

Sports Media Production Adapts to Cover MAAC Games During COVID-19

by Christine Nappi

The best way for sports media production students to learn is by getting thrown into the fire, something Joe Ruggiero, producer of MAAC sports coverage, instilled in the minds of his students as they began to learn how to cover the women's and men's basketball games last year. Students are going to have to learn all over again– but this time they're developing a new skill: adjusting to COVID-19 restrictions while still producing engaging coverage.

This winter season, sports media production students, along with other interested communication students, will continue to cover the MAAC basketball games for ESPN networks amid the pandemic. Ruggiero and his team of dedicated students are taking all safety precautions necessary and are ready to get back to doing what they love: producing sports coverage.

“Right now, we're prepared to film all these games and I'm hoping that the students are ready, but we're gonna take it one game at a time and hopefully COVID doesn't shut us down,” Ruggiero said.

The various precautions Ruggiero and the students will take include, wearing masks, sanitizing equipment, spacing out where student's work, conducting regular temperature checks and installing plexiglass in the production truck. Although it will be hard to distance in the truck, Ruggiero plans to invest in fans and leave the doors open to generate a healthy air flow.

Junior and Sports Media Production student Tommy Courtney finds the restrictions to make game coverage different this year, particularly when trying to teach younger students how the production team operates.

“With COVID, things are gonna be a lot different,” Courtney said. “We're not gonna have all the hands on deck that we want, and it's gonna be a little bit harder to teach some of the new incoming freshmen and people who want to learn the positions because we can't be as close as we want to, so it's just gonna be like a learning aspect and see day by day how we go.”

Despite the differences and challenges, Courtney is hopeful that everyone will eventually adjust and learn to produce games efficiently with restrictions. He is happy to still have the chance to learn





more aspects of sports media production while preparing for his future career. He states that this year will be an important learning experience.

“Communicating is gonna be a little bit different, but I think as soon as we start learning, it will be... business as usual—just with masks on and making sure we have hand sanitizer [and] making sure everything’s safe,” Courtney said. “So we have that mindset that [you] kind of get thrown into the fire and you’ll learn the best; that’s kind of how we learn.”

Audience reaction and cheering usually add an energetic and entertaining flair to game coverage, however, the production team won’t have that aspect to

include this year due to COVID restrictions prohibiting fans. Ruggiero notes that the dance team, cheerleaders and pep band will still be present in Draddy Gymnasium, maintaining some of the crowd energy, yet it won’t be the same without fans.

Cort Koss, a senior sports media production major, describes how the lack of fans will be a challenge for the production team.

“That’s... going to be our biggest issue, is making Draddy not look so cavernous and trying to shut off a lot of the empty space,” Koss said.

Another aspect of game coverage that will change for the production team is conducting post-game interviews with coaches and athletes. Ruggiero and the team of students plan to set up a distant microphone for the interviewee to speak into as they conduct the interview six feet away. Although it’s different than what they’re used to, doing so will ensure the safety of athletes, coaches, and the production team.

“We have to do it, but as long as we keep our distance from the student athletes, from the coaches, wear our masks and have our PPE equipment ready to go,” Ruggiero said. “I think we’ll be okay. [There are] a lot of precautions in place, but we’re ready to go.”

However, keeping members of the Manhattan College community safe is only half of the equation— the team’s opponents need to stay safe and healthy too. Ruggiero is hoping that the positive or quarantined cases stay low so the students can continue to learn how to cover and produce these games. He notes that there’s a positive spin to this situation though. With the lack of fans, more people will be tuning in to watch, making the teams coverage all the more important.

“That’s all we can hope for because we want to be able to produce these games,” Ruggiero said. “I’m just trying to train [the students] and get them used to what it’s like to do live productions... and this is a weird time, but if we could do it, then we’re going to go out and do it.”

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