

# **For Lakers support staff, the bubble has been a frantic, collaborative effort**

LAKE BUENA VISTA, Fla. >> Thirty-six hours into her quarantine, Nina Hsieh couldn't wait to bolt out her hotel room door.

The head athletic trainer for the Lakers paced as she saw the messages from her colleague who were already out of their rooms, dashing through the sweltering Florida humidity to a warehouse that held almost everything they would need for the next three months. They had to bring all the equipment over in flatbed carts back to the Gran Destino to start constructing improvised weight rooms and training facilities that would last them hopefully through an NBA championship run unlike any other.

Their first practice would be in hours. Players including LeBron James and Anthony Davis would need taping and treatment before taking the court. With a skeleton crew staff and a tight schedule, every minute counted, and Hsieh — who has worked in the organization for the last 12 years — was crawling up her walls.

"I know I was still stuck in my room and couldn't do anything," she said. "I think you're still kind of anxious of what's gonna fit where and what if certain things don't fit the way they work out in your mind."

Little about 2020 has worked out as envisioned — and the bubble at Walt Disney World Resort has been the NBA's way to adapt. But to lower the risk, health experts recommended limiting the number of people who participate. Teams were told they'd need strict caps on the number of people they could send: Just 35, which includes players, coaches and staff.

For the Lakers, it means their equipment manager must find a way to move a bus full of duffel bags stuffed with socks, shoes, jerseys and all manner of odds and ends back and forth from arenas without an assistant. It means their security guard and strength coaches run to a convention center ballroom to pick up packages and deliver them. It means their director of sports performance helps plan everything from when they get meals catered to when they get housekeeping services.

General manager Rob Pelinka started the year swinging one of the biggest trades of the offseason for Anthony Davis and signing contracts for a team that would go on to be the West's No. 1 seed. In the bubble, he's a rebounder and occasionally a waterboy. His employees have watched him mop up sweat on the court at practices.

"There's no task that's too low that we can't come in and help," Pelinka said. "Especially when it comes to our players and their safety and servicing their needs."

It's who the Lakers believe they are. But in the bubble, it's also an absolute necessity.

"We're all now essentially a man-and-a-half," Hsieh said. "Everybody's gotta pick up that extra half a person here, half a person there that's missing."

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On the day of the Lakers' first scrimmage at Visa Athletic Center, Andrew Henk did something he never does at Staples Center: He arrived at the same time as the players.

For a team equipment manager, there is no worse nightmare. The initial protocols designed by the NBA limited the window in which teams could arrive, and Henk found himself in charge of bringing nearly two dozen duffel bags of equipment — all the team's uniforms, shoes, socks and all manner of equipment — into the arena. The critical piece of his job is preparation: Even on road trips, he can set up the night before, and lay uniforms and mesh bags with uniform components and shoes out at individual lockers when players come in.

From a purely material perspective, no one on staff faces a challenge like Henk, who is in his first full year as equipment manager for the team. He has a room filled with black duffel bags, which have all the fresh tights, socks, sleeves and other equipment players require for the coming months. He is in charge of team laundry, which takes hours at a time in a complex with a seemingly unending row of washers and dryers. He's in charge of running deliveries from the mailing ballroom to the hotel.

Henk knew the hours would be long and the challenge would be great since the Lakers first told him that his staff would be squeezed in favor of medical emphasis.

Henk's assistants can order or send him packages from Los Angeles, but that's about all they can do.

"It was like, 'When am I gonna sleep? When is there gonna be a break?'" Henk said. "And you know, just my mind really never turns off, because as soon as one day ends and is completed, I start thinking about the next day."

Game days are the most stressful: If the Lakers shoot around in the morning, there can be as much as five sets of dirty laundry that need to be washed the next day for 17 players. The NBA has a small army of team attendants who help unload the bus and serve as ball boys, wipe the floors, scoop ice bags and run towels. But health protocols dictate they can't actually hand anything directly to a player — only members of the traveling party can literally hand over things.

Henk, like a lot of people in the travel party, also rebounds during practice. When the Lakers scrimmage among themselves, he runs the shot clock.

While the organization knew they would have to short-staff team equipment, they've tried to be mindful and helpful. Frank Vogel has deputized all of his coaches as "assistant equipment managers" to carry bags and help out in games to stock towels and water bottles to players on a social distanced bench. Other staff members help out on deliveries, running down to the warehouse with golf carts. The NBA has helped by allowing staff to come to locker rooms earlier than players so they can set up sooner.

Downtime is precious: When Henk throws in a load of the team laundry in an improvised batting cage at the ESPN Wide World of Sports baseball field, he'll plug in his headphones and run laps around the diamond for a workout: "It's really just one thing after another," he said.

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On a recent afternoon, Dr. Judy Seto needed a reference — the Lakers' director of sports performance couldn't remember all the jobs off the top of her head that she's been assigned since the NBA hiatus hit on March 11.

As she scanned her records, she paused to respond to an urgent text — the kind she gets all day long. Messages from the NBA, from the Lakers' staffers back in L.A., from people on the campus itself. Seto is one of the most even-keeled staffers in the Lakers' camp, entrusted as the day-to-day planner in addition to the chief

medical person on site — in many ways, the brain of the Lakers' support operation. She has a well-practiced bedside manner, but here, she allowed herself a rare whiff of weariness.

"Sometimes," she said. "I think my phone gets tired."

In the last four-and-a-half months alone, Seto has earned five new titles, all created and necessitated by the pandemic, to carry responsibilities beyond her role overseeing the medical care and performance of every player. That includes Facilities Hygiene Officer, Restart Coordinator, Logistics Manager, Campus Health Officer and Mental Health Point of Contact. This has made her an inflection point for all kinds of logistical elements, from the scheduling of facilities time and oversight of cleaning back in May when individual workouts started, to now scheduling daily coronavirus testing in the bubble.

Since the bubble isn't like normal road trips, the Lakers left their manager of travel operations, Josh Ingram, at home. But Seto works with Ingram often, and also coordinates with the team's player services personnel to make sure everything from meals to housekeeping gets done on time.

Seto has done some of the most mental labor of the Lakers' organization in the last few months: She worked with the NBA and infectious disease experts to help develop the 113-page memo that has become the foundation of the bubble. While the NBA's outward face was near-silence for months, many of the league's medical minds were on conference calls behind closed doors, revising plans and drafts, getting up to date on the latest science of COVID-19.

