

Case Study: Return to Community Basketball in a COVID-19 world – Darwin Basketball Association (DBA)

Due to the recent COVID-19 pandemic community sport across Australia ground to a halt. The AIS and Basketball Australia have undergone a lot of work during this time to provide a framework for the return to sport at such time that the government policies, both state and federal, allow for basketball to return. The Northern Territory was the first state that was able to lock in a return to community sport and as such Basketball Australia has reached out to them to learn from their experiences in the hope of sharing with the basketball community their experiences that they may help others in planning for their own return to sport.



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State of play for NT

On 1 May the NT government released their 3-step plan for return to business as government restrictions eased:



This gave DBA 5 weeks to create their COVID plan, open team and player registrations and fixture competitions. DBA were given the ability to plan for competitions with the restriction given to them from authorities of max 500 people in the venue at a given time and were able to open their facilities for training purposes in the weeks leading up to competition resumption. This cap equates to 100 people per court in their 5 court venue.

Pre-competition planning and learnings

Working with NT Health and Safety Officers

To be able to return to sport DBA had to work through creating a COVID plan with the NT department of health and their Health and Safety officers.

This meant going through topics including but not limited to:

- Venue planning
 - Traffic flow
 - Creating defined entry and exit points
 - Setting up additional door staff to improve flow and reduce participants waiting around between games
 - Can the venue be closed off into separate sections to help reduce mingling?
 - Venue capacity requirements
 - What to look for when enforcing social distancing in a basketball setting
 - Canteen use
 - Referee room use

- Fixturing planning
 - Are gaps between scheduled games required?
 - If so what impact does that have on the timing of games and a venue's capacity for number of games played in an ordinary session
- Working out what additional items would need to be purchased for a courtside COVID cleaning kit
 - In line with the Basketball Australia return to play policy requiring clean down between games of score bench, bench equipment and game ball
- Signage from a traffic flow and information/education standpoint
 - What signage is required
 - How much signage is required?
- Staffing requirements to execute COVID plan
 - Biosecurity officer
 - Additional supervisors/competition staff
 - Rostering of referees to minimise cross over (referees to stay on the one court during shift, ideally with the same partner during that time)
 - Additional door staff
 - Will staffing requirements differ after first few weeks and community gets used to new norm?
 - Expectation of the responsibilities of each role in implementing COVID plan
- Consideration of likely to occur scenarios upon resumption of play and how they would be handled
 - What to do should someone have a change of mind and become uncomfortable to play after turning up?
 - What to do should someone have a coughing or sneezing fit on court?
 - What to do should club/team do not feel safe to return to play?
 - Likely hood of increased frustration with so much change?
- What communication will be required to be put together for the various members and member groups of the DBA community?
 - Education material on new COVID processes and expectation
 - Over communicating the importance of member registration prior to attending games
 - Communicating key changes and messages to members ahead of time to help set up expectations and reduce the number of fear responses (whether that be fear of change or fear of COVID)

Health and Safety officers have payed spot visits to DBA during the return to training phase with an education and warning approach first. This has proven to be a useful tool for DBA and their community to help reinforce the importance of compliance with their COVID plan and social distancing practices.

Practical implications for competition

Fixturing

One of the considerations for return to competition recommended is consideration of scheduling gaps between games to allow for clearing of one group and cleaning down the court before the next

group comes in. DBA trailed this during their finals before competition was shut down and found even with scheduled breaks and reduced number of games it meant games significantly ran behind time in their multi court venue. This means if they did this for Round 1 they would be faced with the option of having to extend their usual sessions, which is not particularly practical, or look at reducing the number of games played in a session. They also found this was a nightmare for traffic flow and had the potential to increase cross group mingling having the outside group waiting whilst the inside group was cleared.

DBA being in the fortunate position of being able to split their venue into 2 separate areas and having a limit of 500 people are trialling no gaps between games in week one of competition. They will combine email communication asking people to turn up just for their game and to leave promptly afterwards, signage and game day staff communication and observation to tackle this in week one and reassess the outcome and learnings as they go.

