

How NBA is using technology to help with health and safety protocols inside Orlando bubble

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Once the alarm goes off and they remove the crud from their eyes, most people here will instinctively grab their phone.

Checking an email or logging onto social media won't be the only reasons. With the NBA planning to resume its season at the ESPN Wide World of Sports Complex on July 30, the league has required players, coaches, staff members and reporters to use various devices that will keep the league informed on if anyone might be infected with the coronavirus, which causes the disease COVID-19.

"What we really wanted to do was empower everyone to do it themselves every morning so we can integrate that," said Tom Ryan, the NBA's Associate Vice President of Basketball Strategy. "So if there is a flag, we will know it right away."

They login to the NBA's MyHealth app that they downloaded on their phone shortly after arriving. They complete a symptom questionnaire detailing any ailments, including cough, breathing issues, fever, body aches, headache, sore throat, loss of taste or smell, diarrhea, nausea or vomiting, fatigue, congestion or runny nose. They hold Kinsa, a Bluetooth-enabled smart thermometer, under their tongue for about eight seconds. Once the device beeps, they log their temperature into the app. They insert one of their fingers into Massimo, a pulse oximeter that measures oxygen levels. Then they report those numbers in the app, too.

Dr. John DiFiori, the NBA's Director of Sports Medicine, stressed that "testing is really the foundation," as well as social distancing, face coverings and hand washing. Yet, the devices provide an added purpose.

"There is value in these tools with perhaps informing how we might approach the next month or the next two months and next season," said

DiFiori, who is also Chief of Primary Sports Medicine and attending physician at New York City's Hospital for Special Surgery.

The NBA understands it cannot have a perfect shooting percentage. That never happens in basketball, and it never happens in life, either.

The NBA reported that 25 of 351 players, and 10 of 884 staff members tested positive for COVID-19 when they first began testing between June 23-29. The league announced Monday that two out of 322 players tested positive during quarantine when teams arrived in Florida last week, and those players have returned to their respective home markets.

This week, Houston's Russell Westbrook and Sacramento's Harrison Barnes announced they tested positive for COVID-19 before their teams left for Orlando. Also this week, Sacramento's Richaun Holmes and Houston's Bruno Caboclo were subject to 10-day quarantines after leaving the Disney campus.

Still, DiFiori said that "the teams and players have done a fantastic job in adapting to the unusual environment" to ensure the low number of infections. Meanwhile, those in NBA circles have praised the league both for its extensive, 113-page health and safety protocols, as well as the devices everyone has to use daily to ensure health officials have accurate data.

"It's the NBA. They always do a great job," Sacramento coach Luke Walton said. "They explore every option. With this, they know there's going to be risk. They're trying their best and doing their best to keep everybody safe.

"I think if you ask people in the bubble how they feel, my guess is that most of them feel like there's not a safer place than we're at as far as COVID is concerned. And I think some of the technology they're using

is great."

How the NBA technology works

The NBA has used the technology by partnering with Fusion Sport, which has usually worked with professional sports teams, colleges, military branches and private companies to compile and analyze data involving human performance and business trends.

Fusion Sport has recently worked with organizations, including the NBA, to help analyze the data regarding every employee's wellness, symptoms and test results.

So when each player, coach, staff member and reporter fills out their symptom questionnaire, temperature and oxygen levels, they are not just logging the information so they can learn about their health status. The NBA and health officials will quickly learn, too.

"Those are all getting fed to that Fusion Sport database and software," Ryan said. "What we've done is written a big algorithm that takes in all of those inputs for every individual on campus for every given moment."

That input also includes the daily COVID-19 test results, which have a turnaround time between 12 to 15 hours. BioReference Laboratories emails negative results and calls with positive results. In either case, that data is stored in the NBA's MyHealth app.

The app displays seven boxes, including symptoms, temperature, oxygen levels and COVID-19 test results. If all the boxes are green, the person may leave their room so long as they maintain social distancing requirements and wear a face covering. If any box is red, the person has to stay in their room and a physician follows up.

To safeguard from people leaving their room with any red boxes, the NBA has required everyone wear Disney Magic Bands. Disney World has used this waterproof device to allow customers to check into their hotel room and enter the theme parks easily.

The same convenience applies to everyone for the NBA's resumed season. As Los Angeles Lakers coach Frank Vogel quipped, "you never forget your room key if you're wearing it." The Magic Band fits on a person's wrist similar to a watch. The Mickey Mouse icon on the band will open doors.

Ryan conceded that convenience became "a big point of discussion" with how the NBA and Disney oversaw this setup. But the Magic Band provides a bigger service than convenience. People use it as a point of entry for various security checkpoints around the campus, including to team buses, practice facilities and COVID-19 testing sites around the four hotels.

Once someone checks into a location, health officials are given alerts so they can look up the person's profile. If the Magic Band display shows green, that person can proceed through the checkpoint. If it turns a different color, a medical investigation begins. The reasons could include a person forgetting to fill out the symptom self-assessment, leaving a room despite nursing symptoms or breaking quarantine.

Despite that technology, though, the NBA and Disney are not using these devices to contact trace or access a person's location that are not part of the designated checkpoints.

"The Magic Band isn't holding any of your health data. That is not on the band at all," Ryan said. "The band is a unique identifier that says a person is at this location at this time. There's no memory on a Magic Band."

Leading up to the NBA resumed season, Ryan said the NBA players union talked out concerns about protecting players' privacy. A handful of players shared their suspicions on social media. During Zoom calls this week, players changed their sentiments.

"The NBA continues to be the leader in everything," Houston guard Austin Rivers said. "It's been really impressive. I'm not going to lie. I had a lot of questions going into the bubble. But they've done a great job."

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