

For Jordan McNair's dad, an advocate for athlete safety, the coronavirus sparks familiar concerns

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Marty McNair worried when his son, Jordan, headed to a day-care center as a baby. That's the first time he placed the safety of his child in another person's hands. Plus, McNair admits he was an overprotective parent who wanted Jordan to one day enjoy all the opportunities he didn't have.

Jordan spent the following years moving in that direction, propelled by his athletic ability. He developed into a highly rated recruit at McDonogh School near Baltimore and attracted scholarship offers from major college programs. Jordan believed in Coach DJ Durkin's vision to rebuild Maryland football and lift the program into relevancy. So before signing day in 2017, after Jordan had already committed to the Terrapins, Durkin visited the family for dinner.

As they ate spaghetti at the kitchen table, Marty McNair only had two questions: Would Jordan play? And because Marty co-owns a substance abuse program, he asked about Maryland's support services in that area and for mental health.

"All my other questions didn't start until Jordan was in the hospital," McNair said.

Jordan, a 19-year-old offensive lineman, suffered exertional heatstroke at a Maryland football workout in 2018 and died two weeks later. Medical experts have said patients with heatstroke have a 100 percent survival rate when they are promptly diagnosed and treated. Maryland admitted that its staff failed to follow the proper procedures.

Two years later, McNair calls his son the "poster boy for player safety at the college level." With teams returning to play amid the novel coronavirus pandemic, conversations have again emerged about whether college football programs can adequately protect their players and prioritize their safety over revenue. Many athletes and parents have supported playing this fall as planned, while others have concerns about their school's protocols and the long-term effects of the virus.

McNair's advocacy work focuses on heat-related illnesses, but the questions spurred by the pandemic, he said, have obvious parallels to the topics he discusses at events and in "Can My Child Play," his new book. "Any of us can go down on a hot day or a humid day, or any of us could contract covid," McNair said, so parents should scrutinize the safety protocols in place at their child's school.

When McNair and Jordan's mom, Tonya Wilson, spent two weeks with their son in the hospital, they started to realize the scope of the questions parents should ask — the ones McNair said are needed "to feel comfortable when it comes to making the choice to put your child's welfare in somebody else's hands." In his book, McNair outlines a list of questions applicable to heat illnesses but also to any crisis: Where's the closest hospital? What are the school's

emergency action plans and safety protocols?

“We can get so conditioned to that old phrase of, ‘Parents parent and coaches coach,’” McNair said. “And a lot of times we just assume — the same way Tonya and I assumed that everything would be okay or we didn’t anticipate anything happening because this is a Big Ten school and this is a big college program — ‘Hey, they’ve got it.’ ... Unfortunately, that’s not the case.”

Jordan’s parents launched their foundation in the days after their son died. Marty McNair said some parents who have lost children aren’t ready to jump into advocacy work while they grieve, but it was a natural step for him because of his experience helping those who have struggled with substance abuse. He speaks with sports teams around the country, and he said the Jordan McNair Foundation donated more than 200 cold-water tubs to programs last year.

During a recent webinar, McNair called the current circumstances a “double threat” because of how the coronavirus has added a layer to the other player safety issues that already exist.

“I was looking at the TV yesterday, and it was like, ‘Wow, I miss college football,’” McNair said. “But at the end of the day, I’d rather have a student-athlete safe any day than to put their lives at risk for my enjoyment.”

McNair’s work emphasizes education and prevention. He explains the symptoms of heatstroke and the importance of cold-water tubs. But he also motivates players to feel empowered. He wants them to feel as though they can ask a coach why a cold-water tub isn’t on the field. And it’s the same way players this year should feel like they can question their programs if they aren’t following the proper coronavirus protocols.

This summer, players in the Pac-12 organized an unprecedented player rights movement with demands related to safety, compensation and racial justice. The idea began when a couple players had concerns about playing amid the pandemic. As they talked with athletes from other Pac-12 schools, they realized programs weren’t following uniform protocols and that made them uneasy. Hunter Reynolds, a defensive back at Michigan, helped create College Athlete Unity, a group that empowers athletes to speak out about injustices. In the organization’s group chat that includes hundreds of athletes, Reynolds realized many shared some concerns.

The uptick in college football players speaking out and pushing for more safety protections is “a step in the right direction,” McNair said, “because at the end of the day, these student-athletes, it’s their lives on the line.”

McNair receives Google alerts anytime a news article mentions Jordan. His name is attached to the Maryland program and its recent history. But lately, he’s also been referenced a couple times in the wake of the coronavirus. His story serves as a somber warning of what’s at stake if programs don’t follow safety guidelines. Even though heatstroke and a virus differ in many ways, they prompt the same question: Are schools capable of keeping players safe?

“And my answer to that: No, I don’t think they are,” McNair said. “I don’t think they are.”

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