Gathering Limit Size

DBA discussed various ideas on how to enforce the gathering limit size including setting a limit of 2 spectators per participant. Given their limit of 500 participants and a comparison to normal traffic, going down a path like this felt like it would create more problems than it solved. As such they will use game day staff to monitor attendance levels and if the gathering size reaches the 450 people mark, they will begin to move along spectators or those yet to vacate from the game before.

Managing social distancing

This is quite a grey area in a sporting context. The easy one in theory is 1.5m distance between people however this becomes grey when you start exploring the scenarios and balancing out the need to monitor and police and over managing the situation. E.g. Families in attendance together, Teams that have just played together, children that attend school together. DBA will try to implement a middle ground approach and only intercede where they must. E.g. group sizes getting too big and impacting flow/social distancing ability and groups lingering for a long period of time that have finished their game.

This has also been a factor when deciding fixturing as DBA has a pay as you play set up meaning that players pay a set per player fee as they enter opposed to a 'game sheet' fee that can be prepaid. To clear the venue alone posed a social distancing pressure point let alone then get everyone in past the bottle neck that is the ticket box. Even with additional staff the limitations of the lay out and payment requirements could have considerable impacts on the ability to implement and adhere to social distancing requirements.

The referee room is a multi-use space serving as changerooms, personal belonging storage, social space and classroom for officials. The officials will be asked to use it for belonging storage only and to not be in there for other purposes. To complement this referee administration will alter rostering practices in line with BA's recommendations to limit crossover of officials and found an alternative space to hold the education sessions.

The location of the Canteen can also create a bottleneck when competition is in full flight. Consideration was taken when going through the venue planning as to how to ensure social distancing practices were able to be taken should the canteen be in operation.

Images of the entry to the DBA stadium illustrating the combined use of signage, designated spots for que's, barriers and repurposing of existing elements like tables and planter box's to create a clear expectation of flow whilst minimising the use of externally sourced materials:



Sanitation stations and cleaning of equipment between games

The setup of these stations and kits was more than just the procurement of hand sanitiser and wipes. Easy to follow guidelines had to be created and distributed to their community on expectation and location and implementation of this equipment and processes as did safe and convenient access and disposal. Biosecurity officers and game day staff had to be educated on new expectations and how to implement them.

Staffing

A decision was made by DBA that with all the requirements to get competition up and running whilst adhering to their COVID plan meant that the traffic flow management, biosecurity officer, cleaning down of courts and equipment between each game, ticket office flow would exceed the capacity and reasonable expectations of pre-COVID staffing processes. It was important to DBA that referees were free to do the job they are there for to maintain officiating standards however they would be expected to assist with clean down of equipment between games. The remaining workload of resuming competition and ensuring adherence to the COVID plan was to be that of the Biosecurity officer, supervisors, other game day staff and DBA staff.

As any sports administrator knows one of the major week one battle of every season is having all members registered to their teams. Every season week one gets off to a slow start with those that have forgotten, especially for those that use digital scoring platforms as it is no longer as quick as just scrawling your name on the team sheet. This added with the implementation of a COVID safe plan was an added pressure point in the lead up to resumption and added to the need of having to ensure DBA competition staff were able to be on the ground on week one to aid with registrations and troubleshooting on the spot.

Financial

The recent and somewhat sudden cessation of competition for participation driven business has meant that for the last few months most community sport has had no cash flow coming in other than Jobkeeper for those that qualified. No cash suddenly coming in does not mean that bills do not have to be paid and everyone will be somewhat unique in their individual circumstance.

It will come as no surprise that the act of putting on a game of basketball attracts a cost to those organising and in turn participating in the game. Returning to basketball at the moment for many will also require a reconsideration of fees and fee structures as in the short to medium term old financial models may not apply and being of a not for profit nature, grassroots organisations rarely

have enough fat in their cash flow to absorb all the various financial impacts that COVID has had on their operations. DBA have put up their fees for the upcoming season in part due to a pre-planned increase to cover the normal increase in outgoings and in part to help combat the costs associated with the return to competition at the moment. DBA said they would monitor the fee increase and its impacts on their community and depending on how the sporting landscape evolves post resumption of competition might even be able to offer a slight reduction in fees the following season if they saw cash flow trends and modelling able to be returned to pre-COVID standards.

5 days out from resuming competition team registrations had not been impacted by the price increase with total team registrations exceeding that of the previous season and limited push back from the membership base.

