

Closure Amid the Pandemic: How the Return to in-person basketball games has brought the University of Maryland community together

By: Matthew Shea

The lights went out in an instant, leaving the arena entirely dark. One by one, almost simultaneously, camera lights started flickering.. The crowd is in awe, excitedly waiting for what is to come.

No, this is not a concert. This was the spectacle that filled Xfinity Center in College Park as students and alumni alike prepared for the first University of Maryland basketball game with an audience on hand since before the COVID-19 pandemic hit.

After all this community has endured in the past year, the return to games has provided uplifting and memorable experiences for Maryland fans everywhere. Having live college basketball games back in College-Park is about more than just basketball: it is about bringing people together once again as one school and one Maryland family.

“It’s great for the community,” said sophomore student Sarah Cassuto. “When you walk into the arena and see everyone, students and alumni, all together, it’s a great feeling. It feels like everyone is home.”

A MEMORABLE SEASON CUT SHORT

The date was March of 2020 and Maryland fans were preparing for highly anticipated Big Ten and March Madness tournaments.

The Terrapins were coming off one of their best seasons in recent history, boasting a 24-7 record, a ranking at #12 in the AP poll, as well as a share of the Big Ten regular season title.

In a season that was electric, Maryland beat many Big Ten foes and had even climbed as high as #3 in the rankings. It was a season to remember, a season full of hope and promise that had fans all over College-Park buzzing.

And then, in an instant, it was over.

In a historic decision, the NCAA cancelled the men's basketball tournament due to rising concerns over the looming coronavirus. It was the first time the event had been cancelled since first being held in 1939.

And with that, the Terps' season was officially finished, despite feelings that it was just getting started.

For many Maryland fans, the ending to that season was sudden, a devastating and abrupt halt. Even worse, the long waiting period to follow provided little closure, but rather was filled with "what-ifs."

"I remember that team had a lot of promise," said sophomore student Andrew Chodes. "The season had a good feel to it and then everything was just shut down. I wonder from time to time what could've happened if [the Maryland basketball team] had a chance to make a run. It was definitely disappointing for all the fans."

There is no way to know what could have been, no way to turn back the clocks. The ending to the season left many Maryland fans craving the chance to see basketball games live once more, an experience that was lost -- until now.

OPENING THE GATES

After the disappointing conclusion to Maryland's 2019-2020 campaign, the Terps played again the following season, but games were not open for fans to attend. Instead, Terps everywhere watched games on the television, away from the action and separate from the community.

The waiting period was long and often frustrating for fans, but this season the time has finally come to welcome people back -- with masks of course.

Despite some changes, such as the departure of long-time head coach Mark Turgeon, the first set of games back in Xfinity Center have seen huge crowds as well as a loud and electric atmosphere.

"It was just an incredible experience," said Chase Rowland, a sophomore student. "The student sections and stands were all filled with people. Everyone was loud and screaming. It was hard to even hear myself think."

As a sophomore, Rowland is part of the wave of students who came in and did not get to experience an in-person basketball game at first. For Rowland, being able to finally witness these games is incredibly meaningful .

“It’s a great feeling now that we can finally go to these games and experience what it’s all about,” said Rowland. “It was deprived of us last year, but now we can be a part of the action, learn the traditions and connect with other students and I think that’s really cool.”

Other sophomore students agree with Rowland, expressing that the wait for them has felt even longer than most.

“You have all these students and alumni before us that knew what those experiences were like, and the freshmen this year get to go in their first year. But for us, we didn’t have it our first year,” said Cassuto. “We had to wait while it seemed like everyone around us was reminiscing about experiences we hadn’t been a part of yet.”

The return to basketball games has been an exciting moment for students. Not only are they able to cheer on their team and show school pride, but it has also provided many positive mental health benefits. Whether it is the social aspect of going to games with friends or giving students a fun break from schoolwork, the return has once again given students a sense of community after a year in which many of us were dragged apart.

Alex Nevo, a sophomore, did not live on campus last year, something that hindered his ability to socialize and truly delve into the Maryland community. For Nevo, living on campus for the first time this year presented many unknowns, but Maryland basketball has helped to change all of that.

“Going to Maryland basketball games in person has truly been a positive experience for me,” said Nevo. “I’m not a big sports fan, but I always go now that I can. The games are always fun and the atmosphere is great. It also gives me something to do when I’m finished with work,

whereas last year I would just be inside with my family. I love being able to go and be with my friends, and I get the chance to meet other students in the Maryland community.”

RETURNING TO UMD

The return to in-person Maryland basketball games impacts more than just the current students, but also generations of former Terps, all of whom have been desperately waiting for the chance to see their school play once again.

For die-hard fans like Brett Hoffman '95, being allowed back for games has been an experience long overdue. Currently a season ticket holder, Hoffman has gone to every single game this season, and can once again share his love for the Terps with his children.

“I am thrilled that fans are allowed back in stadiums,” said Hoffman. “Everyone was masked up, it was safe. It just was a great experience being at the games we attended and getting to enjoy Maryland basketball with my family. It’s one of my favorite things.”

For alumni, attending college sporting events are about way more than the event itself.

While Hoffman attends games with his family, Scott Needleman '90 enjoys being able to see friends from college. When Needleman attends games, it is more than just rooting on the Terps, but also a chance to catch up with his fraternity brothers and indulge in a pre-game snack, a ritual that the group has before tip-off, and one that had to be put on hold for the past year-and-a-half.

“I am pleased to see things begin to get back to normal,” said Needleman. “The games have been great, and I have felt completely safe. My fraternity brothers and I have a tradition of meeting up

at the golf course clubhouse and having a bite to eat and drink, and then we all head over to the game. It's really great to have that back again."

The alumni have expressed that the mask policy in place at games has not only been upheld, but they have felt safe.

"I really can't say I had any major concerns or even thought of not attending due to covid," said Needleman.

Hoffman also shared those feelings, but added that the risk was a second thought due to the outweighing benefits.

"I believe attending in person sports games is extremely positive for mental health," said Hoffman. "There are many things, like classes or meetings, that can remain more virtual and still be effective, but college basketball needs live fans, and the fans need this experience as well. With the vaccines and the knowledge we have, it is a safe environment."

In their return to the games, alumni have also seen the impact it has had on the students. Oftentimes, alumni attend games to feel young again, relive old college memories and even connect with current students. Now, alumni get that chance once again.

For Ben Sumner, a lifelong Maryland fan and now a writer at The Washington Post, the change in atmosphere at games has been noticeable, enhancing the experience.

"It's great for everyone, especially the students," said Sumner. "It was the most involved I've seen them in a very long time."

Sumner also expressed that since returning to games, people have connected more, and the building has felt more lively.

And so, a community that once shared in the devastating season end that Covid brought two seasons ago can now rejoice and gain some closure. With the stands filled, Terps from everywhere are able to come together and connect like never before watching Maryland basketball in person once again.

“It’s really special,” said Sumner. “After waiting so long, I wasn’t going to miss this for the world. It’s never felt better to be back!”