



Project: Documenting COVID-19: Stony Brook University Experiences

Title: Interview with Tobias Bischof - Transcript

Narrator: Tobias Bischof (TB)

Interviewer: Chris Kretz (CK)

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Transcribers: Kate Kasten-Mutkus, Chris Kretz

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Abstract: Tobias Bischof is the head coach of the women's soccer team at Stony Brook University. A native of Germany, he has been coaching at Stony Brook since 2019. In this interview, Tobias describes how the COVID-19 pandemic affected the team, including the ways in which they were able to keep connected during self-quarantine and how the athletes kept up their training. He also discusses his home life and isolation, including the birth of his daughter during the pandemic in April 2020.

Session 1 of 1.

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CK: Today is Wednesday, October 7, 2020. This is Chris Kretz, interviewing Tobias Bischof for the Stony Brook University Libraries' Documenting COVID project over Zencastr. Tobias, first of all, thank you for taking part and sharing your memories with us.

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TB: No problem. Thank you very much for having me.

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CK: Sure. Can we start off—tell us how long you've been at Stony Brook and what your position is here?

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TB: Yeah, sure. I'm the women's soccer head coach here at Stony Brook University and I started in January 2019.

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CK: And can you tell us, when did you first start hearing about the coronavirus?

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TB: I'm originally from Germany, so I still follow a lot of news sites and a lot of media from Germany, and to be honest—I heard the first time about it, probably in December. And it was on German news pages, what I follow.

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CK: And what type of discussions were you having within the athletics department at that point? Or was it discussed?

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TB: So those discussions early on were really more on a personal, private side, not really within the department. That started a little bit later on in early 2020, when things became more clear that it [COVID] will become a worldwide pandemic and how quickly it took off in Europe and that there's a chance for us in the US to be—you know—unfortunately, be hit by the pandemic in the way we did.

The discussions became then, more and more by the end of January and February, and in March—we had to decide to cease what we were doing here. At that point we were in the middle of our spring season, in our second segment with the women's soccer team. And we had to stop practicing and stop competing at that point.

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CK: Do you remember when you actually had to leave campus, and what was that like to you?

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TB: So we won the America East championship last year and in winning a championship, we have a little something where every player and everybody who was involved in the team gets a championship ring. And we actually—I gave out the championship rings on March seventh. I had the team over and the parents from the seniors were invited and we had a gathering. And very quickly after that we had to stop. I believe it was March twelfth.

That was my last day at Stony Brook. I stopped by one more time on March twenty-first to just pick up the last important things which I left in my office, basically to get ready and to get settled in at home and organize my home office to keep doing what I'm doing—from a work point from home instead of being in the office.

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CK: And what effect did you see it having on the team, or what preparations did you have to take to send the team home?

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TB: In the beginning, it was very scary. We have people from all over the United States, and to be honest, from all over the world, with having a player from Finland, Norway, Sweden, Germany, Canada, Trinidad-Tobago. But also, for example, we have players from Hawaii on the team. And just making sure that all of the players get home safe, that was my biggest concern at that point.

So we had discussions within the team—how to act over the next couple of days to make sure that everybody is in constant contact with their families, [and to] organize the flights for everybody who has to travel bigger distances. And that was really the main concern of myself and the coaching staff at that point.

Mental health was very important for us early on. It's a huge impact on the players who are all between eighteen and twenty-one years old and they were hit pretty hard by the pandemic.

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CK: And what was going through your mind in terms of your emotions when you were leaving campus?

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TB: I think it's everything. It's scary. It's sad. It's sad that we can't do what we love to do: spend the time together, compete, get ready, and just be with each other as a team.

That's the sad part. It's scary not knowing: is everybody getting home safe? When can we actually return to campus? Is it something—is it two weeks, four weeks, or now, as we speak, seven months?

So it's definitely a very intense moment and a very intense moment in my life from a personal point. At that point—now we're talking the beginning to middle of March—I'm like two weeks away, three weeks away from having our first child.

Our daughter, Lillian Sofie—she was born April first. So this all fell together in those two or three weeks.

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CK: And where were you self-quarantining? Where were you living?

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TB: I was living on Long Island in Northport and that's basically where we bunkered in. My wife Jenna stayed home the entire time—didn't leave the house.

