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Delayed — But Not Denied

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By Eric F. Spina

“Toeing the line for a cross country race in the middle of February on a snow-covered course was definitely something I never envisioned when I signed up for Division I athletics,” says Kelly Wilker, last year’s most valuable runner on the women’s cross country team.

“However, after a year of silence I had such a feeling of gratitude when I heard the noise of a starting gun followed by the crunch of racing spikes on frozen grass.”

I truly admire the resilience and tenacity of our student-athletes, who endured months of uncertainty to compete this spring. All Flyer teams — fall and spring sports — are in action, and I’m trying to catch as many games, matches, and scrimmages as I can to root our students on in the sports they love and in which they love to represent our beloved UD.

As our student-athletes compete for victories and championships, they’re following not only their dreams but also strict NCAA COVID-19 testing protocols. Among other requirements, that means daily tests for the women’s and men’s basketball teams, heading to the WNIT

and NIT tournaments this week; masks during matches for the volleyball squad, who's eyeing another return to the national stage; and frequent testing for every student-athlete.

Bridget Doherty, a senior captain and setter on the Flyer volleyball team, says she and her teammates would have played just "one single spring game without any fans" if that's what it took to get back on the court after the hiatus.

"I was overwhelmed with joy. We were all overwhelmed with gratitude and perspective when we learned that we would compete in the spring," says Bridget, who was offered a walk-on position but quickly earned a scholarship and starting position during her first year.

"While it's been frustrating, I find joy in getting to do what we've been trained to do. Once in the moment, it doesn't matter what else is going on in the world. We're getting to compete. I love being on the court during the big moments," she says.

We welcomed back eight seniors from last year's baseball team after the NCAA granted another year of eligibility. As I watched the team take on North Dakota State last weekend, I marveled at how the players are approaching the game with grit. "You never know when the game can be taken away from you. So you treat every game as if it will be your last," says pitcher Tyler Jones, UD's Presidential Scholar-Athlete and president of the Student-Athlete Advisory Committee.

Kudos to the athletics staff who are working overtime with 16 teams training, practicing, lifting, or competing in some fashion this spring.

And a standing ovation for our student-athletes, who have navigated through uncertainty, setbacks, and cancellations with their heads held high. "The resiliency that these men and women have shown has been one of the proudest things to witness of my coaching career," says cross country head coach Jason Ordway.

I share Coach Ordway's pride. The Flyers have made sacrifices and persevered to move from the sidelines back into competition. With "DAYTON" on their chests or their backs, they are our winners — every last one.