Scenario planning

One of the questions posed to DBA by Health and Safety officials was 'how would DBA handle instances where someone on court broke out into a sneezing/coughing fit and potential negative responses from others involved in the game'? Their response was two-fold, hygiene best practice and response to any potential fear response from others.

It is an overarching expectation that anyone who is sick or been in contact with a confirmed case of COVID is following public health and safety guidelines, staying home and not attending basketball. With that in mind the response to above would be as follows:

Hygiene – in line with current advice around hygiene practices anyone having a sneezing/coughing fit or sneezing/coughing on a repetitive basis would be substituted out of the game to go and wash their hands before returning to the game (much like the current blood rule). DBA believed that for the most part it would be the responsibility of the Biosecurity Officer and other game day staff to work with teams to adhere to these practices.

Fear response – it is the responsibility of all individuals to ensure they take responsibility for their safety should they no longer feel safe to participate in basketball. DBA staff would be understanding and respectful of individuals who changed their mind however the onus would be upon that person to remove themselves from the situation. The example they used was "this is the same for DBA as when they have a snake in the venue that is contained but unable to be removed, should play resume and an individual no longer feels safe to participate it is up to them to remove themselves from the venue"

Other learnings

Return to training

The return to training phase ended up being an important part of the education for both the DBA and their community on the importance and practicalities of implementing a COVID safe plan in the basketball context as this is not something that has ever had to be done before and given students ability to be at school junior athletes can easily forget about social distancing and hygiene practices

Removal of jump balls to begin the game

As per BA's guidelines DBA will be implementing a coin toss with a DBA dictated procedure, Team A = Heads, Team B = Tails. They felt this was the quickest and simplest application of this guideline for competition administration staff, teams and officials.

Club's choosing to not return to training prior to competition

DBA did have a small handful of people contact them expressing their concern of a return to play, whether that be disagreement on government, BA or DBA policies or just personal concern, and at least 1 club chose not to return to training before returning to competition. DBA was happy to take the time to speak to these members, hear their concerns and outline where appropriate how their COVID plan and government guidelines addressed these concerns. It is important that these members were empowered to take responsibility for their comfort and safety and make up their own minds. To date this has not had an impact on team registration numbers.

Spectator tracking

During the initial COVID safe planning phase DBA was asked to track the details of everyone who entered the stadium during competition. In working with the authorities through their plan and lay out they were subsequently approved to go ahead without having to undertake this step.

Potential contact tracing for players and team staff will be done utilising the information from the game day scoring system. Highlighting yet again the importance of accurate registration information and use of the game day scoring platform.

Spectators were deemed to be removed enough from the players that cross contamination during play was negligible.

Should a confirmed case of COVID-19 occur at the venue authorities and the DBA would announce the window of time that the infected person was at the venue to inform the public of a potential threat and need to be tested combined with making contact with team staff and players via team registration information to undertake contact tracing.

Post week one review and learnings

Return to train period before competition resumption

DBA felt that this 3 week period gave them a massive leg up for a smooth reintroduction of competition. It gave them 3 weeks to work with and educate their community on safely participating in basketball during these new times. People were used to having to use hand sanitiser/washing of hands upon entry to the venue and familiar with the concept of wiping down equipment after use.

Traffic Flow

Initial plans worked well although observations across the week lead to tweaks allowing for an improved experience. Whilst habits can be hard to break (eg telling people to enter out of the fire door which is not usually allowed) signage and continual communication across the week were well received as people got used to the set up. For the larger days of competition DBA set up an additional ticket box with 1 designated for courts 1 and 2 and 1 designated for courts 3, 4 and 5. This process was well received and DBA will look at making this a more permanent fixture to improve game day traffic flow.

Social Distancing

Signage and a customer experience centred greeting upon arrival helped remind and set up expectations prior to entry. DBA noticed that most people were respectful of social distancing practices and so minimal intervention was required. When they did have to remind people, they found an informative approach worked best.

Venue Capacity

Planning and additional staffing made venue capacity relatively simple to monitor. DBA also count themselves lucky with the combination of the setup of their venue and the current restrictions in place in the NT meaning that on high traffic days DBA could close the back courts off from the front courts. This reduced the number of people floating between the courts and essentially doubles the capacity of the venue.

