

5 keys to navigating tournaments with COVID restrictions

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It's no secret that COVID-19 has turned the volleyball world upside down. Since the unprecedented lockdown in the middle of last season, players around the country have been forced to take unconventional approaches to training. Although we're still playing the sport we love, it may be challenging to adjust to the many new protocols that have been put in place for 2021. Based on my experiences, here are some suggestions that I think will help players and coaches get the most out of the new season:

1. Think of your mask as part of your uniform. Wearing masks while playing takes some getting used to, but for safety reasons, almost all tournaments will require them this year. I've discovered that it's best to embrace the new normal and to think of your mask much like your jersey or kneepads. A few tips: With your mask on, your mid-play interactions with your teammates might get muffled, so be sure to use your megaphone voice while communicating on the court. You have to be extra loud if you want to get set! You might also need to test your charades skills by using body language to talk to teammates. The most trying aspect of mask-wearing while playing is the sweatiness that comes with it. Changing masks daily or in between games is crucial to feeling fresh and rejuvenated for your next match!

2. Impress the “virtual scouts” with your energetic play. Now that the NCAA volleyball season has been switched to the spring, college coaches' ability to travel to qualifiers is limited. Instead of being there in person, they will all be watching games online through streaming services. You might miss the thrill of seeing college scouts on the sideline, but just remember that they are there! It's a great opportunity to play hard and imagine that your dream school is watching. What better way to show colleges you can deal with adversity than to play well with all of the COVID restrictions in place!

3. Learn the COVID rules. There are some important new protocols to be aware of before you play your first tournament. Most of them pertain to limiting contact between teams. To start matches, the old high-five under the net is replaced with a slightly awkward wave to the other team at the 10-foot line. Also, players no longer switch sides of the court between sets, meaning we will warm up and play the full match on the same side of the court. The biggest rule change I encountered is that if you wear your mask on your chin throughout the match, the referees can actually give you a yellow card. While this may vary with tournaments and refs, it's a significant rule to be conscious of. Finally, water fountains aren't open, so make sure to bring extra water to last you throughout the day.

4. Find ways to make team meals possible. Most club teams plan on at least one team dinner on the road during tournaments. With COVID, not only is indoor restaurant dining limited, some of your teammates might only be comfortable getting carry-out food. Team dinners can still be done safely by getting food to go and finding a large, remote area of the hotel or convention center. If the weather allows, a picnic dinner on blankets outside the hotel can be a great change of pace. Ultimately, being together as a team is what matters, not where you're eating.

5. Be in the moment. During quarantine, we weren't able to play the sport we love. We worked out on our own, taught our family members how to pepper with us and made kickbacks to hit against. We trained to get better and stronger for moments and tournaments like these. Although there are some changes to adjust to, volleyball is still the game we love. Get out there, enjoy your teammates and play hard, because thankfully now we can!