Even for small steps like individual workouts, the Lakers and every other NBA team had to open facilities in phases with strict cleaning and isolating procedures. Some teams like Denver never made it all the way through the phases, shutting down facilities after positive tests. While progressing to this point of the restart may look like a steady march, nothing has ever felt assured, even by the long hours Seto and hundreds of others put into creating guidelines.

"People didn't see behind the curtain what it took to even start these scrimmages. We're about to start our seeding games pretty soon, and just to make those happen and get to this point took a lot of work. And it's going to continue to take a lot of work."

The memo's release drew some snickers for its specificity, such as the proper procedures to clean a ball. But this was not a joke to everyone: Henk remembers what a pain it was to clean a full rack of balls after every workout with detergent, water and sanitizer, then leave them outside in the parking lot to dry so they wouldn't drip onto the court.

For Henk and other hands-on staff members, they were simply happy to get back to work. The Lakers were coming up on one of their longer East Coast road trips when the hiatus struck on. As much as working nonstop in the bubble has been a grind, it beats not working at all.

"That was so weird, because obviously this job is a million miles an hour, one thing after another," Henk said. "Then the NBA goes on a hiatus, and it was just literally nothing after that."

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What do you pack for a three-month trip? Everything.

What they don't normally bring themselves, NBA teams like the Lakers often get from the home team when they're on the road. Trainers especially raid opposing store rooms for common things like tape or the lubricant that goes between pads on every ankle. But most of that equipment had to be brought with them, packed in a truck and shipped to Florida on 16 (give or take) pallets.

Many of the items were packed by month they'll be needed, Hsieh said, as the Lakers hope for a long playoff run. When she finally got out of quarantine, she sorted out the things she needed right away — like massage tables and wraps — from what she'll need in October (as she described this set-up, Hsieh knocked on wood).

Creating the inventory involved a lot of math on a trip much longer than the Lakers ever pack for, multiplying the demands of one game for a projected run to the Finals, plus practices. The Lakers' stash includes a ludicrous amount of common items, such as two 1,000-unit packages of ice bags. They hand-scooped Vaseline for skin wraps into large tubs that they packed. Then there's things they probably won't even need all of, like two large vats of ultrasound gel.

"I think at that point we were starting to throw stuff into the boxes," Hsieh said, laughing. "We probably won't even go through one."

If the training staff packed heavy, the strength staff packed lean. Chatten Hill and Ed Streit are the two assistant strength coaches under Gunnar Peterson, who remained in Los Angeles. While Peterson remains on call to consult, Hill and Streit were charged with running a weight room on the “strength coach floor” of the Gran Destino where all teams have their personal facilities.

When they got out of quarantine, the duo had to put together a full squat rack — “Luckily Ed is pretty handy,” Hill said — and within 30 minutes of finishing their improvised set-up, Lakers players were lifting in their hotel.

The strength staff can also use weights and equipment at playing venues and practice facilities at on-campus ballrooms. But gym time is restricted by cleaning protocols, so plenty of lifts and other conditioning are done in adjoining hotel rooms that can house a maximum of two players and two coaches at a time. They’ve largely forsaken advanced, fancy electronic equipment in favor of weights and bands — the analog stuff that simply works.

“We’ve outfitted it with pretty much almost everything we have in our gym (in El Segundo), but just on a much smaller scale,” Hill said. “None of the equipment repeats itself, if that makes sense. But we’re operating pretty well under the circumstances.”

Though downtime is rare, it’s best done like most other things in the bubble: together. When Hill isn’t reading or stealing FaceTime moments with his family, he practices martial arts strikes with Streit — or sometimes with the Lakers’ first security guard in the bubble, who is a jiu jitsu expert. Hsieh swims in the pool, but sometimes indulges in bike rides around the resort with massage therapist Stacey Robinson.

On her first off day she could remember, Seto and Pelinka grabbed rods and bait for a “friendly fishing bet” off one of the bridges at the resort. Pelinka caught four; Seto didn’t catch any — but it was a welcome way to blow off steam.

The bubble, which several people in it have likened to the world’s biggest AAU tournament, requires going back to what a lot of people in the NBA think of as their roots with long hours and sometimes thankless work. Many staffers have experience in the G League or colleges with the menial tasks and multiple roles they’re charged with now.

That's a mentality that starts from the top with Vogel, who famously pleaded his way onto Rick Pitino's Kentucky staff as a student manager and handled all sorts of odd jobs on his coaching path. While some players have teased him for carrying bags to and from the arena, they also have followed his example.

When Vogel took the job, a shadow of dysfunction hung over the franchise — on the day he was introduced, infighting between former president Magic Johnson and Pelinka was splashed across national airwaves. But what's happening now, he said, is a validation of the culture in the organization.

"It's not just the players in uniform. It's the front office, it's the coaching staff, training staff, video team, training guys, everybody working together and helping each other out. And that's been a real positive, a breath of fresh air." he said. "There's a really healthy atmosphere here. The perception of the way this organization works was very different from reality."

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When individual workouts began in May, players filtered in slowly. But two of the chief draws were the Lakers' weight room and the training room. While the Lakers had set up Zoom workouts and sent equipment to players, it's not the same as being there. Hsieh remembered how appreciative players were as she worked on knots in their shoulders, their backs, their legs.

It's an appreciation that carries into the bubble. Players can be notoriously finicky about routines and pregame preferences, but they're adapting to the circumstances just like the people who help heal, train, nourish and clothe their bodies for game day.

Last week, a fridge in the laundry room was suddenly stocked with beer for equipment staffers — a gift from Miami's Jimmy Butler who has a sponsorship. That gesture and other small ones like it communicates the respect that has only grown from players.

"I always appreciate the things they do, because they don't get any accolades or get any support from fans and stuff like that," Alex Caruso said. "The only recognition they get is from us on the team. .. They're trying, man. Their jobs are already hard enough."

The Lakers' first official game in the bubble was a three-hour marathon against the Clippers. LeBron James returned to the Gran Destino like his teammates in need of a shower and a meal. But as he saw Hsieh, Henk and other support staff loading an elevator with bags to whisk up and store on their floor, he stopped to help out.

"I mean he played, so he's tired and he's hungry. And he's still helping us," Hsieh said. "That's kind of what it's been like. That's what everybody has done."

## How LeBron James and his NBA generation grew their voices, influenced the next ones

LAKE BUENA VISTA, Fla. — Eight years removed from a defining moment in his career, LeBron James still remembers the weight of it well.

Sitting in a Detroit ballroom in March of 2012, James and his then-teammates on the Miami Heat reflected on the shooting death of Trayvon Martin, an unarmed Black 17-year-old who was killed upstate in Florida. The Heat were his favorite team.

