

Creating a Safe, Return-to-sport Environment in Upstate New York during the COVID-19 Pandemic

Thomas O'Grady, PhD, MPH^{1,2,3} and Lance Jordan, MS¹

Introduction

On March 7, 2020, New York State issued Executive Order 202, declaring a disaster emergency and, quickly thereafter, shut down all public gatherings, all nonessential businesses, and public schools due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Initial stay-in-place orders were extended throughout the spring months to flatten the infection-rate of SARS-COV-2, and New York State was “on Pause” with all important guidelines coming jointly through the Health Department and Governor's office (<https://forward.ny.gov>) (1). These mandated restrictions were disruptive to the activity of daily living and resulted in families harboring together for long periods without substantial contact with the outside world, disruptions to school and work schedules, and potential economic hardships. The unique combination of the threat to public health, economic hardships, social isolation, and mental health issues were potentially compounded in the youth population (2). When New York State announced its phased, reopening plans, the Outliers Running Program wanted to have a youth summer training program with safety protocols in place and ready to begin when permitted by the State. It was necessary to create a day-of-health assessment for all participants, as well as protocols for practice that would provide for the safety of the participants, while optimizing the time the athletes were training together at a social distance. Our primary goal was to comply with governmental guidelines while creating a program that would provide a safe training environment for the athletes to gather and practice during the summer.

Place and Time

The Outliers Running Program is a long-standing camp that provides a summer training opportunity for cross-country and track & field. With the phased guidelines provided from the

Governor's office, the authors of this article developed a modified program that allowed for the participation of athletes in person. Coaches held the training camp twice per week with virtual tracking for the remainder of the week. Practices were held at three public parks, rotating locations throughout the summer.

Population of Interest

The population involved in the program was student-age athletes residing in the greater Clifton Park municipality. There were approximately 40 athletes, divided into training pods, who participated in the 2020 summer program along with three designated coaches. The primary purpose of the summer camp in past years was to provide a conditioning opportunity to athletes during the summer offseason.

Program Purpose

The primary goal this summer was to provide a safe and effective training opportunity for the youth athletes that would allow in-person training during the summer months while abiding by state phased-reopening guidelines, as well as state and federal guidance on appropriate protective public health measures. The intended duration of the summer camp was 8 to 10 weeks to provide similar preseason conditioning for fall athletics as in previous years. With the nature of COVID-19, the continuity of the program was unclear and subject to change at a moment's notice. An overlooked but important secondary aspect related to implementing this program was the opportunity to improve not only the physical but also the mental health of the young athletes at a time of profound stress related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Implementation

To implement the summer training camp, proper protocols needed to be created to protect athlete safety and allow for proper notification of individuals should contact tracing be required at any point in time. In addition to the standard emergency contact form used in previous years, the coaching staff created two additional items. The first was a COVID-19-specific guidance that described the required protocol for athletes to, and upon, arrival for camp, as well as protocols in case of a contact with a confirmed or possible COVID-19 case. The

¹Outliers Running Club, Saratoga Springs, NY; ²Department of Epidemiology and Biostatistics, University at Albany, School of Public Health, Albany, NY; and ³Walden University, College of Health Sciences, Minneapolis, MN.

Address for correspondence: Thomas O'Grady, PhD, MPH, Outliers Running Club, Saratoga Springs, NY; E-mail: Thomas.James.OGrady@gmail.com.

1537-890X/2001/05-06

Current Sports Medicine Reports

Copyright © 2021 by the American College of Sports Medicine

second document created was a short health assessment to be completed by a legal guardian on the day of camp. The assessment required legal guardians to confirm the athlete was without COVID-19 symptoms and did not have any known contact with an individual with COVID-19 or related symptoms. This was administered through Google Docs, and was completed electronically within 60 min prior to arriving at each practice during the summer. Both documents were specifically created in accordance to recommendations from the New York State Department of Health and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention's guidelines related to social distancing, face coverings, and effectively gathering in small groups (1,3).

