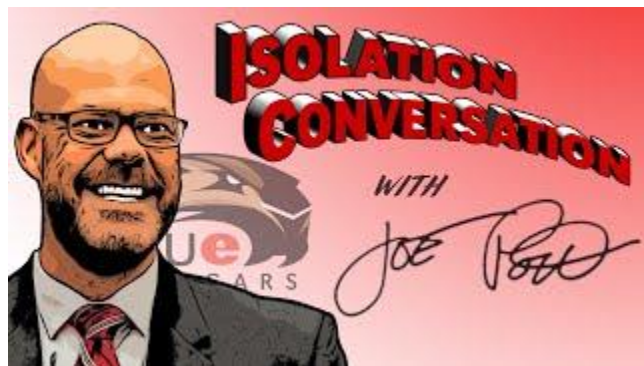


Isolation Conversations Highlight How SIUE Athletics and Student-Athletes are Adapting

by Joe Pott

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EDWARDSVILLE – Southern Illinois University Edwardsville Director of Athletics Tim Hall is dealing with an unprecedented situation as he leads the department through the COVID-19 pandemic. Unique conditions are requiring creative adjustments to be implemented across the board from training, recruitment, academic support and more.

As the Cougars deal with the challenges of caring for their student-athletes on a variety of levels, Sports Information Director Joe Pott is producing “Isolation Conversations” with Hall and his staff to share behind the scenes perspectives. The video features are available at siuecougars.com, on Twitter at @SIUECougars and on the SIUE Cougars Facebook page.

“If you could put on a clinic demonstrating how to manage a situation or national disaster, the way our institution has managed this has been a how-to clinic,” Hall said during his Isolation Conversations segment. “The University’s administrative team has acted in the best interests of students, and made adjustments for the safety and well-

being of faculty and staff. Things are progressing in as normal a fashion as possible, considering what we're going through."

Hall emphasizes the need for care, compassion and concern for the student-athletes. "Everyone is someone's son or daughter," he said. "So, the question you ask is what would I want for my child? Treating those individuals with respect, honor, dignity and stability is essential. We are an institutional family. We also want all of our staff to be in the best possible position amid this pandemic."

Hall underscored two primary thoughts with regard to the Cougars' coaching staff. "We have to be comfortable with ambiguity. An example is the adjustment of the recruiting calendar from none in April, being extended to none until the end of May.

"We are also adjusting to abide by the NCAA countable hours rule. We're not going to have any physical type of interaction, because it's hard to do physical training through virtual or distance learning. In our countable hours, we can conduct zoom sessions, offer video breakdown, share leadership videos, but no actual activity, because it's in the best interest of the student-athletes, keeping them safe and healthy."

Spring Sport/Tennis

Second-year Cougar Tennis Head Coach Adam Albertson was one of many spring sport leaders who saw their season abruptly end before it truly got started.

"We were already into the start of a good season, having just finished a match in Alabama and preparing to open the OVC season," said Albertson, who explained an emotional conversation with his team. "It was tough for myself and tough for our team. We had nine student-athletes that completely bought in this year. Our best tennis was still to come. Things were starting to click, and we were looking sharp."

Albertson has an intriguing challenge with more international student-athletes than most Cougar squads. "We are a unique team with international students from Colombia, Australia, Belgium and Germany," he said. "All of our group decided it was best to be home with family and be safe, so we lined up flights as soon as we got back to campus. The way our whole University has rallied and helped students has been great to see and makes me proud to be a Cougar."

Albertson said the first few days following the Stay-at-Home order were spent checking on individuals to make sure they made it home and were getting adjusted. "We have a couple engineering majors, biology and science majors, nutrition – suddenly your

chemistry course is online when it wasn't before. We had a Zoom last week, and we only missed one person, because it was 3 a.m. in her country. Everyone's doing well for the most part."

While normally preparing for travel at this time of the year or for a home weekend or OVC play, this is a completely different time for Albertson and his team. "A coach this time of year is used to being in the office seven days a week, weekend practices, matches, training, having it taken away makes you appreciate it," he said. "I'll never take for granted a practice or a morning workout with my team again. It shows you how much your team and season means to you. You build for that, the meetings, practice, off-season stuff, academic work and recruiting. To have the rug pulled out from under you shows you how important it is to you."