The men in that room thought about their sons, several of whom would be teenagers in just a few years. [Thirteen players posed for a picture wearing hooded sweatshirts](#) — the same article of clothing Martin was wearing — and James tweeted the photo with the caption: #WeWantJustice.

"We knew that it was going to be uncomfortable to a lot of people," James said this week. "But we didn't care, because we understood how much it hit home for us and a lot of our guys having sons of their own. We could imagine if our kid was to leave home and not return."

It was a turning point for James — and the NBA.



Sports and social activism have long gone hand-in-hand: Often in America's history, the field or the court has been a more level playing field for Black Americans than in civil rights, housing, justice and government — providing platforms for voices such as Jackie Robinson, Muhammad Ali, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Bill Russell and Jim Brown.

But in the 2012 NBA, it was ground-breaking for the game's biggest star to make such an outward statement about a news event that sparked controversy and cries for change.

"It was a timeless moment," said Udonis Haslem, now 40 and the last player from that photo still on the Heat's roster. "I think that moment and that picture will last forever. And I think it's just as relevant now as it was then."

There is rarely a clean line of delineation when it comes to social movements, but many players past and present involved in the NBA's current high tide toward social justice causes identify that picture as a powerful first step toward what they're living now.

When James sent that picture in a tweet all those years ago, he would have had a hard time imagining how he would evolve. And it would have been impossible to predict how the NBA would morph around him to become one of the most vocal leagues advocating social change in the country with [the words "BLACK LIVES MATTER" printed on the very court.](#)

"It started with guys like LeBron, and now that legacy continues," said Malcolm Brogdon, one of the most influential younger voices in the league who was a teenager in 2012, closer in age to Trayvon Martin than to James. "That was a pretty significant and pretty powerful thing."

### **SOPHISTICATED STRATEGIES**

In another ballroom some 1,100 miles from Detroit and eight years after appearing in the picture, Haslem wore a hoodie again — casually, not intentionally — as he explained his latest off-court project to Southern California News Group.

Even in the NBA bubble, Haslem has been a partner with the [Florida Rights Restoration Coalition](#), a group led by activist Desmond Meade (named one of Time's 100 Most Influential People in the World) which seeks to return voting rights to an estimated 1.5 million Floridians with felony convictions. The FRRC has worked with the Miami Heat and Orlando Magic in the past, but [Haslem's involvement](#)

picked up with [More Than A Vote](#), the initiative founded by James and his associates in June.

That right was officially returned by a state amendment approved by a majority of Florida voters in 2018, but barriers remain: [Such voters cannot participate in elections with outstanding fines or court costs](#), which can be steep for a person trying to get by on the kind of job one can get with a felony conviction. MTAV has helped the FRRRC collect a reported \$25 million to help pay off these fees, which the FRRRC is doing a part of a county-by-county bus tour.

It's a niche issue by athlete activism standards, one which Haslem acknowledges he probably would not have tackled eight years ago. But that's where growth gets you.

"It's really weird when you get to 40 years old and realize a lot of things you've been taught, or a lot of things you believed your whole life, weren't necessarily true," he said. "We're still around for the cause and doing things that need to be done."

The striking thing about looking at the key figures in that 2012 picture — and also from when James, Wade, Chris Paul and Carmelo Anthony took the stage for a call to action at the 2016 ESPYs — is how much more sophisticated and developed their strategies have become.

Outside his education reform initiatives and his school in Akron, [James decided to take a more active role in this year's election with MTAV](#), which attempts to restore voting rights at the local level. Paul was key to the development of the NBA's Foundation ([which has pledged \\$300 million over the next decade to Black economic empowerment](#)) and the Social Justice Coalition after the stoppage, [which has players serving as board members](#).

Anthony and Wade also teamed up with Paul in July to create the Social Change Fund, which has some goals that overlap with MTAV. The trio wanted to bring James in as a founding member, Anthony told SCNG, but James had already begun his own off-court pursuits.

"It was like, 'OK, you've got that lane, and we've figured this out, and we'll come together when we come together,'" he said. "But it's all for the right reasons. We all want change, some way, somehow."

What stands out the most is the networks that these established stars have created: Paul said he has consulted Van Jones or rapper Killer Mike on political issues, and he helped organize Zoom calls during the bubble with Michelle Obama to talk about the importance of voting. James likewise consulted several people in the hours following the stoppage in August, including reportedly former president Barack Obama. In MTAV, he counts NBA players (Damian Lillard, Trae Young) as well as athletes across several different leagues (Odell Beckham Jr., Patrick Mahomes) and even entertainers (Kevin Hart).

This expansive, if somewhat corporate-friendly approach has generated real results, from the FRRC's fund to the recruitment of more than 20,000 poll workers, to pushing NBA owners to open arenas as voting sites. James has critics for how much he's leaned into political and advocacy work, but he's well past tentative steps on that front.

"Everyone is not going to agree with your words," he said. "Everyone is not going to agree with your passion. Everyone is not going to always agree with why you're doing it, things of that nature. If you're true to it and it hits home and it hits the heart, then it shouldn't matter."

### **EARLY EDUCATION**

While Brogdon counts these players as inspiration — and being in the NBA has given him a louder voice — he likely would be vocal about social change no matter which career he chose.

Brogdon's family is steeped in reform for Black people: His grandfather, John Hurst Adams, [marched alongside Dr. Martin Luther King](#). His mother, Jann Adams, is a professor at Morehouse College, a historically Black institution in Atlanta. His very namesake is Malcolm X.

When George Floyd was killed by police officer Derek Chauvin in Minneapolis and he saw protests in his native Atlanta, Brogdon could think of nothing more important than to drive down and join their ranks. At one point during the protest, he was filmed speaking into a megaphone, urging for nonviolent protest.

"My intention was never to be a face, or never to stand in the front," he told SCNG. "But it's in my blood to be a part of things like this, to be a part of a movement to help my community and my people."

The youngest voices of change in the NBA are some of the most compelling. Boston's Jaylen Brown, another Atlanta native who has grown close to Brogdon over the past few months, spoke chillingly after the shooting of Jacob Blake — saying his jersey [No. 7 sent a shudder through him when he thought of how Kenosha police shot him seven times](#). Utah Jazz guard Donovan Mitchell spoke out many times about the Breonna Taylor case, once wearing a bulletproof vest to a game [as a statement of the disproportionate danger Black people face when dealing with police](#).

A common thread through this younger generation is education: Brogdon attended the University of Virginia and earned his master's degree; Brown went to Cal-Berkeley, and is a lover of intellectual pursuits including chess; Mitchell [went to a private school in Connecticut during the week and played ball in New York City on the weekends, a citizen of two radically different worlds](#).

