

Use Caution

Professional sports teams taking precautions to protect players, fans

By Christian Red and T.J. Quinn
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NEW YORK (KRT) — The Milwaukee Bucks fan on the phone recently was not offering the usual unsolicited advice. It was U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Tommy Thompson — a former Wisconsin governor — and he wanted coach George Karl to know that the team, which played in Toronto at the end of the regular season, should take that city's outbreak of SARS seriously.

"We relayed the warning that if you felt bad after visiting Toronto, just don't mess around," Karl said. "The warning was also that you can't get this unless you have direct contact with this. But the best thing maybe is to stay inside."

So how did the message from a cabinet member sink in with the players? "So everyone in [expletive] Toronto should stay in the house?" Bucks guard Sam Cassell asked. "It doesn't make sense. I'm a grown man. They can't tell me to stay in the house."

Cassell was one of three Bucks players who returned to Toronto after a recent loss to the Nets for arraignment on assault charges after their involvement in a brawl outside a Toronto strip club on April 11. Trial is scheduled for May 30.

But their case also underscores a rising concern in sports that no one anticipated a month ago. The three Bucks didn't just put themselves at risk of arrest - they put themselves at risk for a potentially fatal disease.

"One of the problems," says Ian Smith, a physician and medical journalist, "is people's refusal to obey the guidelines."

As the Western world comes to grips with SARS — severe acute respiratory syndrome — professional sports leagues are recognizing the special threat to athletes who travel constantly and interact with large segments of the public. Like Cassell, not all are taking it seriously.

"Sports teams in particular are vulnerable," Smith said. "They travel great distances in short periods of time and are around a lot of people. They should be very, very careful about their travel."

According to the National Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, there have been 38 probable SARS cases diagnosed in the United States, though so far the United States has not seen "community" outbreaks like the one in Toronto that led the CDC to issue a travel advisory for anyone headed there.

The disease is believed to be transmitted primarily through person-to-person contact, mostly between people in close proximity. Most of the victims have either been in China recently or were in contact with someone who recently traveled to China. But epidemiologists recognize the danger inherent in any large public gathering. A public religious meeting in Toronto in late March is believed to be the source for several cases there.

Canadian officials have reported 139 probable cases, with 13 deaths.

Sports leagues have not reacted uniformly, but some have decided it is already time to change how they do business.

NBA officials, who have allowed some members of their Hong Kong office to relocate or work from home, told teams during the final week of the regular season to use only charters when flying to Toronto.

One official, who did not wish to be quoted, also noted the futility of trying to convince some professional athletes that they need protection from anything.

"You tell these guys not to do something, and they still wind up in a sleazy disco," the official said.

Some members of the Toronto Maple Leafs declined to sign autographs for fans recently. The Philadelphia Flyers, playing host to Toronto for Game 7 of their playoff series recently also moved with caution when they traveled north.

"We might not want to be walking around [Toronto's] Chinatown," Flyers defenseman Eric Weinrich told the South Jersey "Courier-Post."

Flyer Jeremy Roenick joked with the paper that he would sign autographs, but he'll have "a big wetsuit on and some gloves."

Two Buffalo Sabres players missed a road trip in late March when one player's sister came down with the disease after visiting a Toronto hospital.

Neither player showed symptoms and both were cleared to return. The player, whose sister recovered, had been in contact with her and had possibly exposed the other player, his roommate.

The women's world hockey championships in China were called off last month because of fear of exposure to SARS, and there are rumblings among Jets and Tampa Bay Buccaneers players about canceling a scheduled exhibition in Japan in August, though Japan has reported only two possible cases and no fatalities, according to the World Health Organization.

As of now, though, the trip is still on. "The NFL is monitoring the situation. We're making all preparations to head to Tokyo," said Jets spokesman Ron Colangelo.

Smith, however, warned that traveling anywhere in the Asian corridor should be of concern to teams. "Japan is a way-station to Hong Kong," he said.

The Yankees had their own concerns when Derek Jeter separated his shoulder in Toronto during the first week of the season. When he was sent to Mt. Sinai Hospital in Toronto for tests, he, like many of the patients, wore a surgical mask.

Major League Baseball itself, however, has not taken any actions yet. MLB spokesman Rich Levin said baseball's medical adviser, Elliot Pellman, has been in touch with the CDC, but MLB has not sent any advisories to teams playing the Blue Jays in Toronto.

"If there's a situation where we have to take further action, we will," Levin said.

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- Ian Smith,
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at linebacker. Other options to attend major Division I school's fell apart after Romanelli ran into legal trouble near the end of his senior football season.

Romanelli said that his troubles are behind him. He said that the support he received after the incident helped him stay away from further incidents.

"Everybody on the team [Charlotte Independence] went out of the way to help me out," said Romanelli.

"If I needed rides or needed help with just anything they were there for me."

Most freshman that come in are red-shirted, but Romanelli might see significant playing time due to absences in the linebacker unit.

"I'm coming in there to start," said Romanelli. "I'm going to come in there and be given a fair chance just like everyone else is. It doesn't matter to me who is in there. It is my mind-set to come in and start. I just want to come in and do big things off gate."

Both Romanelli and Autrey are in great academic standing.

Autrey has plans of becoming a dentist after his formal education. Romanelli said that he is undecided about his plans.


Along with the other incoming recruits and walk-ons, Romanelli and Autrey could find themselves in a great position to contribute immediately to a team that struggled with young talent only a season ago.

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"I liked everything about the school. Everybody was involved in what was going on with the sports. I went to the games and everybody was in to what was going on and I liked that. I went to a basketball game and the gym was packed. Everybody in there was getting up, and I just liked that atmosphere."

— Jeffrey Romanelli

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