In addition, all attendees agreed to wash their hands, bring a separate bag with all necessary gear, train in designated groups of four, and use a face covering and hand sanitizer when necessary during practice. Information on the proper use of face coverings was provided along with face coverings. Athletes were notified that in addition to being placed in defined groups, they had staggered arrival times and staggered start times for workouts to ensure proper distance was maintained. To allow contact tracing, should the need arise, all assessments were confidentially stored after each practice electronically. Each of the three documents (Daily Sign-in, COVID-19 Guidance, and Emergency Contact) were specifically created for the Summer 2020 training camp and can be found and reviewed on the program web site: <https://sites.google.com/site/outliersrunningclub/summer-running-program?authuser=0>.

Program Evaluation

We evaluated the success of the 2020 version of the summer training camp as follows. The team officially met a total of 16 times. This is similar to the amount of in-person meeting times that would be scheduled during nonpandemic years. At each in-person training camp, there was 100% compliance with the health assessment procedure. There also was compliance with the guidelines related to practice arrival and initial groupings. Further evidence of the success of the program can be evaluated both objectively and subjectively with the limited data available.

Objective measures of program success are related to athlete health and fitness with quantifiable numbers. Athlete health was not compromised during the summer program as we encountered zero instances of coronavirus transmission among program attendees. Additionally, there were no suspected contacts that required reporting to the county health department. Athlete physical fitness also objectively improved during summer camp. The top 7 athletes improved their timed mile over three intervals, for example, 4:45 at the start of camp to 4:39 in August to 4:35 at the official beginning of cross-country in September.

Subjective measures of success were observable in the response from the athletes, parents, and community. Athlete morale seemed high, and many comments from parents highlighted the positive impact the program had on their child's overall health. Community feedback was mixed with some individuals expressing concerns about a group meeting publicly, while others provided positive feedback. We specifically received

positive feedback about group compliance from two police officers designated to patrol the bike path and community park. The program additionally served as an educational opportunity for the community as the coaching staff was approached by town residents several times for information regarding the program, its purpose, and clarification about the safety procedures being followed.

Sustainability

To the best of our knowledge, there were no known adverse effects related to this intervention. Given the nature of the COVID-19 pandemic creating sustainable opportunities for in-person gatherings will be necessary. The model we used in its current form exceeds any that were previously in place to the best of our knowledge. In its current format, this program and others are sustainable for as long as mandates remain in place related to COVID-19 and the incidence of infection remain low enough to allow continued phased-in gatherings of this type. The model formed by the program can be modified appropriately and is applicable in other cases and portions of the intervention can be implemented postpandemic to increase overall health and safety of athletic practices.

Conclusions—Public Health and Sports Medicine Significance

The overall nature of this summer camp and the guidelines in place are of great public health significance and are related to important current topics in sports medicine. This program allowed for the safe gathering of athletes over the summer and prevented opportunities for the spread of SARS-COV-2 during a public health crisis. In creating a safe training environment, an opportunity was created to improve athlete physical and mental health in preparation for fall athletics.

We appreciate the review and guidance throughout the summer and in the writing of this article from Mia VanAuken-Clay, Esq. Additionally, we thank the parents and youth who participated in the Outliers Running Club's 2020 Summer Camp.

Note—In accordance with NYS Guidelines this article should not directly connect the program to the specific high school athletic program that most of the athletes attend. The concept, design, and writing were completely within the confines of the Outliers Running Club and were not connected in any way to Dr. O'Grady or Mr. Jordan's employment with any other institution.

References

1. New York State Department of Health. Information on Novel Coronavirus. 2020. [cited 2020 November 4]. Available from: <https://coronavirus.health.ny.gov/home>.
2. de Miranda DM, da Silva Athanasio B, Sena Oliveira AC, Simoes-E-Silva AC. How is COVID-19 pandemic impacting mental health of children and adolescents? *Int. J. Disaster Risk Reduct.* 2020; 51:101845.
3. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. Coronavirus (COVID-19). 2020. [cited 2020 November 4]. Available from: <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/index.html>.