The Heat's hoodie picture struck him hard as a teenager, particularly because Mitchell felt the pressure of changing his appearance — specifically not wearing hooded sweatshirts — to make the people in his largely white school feel more at ease. That symbol of protest also showed Mitchell how athletes faced backlash for making statements that seemed outwardly genuine and straightforward.

"And it's really opening your eyes, my eyes everybody's eyes to really seeing what people's true mindsets are," he said.

While many of the younger generation's messages about social justice echo older ones — that Black lives matter; that police brutality is wrong; that voting is important — they've been made in edgier and sometimes more hands-on ways. James, for example, decided not to physically join the protests in Los Angeles — "I wish I was out there as well" — during the pandemic even as he organized behind closed doors. For Brogdon and Brown, marching in Atlanta was a key piece of what motivated them.

There also seemed to be a difference of opinion at a key moment in the season: When the stoppage happened, James was among those who voiced that he was willing to walk out on the season. Many in the ballroom meeting felt that abandoning the platform of the NBA bubble would turn down the volume on their social justice messages. Eventually, James came to see that side of it, [which Commissioner Adam Silver described as "a chance to step back, see the larger impact."](#)

It's unclear how much James personally gets involved with some of the NBA's profound younger voices. But the ties between generations are there: Mitchell said he speaks frequently with Wade (Wade declined to comment for this story through a representative); Brogdon, who serves on the NBPA executive committee, is close with Paul and Miami's Andre Iguodala.

Some of those older figures were undoubtedly important in convincing the NBA player ranks to register to vote: After just 20 percent of players reportedly voted in the last presidential election, the NBPA recently reported that 90 percent of its players are now registered to vote, with 15 teams at 100 percent.

With his own team, Paul told SCNG, he tries to keep in the ears of young Thunder players.

"I'm constantly talking to them about it, just about how at their age, it may not seem like it affects them, but it's real," he said. "The earlier you can get educated on these things and understand what it is, then you don't try to wait around to make a difference."

#### **PATIENCE, COMMITMENT**

One of the biggest reasons James hasn't kept his usual postseason social media silence is to stump for social justice causes, including MTAV. His belief that the November election is a critical one has swayed him to be more vocal than ever before during the playoffs (which also are spilling into fall). While in the bubble, he's voiced discouragement [about the shooting death of Breonna Taylor](#) and [about the shooting of Jacob Blake](#). He's often seemed anguished by this dual role, which has grown far beyond what he probably first imagined when he started down that path: "I got half of my brain locked in on the playoffs and the other half locked in on how I can help Black people become greater in America," he said back in August.

But through eight years, James and those who helped create a more widespread push for social change through the NBA have endured and grown. Patience and commitment itself might be the most important piece.

Citing the work of John Lewis, C.T. Vivian, King and his own grandfather, Brogdon pointed out that being discouraged by individual events is "irrelevant." It's not a moment, he said, it's about a series of moments — a steady approach over time.

“They continued to fight, continued to push, and it’s gotten us extremely far,” he said. “And we’re not close to ending racism. We’re not close to being treated equal in this country, but we’re getting there, and we’re going to continue to make progress. Losing hope and being discouraged isn’t the way to go. You have to continue to move forward and be encouraged.”

## **How LeBron James’ opportunity at private St. Mary-St. Vincent’s shaped the I Promise School**

AKRON, Ohio — Morning snow has made Northeastern Ohio cold and wet, but Willie McGee wears a sharp hunter green sports varsity jacket to keep out the chill. By the time he gets to school, it’s no longer a concern.

His office is attached to the legendary gym at St. Vincent-St. Mary’s High School, a square, three-story building slung on a hill near downtown Akron. Millions of dollars pumped into a recent renovation have updated the bleachers and the floor. But the warm wood tones and the dark green banners hanging from the rafters are a lot like they were when he played there – when he was on the school’s best-known team called “The Fab Five.”

“We’re proud of this,” he says, sweeping broadly with his arm. “We only hang state championships here.”

Indistinguishable from its neighbors at a distance, the 2003 national boys basketball championship banner hangs behind the baseline. It was a title driven by McGee’s high school teammate, LeBron James. This was the school where he first came to prominence, gracing the cover of Sports Illustrated. The renovations to the gym were paid for out of James’ pocket, as was likely the very jacket McGee, the school’s athletic director, is now wearing. Naturally, the court is named after its greatest player and benefactor.

But St. Vincent-St. Mary’s, a private Catholic school, was also where James spent, by his own admission, some of the best years of his life and learned a lot in the

classroom. And the deep roots it planted have helped lead to something completely new in education that's unfolding just a few blocks down the street.

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One of the most striking outside features of the I Promise School is that it looks like a school house, only bigger. Its red brick walls are lined with neat rows of white windows, stacked by a clock tower. The building has actually been many things over the years: a healthcare center, a corporate office for McDonald's, and most recently an auxiliary space for Akron Public Schools.

Inside, it's unlike any school you've ever seen.

Dual curved staircases curl down from the second floor to the lobby, lined on each wall with James' game-worn size-15 shoes. They span across nearly the whole of the forward's 16-season career. The shoe walls are just one of the myriad ways that the 33-year-old's presence lingers over the public school that he's innovated and funded with [the full might of his empire](#).

While James' 51-point outing in Miami on Sunday night was a homecoming of sorts, it's much more personal in his hometown. He returns to Cleveland on Wednesday night for the first time as a Laker. And even though some fans in Cleveland might boo James, it is efforts like his school that have kept Akron a loyal pocket to its native son.

[Since opening in July](#), the I Promise School is, at its heart, an experiment: It currently serves 240 third- and fourth-grade students who are in the 25th percentile or lower in the reading levels of Akron Public Schools. The difficult students who are dragging behind the curriculum, or who act out in class and disrupt others, the hard cases – this is a school that welcomes them.

And their welcome is literally a warm embrace: As they make their way down the sidewalk to the glass double doors of their school, they're met by many of the school's 42 faculty and staff members who give out hugs and dance to music pumped through portable speakers (Beats Pills, the same model often blaring in James' locker for Lakers games).

Some of the children move past this quickly, scooting along to free breakfast upstairs (one of three food servings the school serves during its 9-to-5 school day). Most stop for at least a quick squeeze. A few linger, perhaps needing a hug as

much as anything else that day. The staff at IPS, selected through a rigorous multi-step process, are keenly attuned to these needs and ready to give extra attention to any student who seems upset.

