

# COVID-19's effect on young college athletes in Puerto Rico

The emerging struggles and challenges that the athletic youth of the island now face.



Image by José Santana

by Jesús Feliciano Batista, Gabriel Santiago Cortés, Antony Useche Ramirez

April 24, 2020

March 15th was like any other Sunday for thousands of college athletes who woke up early in the morning to begin their training. However, things soon changed that day when the government of Puerto Rico announced a countrywide curfew that interrupted the routines of these athletes. For the time being, their sporting goals were paused.

Four athletes, three universities, one feeling. Amarys López, Alondra Cuencas, Marissa Lugo, and Chiara Chimelis expressed their troubles and

obstacles during their time in quarantine. All four athletes agreed on the physical setbacks and emotional effects this drastic change has had in their daily lives.

"On Thursday, March 12, we trained in the morning, but they pulled us out of the water early because it was suspected that a member of the soccer team might have contracted COVID-19," said Marissa Lugo, a swimmer from La Universidad del Sagrado Corazón, "that afternoon the athletic director met with us and informed that LAI (Inter-university Athletic League of Puerto Rico, by its acronym in Spanish) was suspending *las Justas*."

*Las Justas* are the biggest sports event for college athletes in Puerto Rico. This competition, which includes athletes of over 25 events from 20 of the Island's biggest universities, is the goal all student-athletes train for all year.

Lugo mentioned that the fact that COVID-19 ruined her plans took away some of her motivation and provoked stress. This stress grew in her because she knew that if she stopped swimming, getting back in rhythm and returning to the physical state she used to be in could be extremely difficult.

Many athletes have found themselves in the same situation and were beginning to analyze the impact COVID-19 would have on their goals and commitments.

Alondra Cuencas, an athlete from Caribbean University in Bayamón, expressed the satisfaction she feels when she arrives at competitions and gets good results, a feeling she will not be able to enjoy for some time.

"It's the best satisfaction one can have as a student-athlete. To see how you can achieve every goal you set, even with a thousand obstacles, I would say it is the best."

It is because of this feeling that Cuencas, and many other athletes, feels the impact of the loss of *Las Justas*.

Moreover, Chiara Chimelis, another student-athlete at La Universidad del Sagrado Corazón, remarked on how being at home for so long did not go according to her plans and that she did not know how to cope with her situation. She explained that her experience has been marked by frustration, crying, loss of hope, and a draining feeling due to the changes she has faced.

About her participation in *Las Justas*, she highlighted the loss of hope she felt since she had been preparing for more than a year and she feels that all her effort was in vain.

Amarys Lopez, unlike her fellow student-athletes, has tried to stay calm and focused during the quarantine. She added that at some point she thought about giving up, but when she saw her progress in her team and the way she was improving during the quarantine, she decided to follow her dreams. This has kept her active and helped her keep progressing day by day, despite the circumstances.

Likewise, sports psychologist Mirian Gines commented that Lopez's initiative is a correct one and to be emulated. She recommended that athletes who find themselves in difficult moments should recalibrate their minds and establish new goals, as well as maintain communication with their coaches and look for ways to practice within their environment.

Student-athletes sacrifice a lot and train for months in order to compete at a high level. The restrictions established due to COVID-19 have interrupted their routines and possibly even affected their chance to demonstrate their effort. However, along with support from peers and coaches, they can undoubtedly continue to fight and strive through the struggle until they achieve their goals.