

COVID-19 Concerns Lead Men's Swimming and Diving to Postpone Practices Until 2021

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The 2020-2021 Rowan Men's Swimming and Diving season has suddenly screeched to a halt due to growing coronavirus concerns.

The team began practice the first week of October, but just a couple weeks later, on Nov. 24, they decided to suspend practice. This decision was a collective one made by both the men's team head coach, Brad Bowser, and the women's team head coach, Elise Blaschke.

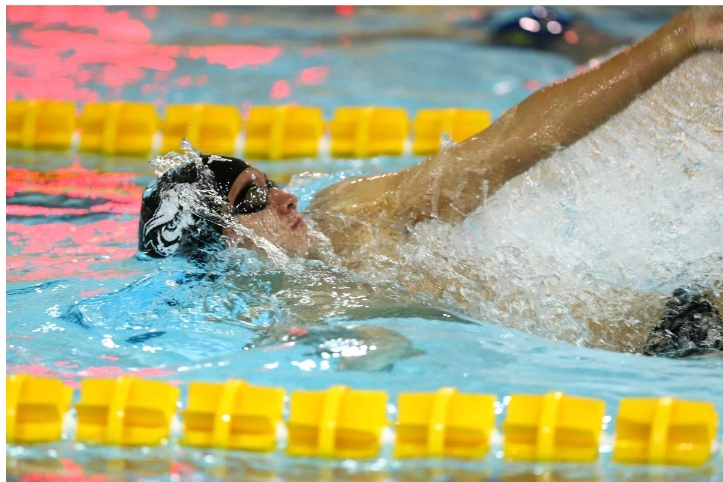
"Myself and the other coach did not feel comfortable with the individuals we had; four of the guys were going to have quarantine for 14 days when they came back," Bowser said. "We had some kids that were from the North Jersey area and we did not want them — if they had it and weren't aware — to come back and infect everyone else. And if someone had it, they'd have to quarantine during finals. It just was turning into something where myself and the head women's coach, Elise, did not want our athletes to have to go through. It was more of our decision from a safe side, just looking at the whole picture... We're going to try to pick back up in January."

It was a tough decision, but it was not a risk both head coaches felt comfortable taking. As college coaches, their number one priority is their players' safety, and admirably, these coaches did not waver.

COVID-19 precautions presented a multitude of complications that hindered the team's ability to conduct practice. With all the precautions that are currently in place, it was extremely difficult dividing up pool time with the women's team.

"We were shut down to only having eight swimmers in the pool at once, which only allowed us to have practice in one hour sessions. There's 25 guys on the team, so we had to intertwine with some of the girls team that practiced in the afternoons," Bowser said. "We tried to have the guys practice in the morning, and it really made it harder to where these guys were only getting two water sessions a week, where we normally get about six or seven sessions for two hours of time. In a normal year, we usually practice 14-15 hours in the pool a week, and these past two months we've only been allowed two hours per week."

Practicing during a pandemic has been extremely hard on our athletes, and it took them a while to get used to it, according to senior Kevin Gillooly.



Swimmer Kevin Gillooly during a backstroke race. Gillooly and his teammates' season has been postponed due to COVID-19 concerns. - Photo via Rowan Athletics

“It was definitely different... We had to limit our practice schedule in case we compete in the spring because the NCAA has rules on how many days a year you can compete and practice. So, it was very odd practicing leading up to this point,” Gillooly said. “Usually, I’m used to coming in every year and being able to see 30 of my close friends — who I consider my family — every single day and getting some really good work in with them. This year was challenging being in groups of eight to 10 people per practice and trying to motivate each other. It is much different than having a group of 30 guys around you motivating you.”

With the season and practice being postponed, a couple problems could possibly arise. One being swimmers’ development, and the team’s development as a whole. Gillooly is adamant that he will not let his team fall into that trap, and will be a leader by pushing his teammates to stay mentally and physically prepared.

“The way I look at it is the people who are going to be successful the next couple years are going to be the people who are putting in the work and finding any way possible to make themselves successful right now, regardless of the conditions,” Gillooly said. “People who are successful in athletics — and life in general — when they face adversity, they stare at it in the face and tackle it in any way possible... I think with the season being postponed, one important thing we’ll try to push to the team in the next couple months is that if they really want to be successful, it’s on them to really take it upon themselves to become the best versions of themselves they possibly can.”

Another issue at hand is the long-term effects of this pandemic on Rowan swimming and swimming in general — whether swimming will be changed forever because of COVID-19.

“I don’t think it’s going to change swimming in general, I think U.S.A. swimming and the background that we have within the national governing body for the sport is strong,” Bowser said. “We have very good developmental programs and club programs that a lot of people survive on; it’s their business, it’s their life to train athletes, to train competitors and swimmers.”

Gillooly also noted that the times for the swimmers might fall because of the possible hindrance on their development, but he does not believe swimming will be all that affected by the pandemic long term.

“There are things, like pro sports, being affected right now, maybe being changed for the foreseeable future, with how they are running their leagues because of this,” Gillooly said. “For swimming, the times might get lower for a couple of years, but I don’t think it will change the sport too much.”

Gillooly did find lessons he has learned during this whole COVID-19 experience that he can apply to the rest of his swimming career and life in general.

“I think just expectations, and the fact you have to take every opportunity possible and take as much out of that as you can. The last nine months I’ve thought about it a lot, I was sitting on the bench in February at the Metropolitan Conference Championships (METS) and I wasn’t taking in any of that atmosphere,” Gillooly said. “I wasn’t appreciating it because my sights were set on NCAA championships. They ended up getting canceled, but I thought, well, there’s always next year, and then we got to this year and I realized that I’m not going to be able to swim in the (METS)... It taught me, maybe instead of looking to the future so much, maybe I should take a step back and cherish what we have in the present, because otherwise, you’re going to miss a whole lot of opportunities.”

This pandemic has shown we cannot take the present for granted and to just be in the moment and enjoy life, because anything can be taken away from us in a split second. Gillooly and his teammates are finding that out the hard way. Hopefully we will see them in the water this upcoming spring.

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