IPS is revolutionary in many respects: the longer length of its school day, who it accepts for admission, who it wants to work there, how it teaches a public school curriculum. But the most defining difference is how radically it attempts to identify and address students' needs far beyond the scope of the classroom: hunger, clothing, emotional trauma and even addressing crises for their parents.

When James decided to leave his hometown Cleveland Cavaliers for the second time this summer, he did so with much more of his legacy intact. He gave the Cavs four more years, all trips to the NBA Finals with one championship folded in. But locally, James' legacy will be weighed in large part by his efforts to kids in Akron, the heart of the Rust Belt, to graduate and go to college.

IPS is the flagship of this effort. And it's incredibly ambitious.

"It's more of a movement," said Michele Campbell, executive director of the LeBron James Family Foundation. "The families trust him. It's so much bigger than anyone could explain."

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It's quickly apparent just how personal of a project the school is to James. While his foundation gathered experts together who could contribute years of research and expertise, so many functions of IPS directly correlate to things James felt he needed growing up poor in Akron, the son of a struggling single mother.

The school not only provides three school meals – breakfast, lunch and afternoon snack – but there's also a food pantry. The foundation estimates that more than 1,000 families have been served since the pantry, run by the Akron-Canton regional food bank in a back room of the school, opened in September. Any family in the area, even ones not necessarily associated with the school, can go and pick up mac-and-cheese, hot dogs, cereal, apples – however much they need, no questions asked. Linda Steinhebel, who works for the regional food bank which serves an estimated 480 locations, says even among food pantries, this is unique.



The school not only communicates with parents, it offers comprehensive services for families. That includes a GED program, I Promise Too, that helps parents learn two nights a week, then sends them out into the job market with a new work-appropriate outfit. Parents struggling with bills, or violence in the home, or career searches can be connected to the resources they need at an office at the school itself, helping them overcome institutional distrust and bureaucratic runarounds.

There's a store room full of shirts, hats, mittens, shoes and other clothes that have been bought new by the foundation and its corporate partners, which faculty can pluck from at will to give to students who don't have the attire they need. Next door is a room for teachers: markers, poster board, tissues and all manner of school supplies they can use to restock. The foundation resupplies the room weekly.

Every student of the school has received a new bike, for the simple reason that James had a bike as a kid – it was often his only way to get to his basketball practices.

The structure of school is vastly unconventional. For the first hour, teachers gather students in a "Promise Circle," play a song and discuss how it made the students feel. This practice, borrowed from a foundation ritual, leads to other more weighty tangents that come out in an intimate setting: problems at home, insecurities, distress and frustration. It's one of the many means by which IPS not only tries to catch kids up to the reading and math levels where they need to be but also helps address the social issues that have put them behind their peers in the first place.

Kay Low, an intervention specialist who tends to do more one-on-one work with students, has worked in Ohio schools for more than 20 years. Her biggest problem of the past was trying to round up the collection of social services kids and their families needed to help stabilize not just their education, but their home life, as one often flowed into the other. At IPS, all those services are in the same building.

"Now," she said, beaming, "I found my home."

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What does IPS have in common with a Catholic private school? A street, for one thing.

The two are just a short walk apart down Market Street. While IPS's arrival might mean James showering less of his largesse on his alma mater, you won't find a lot of people at St. Vincent's who have a problem with it. On the contrary: A number of SVSM staff and students volunteered to help clear out old furniture from the building this summer in the early stages of a seven-week renovation blitz.

McGee attended the opening ceremony in July and got to meet the IPS staff. He came away impressed.

"You see educators who are committed to their students and care about their students and helping them learn, which from a private school, we had here," he said. "I'm not saying it's not in the public schools, but some of the public schools are stretched so thin."

One goal of IPS is to ease the budgetary strain of the public school, which receives \$2.5 million in funding. Between renovation of the building and the expenses for the additional "wrap-around" services, [the foundation has estimated its initial costs at \\$2.8 million for this year](#). As the school hopes to expand in the next five years, foundation officials expect the cost will continue to be steep during that stretch.

McGee thinks James wants to give his students a taste of the support he got in his private school education. While his basketball coaches, including current coach Dru Joyce II, played a huge part in his development, so did teachers. Off the top of his head, McGee listed off some of his favorites: Mr. Knox. Mr. Allison. Mrs. Harmon (since remarried and still on the faculty at SVSM). Some of McGee's best Fab Five memories were spent in home room periods, alongside James and his other Irish teammates.

McGee knows as well as anyone how much the school is undertaking in the community: His sister-in-law, Victoria McGee, is the full-time employee at the resource center, which helps parents as much as the students themselves.

In a rack in the school lobby, an SVSM brochure reads: "The Marianists believe that people learn, serve and pray most effectively in community, as part of a family." It might be a coincidence that the IPS and foundation motto is "We Are Family," which is not just a saying but a cornerstone of the school's approach to learning. Outside of the school, the phrase is spelled out in sculpture, with letters rising several feet high.

McGee doesn't think it's a coincidence. And he thinks James' passion about education is a way of extending his legacy far beyond his basketball playing days.

"I believe that's what he's called to do," McGee said. "I think he as a person sees the bigger picture. I think he knows basketball is temporary, but the ability to change a kid's life is forever."

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James stays close to the affairs of his old school, in part through McGee. When McGee applied for the athletic director job four years ago, James wrote him a letter of recommendation. He asks McGee how the basketball team is doing, how the football team is doing.

James sometimes marvels that McGee has reached a level of power even he can't fully comprehend.

"He like, 'Man, now you Coach Dru's boss,'" McGee said, laughing. "We made fun of that and stuff. But he's been my biggest advocate."

It seems reasonable that over time, his focus will begin to shift more to his own school, which is scheduled to double in size next year.

It's worth noting that IPS is merely the tip of the spear for the foundation, which serves an estimated 1,300 students from grades 3-10 in the Akron area. James struck a deal with the University of Akron for students through a 10-year span in his foundation: If they graduate, they will be offered full scholarships to go the university. The first class arrives on campus in 2021.

In the meantime, there's a lot to learn about how IPS will actually perform. The school hopes to show signs that the students, who started out as the lowest-performing in the district, can make big strides in testing areas.

There are already certain positive barometers: School officials estimated that attendance has been around 96 percent so far. With so many students hailing from underprivileged homes, sometimes getting to class is half the battle.

Aside from his shoes and his picture all over the building, James has other ways of staying present in students' lives. They receive notes from him and occasional robocalls. Teachers point out when James is photographed wearing an IPS T-shirt, which is often, or an IPS wristband, which is always.