[I] just wanted to make sure that she's safe at home—being pregnant at that time. And for me, I tried to be home as much as I can, and the only time that I actually really left the house was to go grocery shopping. And we figured out a way to do that only once every three weeks. So I stayed home since the middle of March, basically 24/7 constantly—besides every three weeks, going food shopping once.

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CK: And I can just imagine the added stress of having a newborn in the house. So how did you manage to cope, or what did you find yourself doing to survive in that situation, mentally and physically?

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TB: It's crazy, Chris. Honestly crazy. In the beginning it was more about, what are the guidelines? Am I, as Jenna's husband, still able to be there for the birth of our child? Can I actually go to the hospital? Are the hospitals shutting down and don't let anybody else besides the woman come in for giving birth? Those were our biggest fears.

But that worked out, that I was able to go to the hospital—which I am very thankful for. But it's really just stressful to get through this time. Afraid of the virus, afraid of the future, the situation we are in. What is safe, what is not safe, and all of those kinds of things.

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CK: How were you able to keep in touch with people in terms of your use of technology? Was that new to you, the ways that—the tools that we've been using? What kind of platforms have you been using to keep in touch with people?

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TB: So, Zoom became our best friend at that point in time. We started Zoom meetings pretty soon. March twenty-fifth was our first Zoom meeting with the team.

That was the first time that we got the team together, all our players from all over the world. It's not easy to find a time between the time change from Finland to Hawaii.

So we asked some of the players to stay up a little bit later, some of the players to get up pretty early in the morning, in order for us all to come together on a Zoom call and to just stay in touch with each other on a personal aspect.

FaceTime and regular usage of text messaging and phone calls with the family—that was a gimme. That was what we did on a daily basis.

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CK: And what can you advise your student athletes to do to keep in shape now that this is still going on?

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TB: We're in the situation now that we are actually back on campus. We are back practicing. But during the time of the pandemic we advised them to be—the most important thing was safety. Be smart, social distance, wear a mask. All the hygiene aspects of washing your hands and just being super careful. To just be safe, to be honest.

The sports side in the beginning took second seat to that. That was not as important for us as the safety of our players.

But then during the pandemic—during the quarantine time when everybody was spread out all over the world—we started back up and, depending on the situation of the player, if it was safe for them to get certain kinds of workouts in, we did that.

Everybody was in a different situation, Chris. Some people had access to a soccer field. Some people didn't have access to a soccer field. Some people had access, actually, to gyms and could go into a gym and it was declared safe where they were.

Other people didn't do that. And then when it became more and more severe and everything kind of shut down—you've got to give credit to my players. They were very inventive and they asked their dads to build up squat racks and figure out a way to create weights and they did strength conditioning training at home, under the guidance of our strength conditioning staff, and really—hats off to them, how they were able to keep in shape the way they did.

I do think that was important for them. I do think that we could give them a little bit [of] something normal within the craziness: working out, talking to the team, to the coaching staff, coming together as a team during the Zoom calls. I think those were the moments which were maybe the most normal for them, during those days.

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CK: And just in your own life, obviously caring for a newborn—but what did you find helped you to cope? Or things that you could do to help you through the time?

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TB: I think my wife, Jenna. Just being with her during the whole time. Caring for our daughter, Lilli. I think that was the most important part besides this, just staying in touch

with friends and family, with colleagues from Stony Brook University, colleagues from other universities. And I think those conversations and going through it together [helped].

Not just as Americans, really, [bu] as people from all over the world because, you know, it was no different in Germany than what it was here. It was dangerous everywhere, and I think talking to people about it helped me.

But it's—I would lie if I would say it was easy. It's definitely, probably the most stressful time in my life. Just because everything is a little bit uncertain, and you don't know what the ending to it is, when the ending to it is.

You don't know—in some areas, early on, you didn't really know what was right and what was wrong. And we, or I, was very, very, very careful and I maybe overdid stuff that I maybe didn't have to do.

For example, when I went food shopping and I bought stuff, as soon as I bought it, I brought it inside the house but it went into an area of the house where we were not and where we never go, really. And everything just was laying there for the better part of three, four days before we touched it again. And we cleaned everything. I never thought I would clean food the way I did.

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CK: I did the same.

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TB: Yeah, but I think it was—it was necessary. Because you just didn't know. You didn't know what was really necessary and what was not necessary.

