the tremendous difficulty of it all, rather than because it was a shortened season. Rampe admitted that he did not exhale, relax and enjoy being World Champions until Thanksgiving Day.

“2020 will go down in history for so many reasons. I am very proud to be a part of the 2020 World Series knowing that being the last team standing signified more this year than a normal year because of what 2020 was,” Rampe reflected.