Even from Los Angeles, James has a similar omnipresence in Akron to Santa Claus: Maybe you can't see him around, but you know he's keeping track.

"His connection to that community is rooted in years of works that are so much bigger than one thing," Campbell said. "He understands now that making real change takes years."

So too are his kids close to James' thoughts: He shares posts from his school on social media. During a recent shootaround, he lamented that he wasn't able to attend a Halloween party the school threw for students and parents – James is famously fond of Halloween, and he relished the pictures he saw of the childrens' costumes.

After scoring 44 points against the Portland Trail Blazers last week and passing Wilt Chamberlain on the NBA's scoring list, James said his game ball and jersey were headed to his school. His wall of shoes? They're being auctioned off to sponsors – the foundation hopes to raise close to a quarter-million from the proceeds that will be funneled right back into the school.

A reporter posed recently to James: Is it ever surreal that you built a school?

"I think every day it is, actually," he said. "We do something pretty cool on a daily basis at our school. Just to see the smiles and see the activities and things that are going on at the school, it's a really cool thing."

## **A team owner at 27: Lakers' Dennis Schröder has big dreams for his hometown club in Germany**

Long before he worked for Dennis Schröder, Nils Mittmann was his driver. Or rather, his ride home – because at 17, even though he was playing professional basketball in his native Germany, Schröder was not yet old enough to drive.

Mittmann was in his early 30s, a few short years away from retirement while Schröder's career was only starting to bloom. But through conversations with the scrawny teenager perched in his front seat, the car weaving through the cobblestone streets and red roofs of Braunschweig, he found a kind of kinship – and something he admired. To see Schröder darting through and past men twice his age on the court was to see brilliance unfolding.

“You could see his talent, how special he is, how fast he adapted,” Mittman said. “What really impressed me is his attitude: If he decides on something, he will execute it.”

That early observation has played out into Schröder's eight-year NBA career. He has one of the NBA's quickest first steps, driven as much by his decisiveness as speed. When the Lakers guard drives into the paint, or when he lunges into a passing lane for a steal, his strength (and sure, sometimes his weakness) is commitment – the belief that what he's doing is absolutely going to work.

Owning a team is a much more deliberate decision than any Schröder would ever make on a basketball court, but he's no less invested: [In May, he bought out a group of his partners to become the sole owner of Braunschweig Löwen](#), his hometown basketball club of which he is the most famous alum. Being a team owner at 27 might smack of audacity and ambition, but those are things Schröder has never lacked.

“The people who were involved before didn't have the same understanding we had,” Schröder told Southern California News Group in a recent interview. “I think if I invest in something, I want it the right way.”

Schröder didn't buy his hometown team for vanity, or as a rich man's collector's item, or even just to make a little money on the side. The goal is basketball development for players like him: young Germans, especially those with an immigrant background. And yes, in full scope, it is rampantly ambitious, requiring attention to detail varying from which executives and players to bring in, down to the color of the walls of the office.

That might make Schröder the perfect man for the job.

## **DEVELOPING GERMAN TALENT**

On his first day of work after the offseason trade that landed him in Los Angeles, Schröder was still settling after flying in from Germany. But teammates had no problem making getting-to-know-you small talk.

Quinn Cook, perhaps one of the most effective networkers in pro basketball, came up to Schröder unprompted: “You signing players from my area!”

Of course, Cook knew that Braunschweig had signed Bryon Allen and James Robinson, two Americans with Maryland-D.C.-Virginia ties. Cook had worked out with them before they turned pro. Now, Schröder is cutting their checks.

“It’s a small world,” Schröder laughed.

As small as the basketball world is, the successful teams are even more exclusive. In Germany’s top professional league, the BBL, the landscape is historically dominated by clubs from Berlin and Munich, the largest and most robust cities in Germany. What sets those teams apart is the best foreign talent, typically from the United States.

At the moment, you won’t find Braunschweig at the top of the BBL standings (and recently, they’ve been hamstrung by quarantine protocols that have postponed two straight games). But the team also follows a dramatically different approach, pushing German talent to the fore and signing fewer foreign players.

There is no better example of this than Schröder himself, who toiled with the club’s farm team for two seasons as a teenager, then exploded onto the scene in 2012 alongside fellow future NBAer Daniel Theis (“they called us the dynamic duo,” Schröder said) before becoming the No. 17 draft pick in 2013 – the highest a guard from the BBL has ever been drafted until Killian Hayes this past year at No. 7.

Mittman, who took over as the team’s general manager in November, proudly points out that 65 percent of the team’s minutes are doled out to domestic players, the highest ratio in the BBL. Most teams have six Americans; Braunschweig only has three.

Braunschweig (typically known as Brunswick in English) skews as a blue-collar town, with many citizens working at the nearby Volkswagen factory. Financially, they’re an underdog. But what can help them, the team leadership believes, is finding the next Dennis Schröder.

“We force these young guys to take the step in their development,” Mittman said. “We really are keen on this factor that we want to bring these kinds of players.”

One of Braunschweig’s two German co-captains is Karim Jallow, a 23-year-old, 6-foot-7 forward who also plays for the national team. Born in Munich, he rose through the well-established club system but hit a glass ceiling: The best playing opportunities were for Americans, not Germans. His agent convinced him to play in Braunschweig, where he’s now the team’s leading scorer (16.5 ppg).

No one is pumping up Jallow’s opportunity more than Schröder, who besides being the team owner is a national team teammate and one of the numbers in Jallow’s speed dial.

“He told me, ‘You need to use this because there’s not a lot of clubs that would give a German player a really big role,’” Jallow said. “It’s been hard for me to be a captain a lot of times, but I learn and grow with every game. And I know if we want to make the playoffs, I need to step up.”

#### **HANDS-ON APPROACH**

Of course, being an owner is not all about motivating your players.

There was a problem this season, Jallow remembered, when some new players were stuck in some not-so-nice apartments. One of them called Schröder to ask if there were other accommodations available. It was swiftly taken care of.

That doesn’t mean Schröder handles every issue, and with a full-time playing career in the NBA, he certainly doesn’t handle them all personally. But players feel empowered to approach him.

“Some owners that you have don’t know nothing about basketball,” Jallow said. “It’s not like, ‘I have to talk to the owner of the club about some issues or something and it’s some old guy.’ ... Every week we’re in contact, and he’s asking stuff about basketball, about business, as a basketball player but also as a friend.”

It has not always been this way. When Jallow arrived at the club a year-and-a-half ago, he describes the set-up as “total chaos.” Players couldn’t reach people in the team office who could help them with logistical issues such as the apartment problem. That even stretched to payroll: Jallow said certain players weren’t being paid the same salary they were told they would make.