Player/Team registrations

The number one reason for games running late in week one was due to player/team registrations being incomplete and having to be rectified, DBA felt this was not outside the norm of a non-COVID environment week one of competition. DBA also found that having additional staffing on hand greatly improved the customer experience and reduced tension levels usually associated with week one of competition.

Removal of Jump balls to commence game

DBA found this was well received and the clear direction on implementation made things easy. The issues in this area arose from:

- Remembering to have coins on hand on day one (as most officials did not have coins with them)
- Loss of coins across the course of the day
- Remembering that this is a new process for young officials so to give them example strategies to help them look after their coin during play (many of them do not have pockets to carry the coin in). This step may seem insignificant but was usually the first question asked on an officials first shift “what do I do with the coin while I am refereeing?”

Sanitation stations

Communication on entry, signage and strategic placement of stations meant they saw heavy use throughout the course of competition. The stations were closely monitored by game day staff and biosecurity officer to ensure the stations remained stocked as needed.

Sanitation kit for game equipment

DBA trailed the use of wipes to clean down balls, benches and scoring equipment at the beginning of competition resumption. This worked well for scoring equipment and benches but was not a practical solution for game balls as it was observed that wiping down balls between games did not provide for adequate cleaning of the ball surface and left the balls a bit tacky. DBA chose to trial a disinfectant spray to combat this, they could ensure the entire ball surface was in contact with the spray in a quick and effective manner. They also found that the spray did not leave the ball with a tacky feel.

Team Balls

As part of DBA's COVIDsafe teams were not allowed to bring their own balls in during competition hours. These conversations started outside the stadium with staff on hand to meet and greet the community. DBA thought this was going to be a potential point of conflict however found the community very understanding of this.

Staffing

DBA overstaffed week one with additional supervisors, ticket box staff, competition staff and management staff all on hand. DBA focused on a welcome back and education mentality with people stationed outside the venue to greet and explain what people could expect before they even got to the ticket box. They felt that this type of approach resulted in people feeling welcome and excited to return to basketball and they did not encounter any issues around fear responses relating to COVID-19 in week 1 of competition. DBA has received positive feedback from their community in regard to their warm welcoming return to play approach.



DBA used this time to trail an increased presence of eftpos machines in the ticket box for collecting payment which meant less man power was required to complete each nights financial processing requirements both on game day and the following day by the financial team. These staff hours were

redeployed into other areas of game day operation which DBA felt was very successful and will look into ways to make this a permanent part of their operations going forward.

DBA believe that the overstaffing on game day was instrumental to their positive return to competition and have committed to their week 1 level of staffing for the first 3 weeks of competition, after this point they will reassess and retune as required.

Other Notes and learnings for return to competition

Planning

DBA felt that while the creation of their COVIDsafe plan felt somewhat arduous at the time it ended up being time well spent as it gave them the opportunity to scenario plan and strategize how they would implement their COVIDsafe plan on game day and remain in line with Health and Safety requirements. Doing walkthroughs of their spaces also proved valuable in fine tuning game day plans prior to the community descending on game day.

Everyone will be different

DBA have been one of the first to go through this new process and were very fortunate with how the NT government restrictions were rolled back and that their venue set up works well within these restrictions. Whilst everyone's circumstances and experiences in getting sport back up and running will be unique there a lot of learnings that can be applied across anyone returning to competition.

Team/player registrations

With the game day scoring system being the tool for contact tracing it was paramount that registrations were completed and recorded correctly prior to games commencing. This is a challenge even in a non COVID-19 environment so the additional competition staff on hand during week one and supervisors keeping an eye on game day implementation went a long way to minimising the usual week one delays. Anyone who is resuming a season as opposed to starting a season from scratch may not face quite the same level of competition administrator workload as those that are starting a new season from scratch.

Racism

Racism is sadly something that still exists in this world and COVID-19 has very sadly seen an increased report of incidents of racism. There is no place for racism in Basketball and it is expected that all participants abide by Basketball Australia's and applicable State codes of conduct. Basketball Australia expects a zero tolerance policy towards incidents of racism and that any incident be treated in line with the applicable state disciplinary procedures.