"For student-athletes, just about every place, it's been taken away – courts are locked up, nets are taken down," Albertson said. "The stay-at-home order is so strict, kids get a little cardio workout, go for a jog, but their normal practice/training mode is gone. It's tough on everyone, but we realize it's bigger than us."

Winter Sport/Wrestling

The Cougars wrestling team is a winter sport and was close to the NCAA Championships when the shutdown occurred. Sixth-year Head Coach Jeremy Spates had to adjust to the pinnacle event of the year not happening. Tyshawn Williams (senior, Baltimore, MD) and Justin Ruffin (sophomore, McDonough, GA) were anticipating bids.

"This year, U.S. Bank Stadium in Minneapolis, home of the Minnesota Vikings, had sold 44,000 tickets to the NCAA Tournament. It would've been an opportunity to wrestle in front of twice as many fans as usual. To miss out on that chance at history is disappointing."

Spates communicated through group text early. Eventually, he sent his student-athletes a more formalized practice plan. "Before that, our strength and conditioning staff did a great job of sending them things that they could do at home," he said. "Last week, we did our first Zoom meeting, asking them how are they doing, how is their family doing, what do they have access to weight-wise?"

Spates appreciates his young, hungry group. "They were looking forward to this training phase," he said. "In the spring, we usually go to freestyle and Greco. They're trying to do as much as they can work-out-wise. They're running, lifting on their own, studying video."

Spates' focus is turning to preparing for next year. "Normally, we're wrestling and weightlifting three times per week at this point," he said. "Every NCAA athlete is going through this. Let's control the things that we can control. Let's use this time to work on mentality and creating an attacking style. There's lots of resources like podcasts, articles and great wrestlers are putting out a lot of good content."

Spates believes this experience could work as motivation for a lot of athletes. "When it's time to get back on the mat, they realize they miss it, they love it, they realize they've been training like crazy for years and do they still want to do this?" he said. "I think our guys will use it in a positive way, because they're ready to go, they're excited about their futures, and we've got a tight knit group. When they're on the Zoom calls, everyone is smiling, laughing, and you can tell they want to be together."

Sport Psychology

Lindsay Ross-Stewart, PhD, associate professor of Exercise and Sport Psychology in the SIUE School of Education, Health and Human Behavior, serves as the Department of Athletics' sports psychologist. She has spent countless hours counseling student-athletes on the mental aspect of dealing with the pandemic and staying at home.

"The first question is how do we help each other as humans?" Ross-Stewart said. "Each individual is unique, and they're in different situations. The first couple weeks were spent checking in, making sure that they're feeling OK. Our focus was on about having to move, leaving their roommates, or staying here and being away from their families."

Ross-Stewart acknowledged that we're all experiencing something truly unique. "Athletes, coaches, everyone is going through it," she said. "Working at it from that place first is important. Now, as an individual gets somewhat used to this, how do they start to ramp up their training and use this time to their best advantage athletically?"

Ross-Stewart acknowledges the sense of loss that student-athletes are experiencing. "Athletes go through stages of loss when careers end through injury or graduation," she said. "Certainly, this is the same thing, and it happened so suddenly. They had put in all this work, had a successful season, had this idea about what was to come, excitement about what they'd been working for. To have that all disappear is difficult."

"As people are dying around the world, there's sometimes feelings of guilt or selfishness about feeling sad about sports. The truth is these are two completely different things, and you can be sad about your experience, while recognizing other people are going through something difficult, as well."

Ross-Stewart admits it's also been difficult for her. "In any kind of role in athletics, we're all in this for our student-athletes," she said. "It is difficult to be pulled away from them. For the student-athletes, they are used to having their support network – their academic advisors, their coaches – it's important to connect. Just seeing someone's face and their reactions is impactful."

Southern Illinois University Edwardsville provides students with a high quality, affordable education that prepares them for successful careers and lives of purpose to shape a changing world. Built on the foundation of a broad-based liberal education, and enhanced by hands-on research and real-world experiences, the academic preparation SIUE students receive equips them to thrive in the global marketplace and make our communities better places to live. Situated on 2,660 acres of beautiful woodland atop the bluffs overlooking the natural beauty of the Mississippi River's rich bottomland and only a short drive from downtown St. Louis, the SIUE campus is home to a diverse student body of more than 13,000.