Schröder has only been in the ownership group for the last three years, but the stewardship of Braunschweig over the last decade has been unsteady to say the least, including what Schröder and Mittman consider to be one of the most short-sighted decisions: The club sold its farm team license to focus on the top-league group, which saved money, but cut off the very developmental system that helped propel Schröder into stardom.

“This was always a platform for the youth, these were the players who developed,” Mittman said. “This is the structure we have to rebuild.”

The steady accumulation of these missteps prompted Schröder, who owned 70 percent of the club chiefly as a figurehead, to buy out his partners and take a hands-on approach with his brother, his attorney and Mittman, who left a job in a digital agency to get back into basketball.

As a player, Schröder was deeply impressed by his time in Oklahoma City and the brisk efficiency of General Manager Sam Presti. The Thunder were adept at handling any and all issues off the court, he said, and it gave the players the ability to focus on their jobs. [His short time with the Lakers has been similar](#), he said, and has helped lay out the template of the kind of organization he wants to run.

“You see the vision: Everybody’s really professional; everybody knows where to go with a problem; everybody from the players to the coaches to the weight room guys and trainers are all on the same page,” Schröder said. “What we had the last couple years, it wasn’t like that. I want to bring a little bit of touch from the NBA.”

That varies from the organization’s strategy of talent development to issues as mundane as the team colors, which have been swapped to black and gold, which Schröder thinks is both more modern but will also have staying power. The team itself has stripped sponsor names from its title, now just standing for the city where it is based.

“Hands-on” is not lip service: Schröder spent part of his shortened offseason repainting the office walls with his associates. He also has made time to practice with some of the players on the court – which Jallow said despite how that might sound hasn’t been intimidating. He talks to players, to coaches and gives everyone advice in search of building the kind of culture he’s seen in the NBA.

Hometown pride animates this process: Like his boss, Mittman was born and raised in Braunschweig, and after being a part of top-four teams during his playing



career, he was disappointed to see it tail off into irrelevance. They want to make it a team that the residents are proud to call their own again.

Mittman had to move from his wife's hometown to accept the GM job – but when his old teammate called, he couldn't turn him down.

"I was criticizing the club, but if you have the chance to be a part of it and change it, then you cannot hide," he said. "Dennis and I, we really started to feel, 'Hey we want to say we want the same thing.' So I am thrilled to be a part of this, bring him my ideas and bring Braunschweig back to where it was."

### **CREATING OPPORTUNITIES**

If you want to start a sprawling conversation with Schröder, the quickest way is to ask him about his annual summer visits to Gambia, where his mother is from.

Schröder will stay in Gambia for weeks at a time, bringing with him a boatload of donations. But he is endlessly fascinated by the humility and simplicity of life in the West African nation, where it's custom to share large meals while eating with one's hands.

They play basketball there, too. And Schröder has seen some talent that he wants to import to Braunschweig.

"They don't have a league or any structure: They just play outside and play streetball," he said. "We want to get those people playing on these platforms and get that opportunity. It means a lot for me and my family."

The NBA has identified Africa as one of the world's most important emerging talent bases. Before the pandemic, the NBA and FIBA were poised to start the Basketball Africa League to serve as a meaningful platform to showcase talent in that continent, but develop it, too (the BAL is still expected to launch in 2021). On a small scale, Schröder would like Braunschweig to help create that pipeline.

Jallow also has a Gambian background, which didn't escape Schröder when they first met with the German national team. They were playing a FIBA qualifying game in Hamburg, and already at that time, Schröder was the top German player. But Jallow felt warmly embraced when he got an invite for dinner at the apartment Schröder was renting next to the team hotel.

"He's like, 'Let's go to my apartment: We're from the same country, my mom will make us some African food,'" he said. "A lot of people told me he's a little bit

different, he's arrogant, stuff like that. But if he likes somebody, he's the nicest guy. You wouldn't even recognize that he's a millionaire in the NBA. He's just a normal person like me."

His years in the NBA have changed Schröder, but perhaps not in the ways one might think: He has a family now. He's a little less tempestuous than he was when he first started. He has a stronger sense of the player he wants to be, and with the Lakers, a firmer grasp on what it takes to be part of a winning team.

And as for being an owner, his impulse, now more than ever, is to find a way to pay his career forward – to help his hometown, the team that helped make him an NBA prospect, and more young players in his home country and his mother's homeland. Even though he's striding forward as decisively as ever, owning Braunschweig Löwen might be the most definitive sign that Schröder is also looking behind him, too.

"I made it. I'm there," he said. "Now it's time to help other people make it, too."

## **Without a bubble, the NBA prepares to plunge into the unknown**

On the night the NBA hit pause for a second time during the 2019-2020 season, no one was quite clear on what the morning would bring. Some assumed there would be no tomorrow for the bubble.

In those early morning hours in late August, I was stationed by the lake at the Coronado Springs Resort, unwinding over a bottle of wine with friends in the media. A tipsy group of players (from a team that shall remain nameless) ambled over from Three Bridges Restaurant, growing louder with each step as they approached the fence around the man-made lake.

Several veterans had dared a rookie on the roster to jump in. A \$5,000 reward was promised. The rookie slipped off his flip flops and stepped over the railing in his socks, peering down wide-eyed at the dark water.

Some of his teammates were begging him to reconsider. Some were egging him on, phones at the ready to record video. Someone mentioned off-hand that the lake contained alligators, which none of us present had seen, but which certainly could have been true.

The rookie shot a panicked expression toward our table: “Are there really gators in there?” It was just enough uncertainty to dissuade him from taking the plunge.

There were times when the NBA bubble at Walt Disney World seemed like that lake, and every bubble attendee seemed like that rookie: [We dove into uncharted territory amid the coronavirus pandemic](#), with shadowy and unknown perils, for the promise of money.

That, of course, is the most cynical view. The bubble is not easily captured by any singular metaphor. At times it felt like a marathon. At other times, a safe haven. In the most desperate times, a prison. When I left the bubble after 93 days of living at Coronado Springs, working at the ESPN Wide World of Sports or shuttling between the two, I sped out of there happily – I drove only a few hours before it was clear how many protections and privileges we had enjoyed there.

On the cusp of another NBA season, one without the guardrails of the bubble, I see more clearly the privileges of that experience – unrepeatably as it might be – and understand that the real plunge into the unknown is about to take place.