And with a newborn in the house and us—we just wanted to be safe. And we maybe did more than we had to, but I do not regret it. I'm happy to say that, so far, knock on wood, we did not have the virus, and so it worked out for me.

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CK: And how are Jenna and Lilli doing now?

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TB: They are doing absolutely fantastic. It's hard on me and Jenna—that we cannot have the family around the way we would like to, but Lilli is absolutely fantastic.

She turned six months a week ago. She's doing great. She's laughing, she is sitting now, she's eating solid food now. She's the joy of my life, to be honest.

But for us, as parents, it's still tough because we have a lot of family who we want to be part of Lilli's life and they want to be part of Lilli's life. And so far, this can only happen through FaceTime, and WhatsApp, and video streaming services, as we can't really have anybody come over and hold her or be close to her. The only part of the family we did it with is the family who got tested. And it's great that they did that. Taking off from work, getting tested, having the negative test, and then [they] will be able to come over for a couple days and take full advantage of Lilli.

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CK: And when she gets older, how do you think you will describe this time to her, or what would you tell her about this time?

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TB: That is a good question. I will have to say that it felt that when she was born, that the world stopped. For a little bit.

But it stopped and it was ready to explode.

And that's the way I felt. I mean, everything just changed. All of a sudden, we work from home. The home office is your new normal.

Not going out to restaurants is your new normal. But also the fear of: how much bigger is that virus getting? How much more is going to shut down? That's the part I meant when I said that everything is going to explode. But it is, again—I would call it the most challenging time in my life.

But Lilli obviously made everything so much easier and so much better. And I'm totally aware of it, that having a little baby—even in the craziest of times there is—it does give

you a purpose and it does take a lot of attention away from other things. And you seem to focus more on that, and that was definitely an advantage and a positive for me and for Jenna, to have Lilli at this point.

Because as much as you worry about what's going on, the most important thing was Lilli at that time. And that was where all of our focus was.

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CK: And you mentioned you're back on campus. So, what's the current state of the women's soccer team, and how are you approaching the sport now?

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TB: So, we came back to campus. I came back to campus in July. And then the rest of the staff came back in August, and then our athletes came back on campus at the end of August. Under the guidelines we have with the COVID-19 pandemic, our foreigners will be able to travel back to the US, as that was considered essential travel. And they are with us as well. So, I'm happy to say that we have the full team here right now. All twenty-nine players are here and doing their academic work on a daily basis.

It is different now. It is a lot of online classes or online courses, some hybrid. Some people, especially the upperclassmen, have classes in person as well. From a soccer side, we did the following: the first week when classes started back up, we didn't do anything.

Everybody had to be tested before they came on campus. We gave it a week before we started getting the girls together. Then we divided the team into groups and the groups did for two weeks, training just with our strength and conditioning staff, mostly outside.

Then we started practices in very small groups. That means groups of five, with one coach, for forty-five minutes. And every coach heads two of those groups. Then for the second week, we combined those two groups who work with the same coach. So now it was ten people in a group.

We worked out for forty-five minutes and this week is actually the first week, Chris, that we can have the whole team together and we can now practice as the full team. So that's

very exciting for us as a staff and especially for the girls, because we are now back to at least normal practices.

What we can't do is, we can't compete. We won't compete right now. This will be done in the spring. The NCAA decided to move the championship segment from the fall [of] 2020 into the spring of 2021. And we're really looking forward, in the spring of 2021, to represent Stony Brook University the best way we can. Last year we did very, very well. We won the championship, and that's the goal again for the spring as well.

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CK: That's great. And then, just [a] final question: is there anything else you would like people to know about what you experienced during this time?

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TB: I think what is great to see, is how people care for each other in those moments. How people check in on you, how you are doing.

I myself did the same, just seeing to make sure that people are doing okay and it's—to be honest, it's more from the mental side than from a physical side. The physical side, obviously, you hope that nobody gets the virus. For the people who did, just keep checking in on them and hopefully they get through okay.

A lot of people do. Unfortunately, some people had to struggle a little bit more. But, from a mental side, just checking in on everybody and trying to ease the feel, trying to ease the stress that it had on everybody—that was an important part of it. And I think that is one of the things that I really appreciate—that people did that and that this was happening.

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CK: Well, Tobias, thank you very much again for sharing that with us today. We appreciate it.

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TB: Thank you, Chris, I appreciate your time. Thank you.

[end of interview]