As a work of sheer ambition, the bubble remains an unmatched feat. No sports league has housed more people – several thousand at its peak – provided more access to the media and managed to hit the zero mark. That there were no positive tests reported by any on-campus residents becomes more remarkable with time, as many pro and college leagues around the country, especially this fall, [have been riddled with cancellations and rescheduling nightmares](#), to say nothing of the health risk for players and staffers who have tested positive for COVID-19.

I remember well the first tense hours spent cooped up for a week in my hotel room, [praying that I would pass seven tests in a row](#). But after that, testing negative was something many of us who lived in the bubble took for granted. Going to get tested became [as normal a routine as brushing our teeth or washing](#)

our face – many of us told the same joke that we never knew our date of birth so well after being asked the same personal information every single day. Over time, test receipts on my desk grew like an untidy pile of autumn leaves.

The bubble encased an ecosystem. It was composed of literally thousands of people: scorekeepers, referees, broadcast employees and technicians as well as a number of behind-the-scenes folks who are largely working-class. While the NBA and the players' association came to the agreement and set the conditions for the bubble, a small army of people – including the media – saw their lives dictated by those decisions, and many were simply hoping it would work. Many of us were surprised it worked at all.

But preparing to cover a season remotely, with media sessions conducted via video conference, reinforces how special the mundane rhythms of the season were inside the bubble.

We attended practices. We chatted up players and coaches and staff about their families, or what they missed about the outside world, or what odd hobbies they had developed during the months of quarantine. We watched post-practice shooting competitions from halfcourt; pregame dunk exhibitions. When the Lakers won the championship, Danny Green and LeBron James came out of the winning locker room to spray champagne on the reporters clustered in the hallway.

Basketball without fans present was strange and initially alienating, but over time, the games were often so competitive, it was easy to get lost between the lines, momentarily forgetting that the fast breaks and dramatic 3-point buzzer-beaters didn't have the accompanying soundtrack of screams of anguish and awe.

These fleeting moments of normalcy – which we haven't been afforded during the pandemic – stand out even more months after the fact.

Wearing a mask constantly in the bubble (on its face a controlled environment) could be annoying. It was common to skirt the rules on how often and around how many people one would remove one's face covering. But especially when you're in the business of reporting and asking questions, you realize how important it is for someone to see your face and look in your eyes. Even with a mask, press conferences and intimate interviews are much smoother in person than over a computer. There was an understanding that, though the media was not affiliated

with the league or any of its teams, we were experiencing something together – that we couldn't fully divorce ourselves from the experience of the bubble itself.

It was emotional. Everyone I know had days when they were ready to stalk off from campus. I personally remain convinced that isolation and fatigue played a huge role [in that second stoppage in August](#), one that might have come along whether or not [the Milwaukee Bucks took the court for their scheduled playoff game](#).

It was generally understood that the players – the party that really drives the economics of the NBA – would not agree to a bubble environment again, especially played out over the course of even a reduced regular season. This was especially true of players who were more settled down: One player told me the night his team was eliminated that if the NBA came calling for a second helping of the bubble, he would skip it and stay home with his family.

But as untenable as a second, longer bubble is – financially and emotionally – it's clear that playing sports with normal travel and relatively familiar conditions is not solid ground either. A late fall spike of COVID-19 cases has carried over onto our fields and courts, resulting in a steady churn of postponements, mental gymnastics about the strength of teams and schedules, improvised game-planning as opponents are re-matched on short notice because of cancellations. The unpredictability of our sports in 2020 is an almost certain contributor to the television ratings dives across all leagues.

I'm a sportswriter. As much as anyone in the NBA, my career depends on a season being played. Players understand that even more coldly: The NBPA laid out the pros and cons of four different models and timelines for the coming season, highlighting for union reps that every delay or cut to the number of games played translated to cash out of their pockets. So the NBPA did what many of us would do and have done when confronted with the competing interests of livelihood and safety – [they took a deep breath and decided to dive in](#).

It's almost impossible to imagine a circumstance in which the 2020-21 NBA season goes as smoothly as the 2020 bubble portion did. Players are already in their respective markets, testing. In the coming days, it's pretty reasonable to expect at least a handful of positive tests. There could be teams with a significant number of their players sitting out on mandatory 10-day breaks by the time group workouts begin later this week (Dec. 5). It doesn't take much imagination to consider how much havoc positive tests will create on the just-announced

preseason schedule. The regular season begins on Dec. 22, and the schedule hasn't been announced yet, but it's telling that the NBA isn't confident enough to release the entire thing in a single installment (the second slate of games begins on March 11 and will be released later).

In the bubble, I took notice when my voice was a little hoarse. Every cough or casual throat-clearing brought a drip of creeping dread. These fears were largely in my head because the protocols of the bubble meant that I, and the thousands of people who joined me there, were remarkably safe. But the rest of the world is far from a safe place to travel, to get in close contact with dozens of people, to conduct business nearly as usual (a polished 134-page book of cleaning and testing guidelines aside). Those tickles of anxiety and second-guesses will suddenly be real, with stark health and moral consequences. It could be a rude awakening for players and staff who were insulated within the bubble and took it for granted, much in the way that I did.

Back in June, before the bubble, [NBA commissioner Adam Silver talked about the number of man-hours it took convening with experts to design the system](#). He said then that the goal of the NBA was: "to restart this season in a way that guaranteed our players' health and safety." Somewhere along the line, that guarantee became less important – perhaps less reflective of the NBA's values than our society's general tolerance for normality at a great and terrible cost. The United States has seen [no fewer than 100,000 new cases of coronavirus every day since Nov. 5, according to the New York Times](#) – a benchmark that would have been deemed an unacceptable risk back in March, when one positive test shut down the entire sports world.

I've been asked many times if I think the Lakers' championship, [which saw them finish their season 353 days after they played their first regular-season game](#), deserves an asterisk. Considering the challenges put in their path, my unconditional answer is no. But with an upcoming season that could see stars sidelined with COVID-19; teams with uncomfortable discrepancies in games played; a lacking sense of rhythm and reliability – how does the 2020-21 champion avoid an asterisk?

While the league worked a miracle to finish last season, it's a problem that looms large over everyone who has tackled it. The move seems more like a calculated gamble – that vaccines and testing technology will catch up by the end of the season – than last season's cautious, often frustratingly circumspect

procession. The bubble didn't come together as quickly as anyone liked, and living in it was often a grinding, grating existence. But the goals were achieved. [The season was finished, a champion was crowned](#), the basketball (for those who cared to watch it) was compelling, and the participants were kept safe.

Those are goals a league with as much to lose as the NBA should still have. But here we are at water's edge, not sure what lies beneath the surface, but leaping in all the same.