



By BILL PLASCHKE COLUMNIST

AUG. 12, 2020

It hit me in an inspired bit of irony, at the exact moment I filed my column on the NBA restart opening game between the Lakers and Clippers.

After marveling about the return of the intensity of a live sports event, I literally curled up with the chills.

After celebrating how our local teams renewed their rivalry with exhausted passion, I was so fatigued I could barely walk from my office chair to my bed.

It was a night filled with hope that this country's long-stalled sports machine was finally chugging its way out of the novel coronavirus pandemic.

It was also the night I began showing symptoms that later resulted in a positive test for COVID-19.

Yeah, I've got the 'Rona. Who'd have guessed? After I spent four months writing about how this nasty incurable coronavirus should shut down the sports world, it laughingly shut me down too. It didn't care that I respected it. It didn't matter that I used noted scientists to warn sports fans of its perils.

It was as if my ominous words were lifted from the page and injected directly into my veins. In an instant, my fears for others became prayers for myself.

I picked up COVID-19 at the end of July, tested positive a few days later, suffered through it for about a week, and now am quarantining for the rest of this week while waiting for the danger to pass.

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I am lucky. I am blessed. According to the latest numbers, I am one of the around 212,000 confirmed cases in Los Angeles County, but I am not among the around 5,000 deaths, and I had the incredibly good fortune to avoid hospitalization.

I basically lived through a really strange and bad flu. You've heard the stories, and mine is actually one of the better ones. Many victims would love to be alive to tell such a relatively benign tale. The depth of their nightmare resonates deeply in me now. This column honors their struggle and commemorates their spirit. May we never forget that behind every coronavirus statistic there is unquantifiable human suffering.

I'm the first person I know who has had the coronavirus. I would occasionally hear acquaintances wonder if it was truly that awful. I can now offer indisputable confirmation. Yes, it really sucks.

My temperature hovered in the upper reaches of 102. It felt like my head was on fire. One night I sweated through five shirts. I shook so much from the chills I thought I chipped a tooth. My chest felt like LeBron James was sitting on it. My fatigue made it feel as if I was dressed in the chains of Jacob Marley's ghost. I coughed so hard it felt like I broke a rib.

I would fall asleep in a chair and wake up terrified from a hallucinatory dream where I was chased through a playground by old women with giant heads. During phone calls I would get confused and just stop talking. I would begin crying for no reason. I lost my sense of taste, smell, and five pounds in the first four days.

None of this is probably news to anyone who has read about these cases. Everyone knows what happens, even if they never believe it will happen to them.

But still, there are things about this insidious illness that nobody tells you. There are things that surprised me, things that stick with you long after the fever has spiked and the headaches have stopped.

Nobody tells you about the dread. From the moment my doctor phoned me with the test results, to the moment I am writing this column, I have been scared out of my mind.

I know the minuscule overall fatality percentages. I know the overwhelming odds of survival for a 61-year-old male in good health with no preexisting conditions. It doesn't matter. Once you realize you have a virus that could kill you and *there's nothing anybody can do about it*, you live in constant fear.

*A couple of weeks ago, I didn't follow my instincts. I briefly let my guard down. The coronavirus came out swinging.*

With every trickle of sweat off your forehead, you worry. With every deep cough, you wonder. You check your temperature 53 times every day, and every single time that thermometer is in your mouth, you close your eyes and pray. You stick your finger in the pulse oximeter every hour, and beg for the number to rise.

Then there are the late nights, when your quarantine feels most acute — when you are the most alone. You start coughing into a wet pillow and you can't stop and your breath becomes ragged and your bed is soaking and you wonder, is now the time? Do you try to drive yourself to the hospital? Do you call an ambulance? Are you just being a baby? You can't call any friends or family for help because they can't be exposed. You can't call your doctor because he's already told you there's nothing he can do. You don't know what to do, so you simmer alone in the darkness doing nothing, paralyzed by fear and chasing your breath and praying that 102.1 does not become 103.1.

The other emotion nobody tells you about is the anger. You followed all the rules, you wore countless masks, you never strayed far from home, you spent four months battling this thing, and still it hits you with a sucker punch.

In my social circles, I was considered among the least likely person to contract the disease because, basically, I abandoned the circles. For four months I avoided all crowded driveway happy hours and cul-de-sac cocktail parties. I didn't set foot inside

my church even during the brief time it was open. I didn't set foot inside a grocery store as my youngest daughter Mary Clare, who was quarantined with me for most of the summer, did all the shopping.

I wore a mask everywhere. I followed all the rules, but a couple of weeks ago I didn't follow my instincts. I briefly let my guard down. The coronavirus came out swinging.

The weekend before my symptoms appeared, for the first time in four months, I met friends for two dinners at two socially distanced patio tables. Nobody is required to wear masks at the tables, so I removed my mask when I sat, as did my dining partners, and we left them off during the entire time we were at the table.

I didn't do anything that was prohibited, right? I was just following the rules, right?

My guess is that I caught it there.

I'm angry not at the coronavirus, but at myself, because I should have known it doesn't fight fair, because I was stupid enough to relax around it for even a second, and now my mistake could fester in my system forever.

Framed against the sports world of which I write, my illness has further convinced me that organized team sports played outside an NBA or NHL-style bubble don't have a chance this fall.

This is why all of college football should follow the smart Pac-12 and Big Ten conferences and cancel their seasons. This is why the NFL should shut down training camps before they begin practicing in earnest. This is why baseball needs to get into a postseason bubble if it has any chance of crowning a champion.

I've written all this before, and so I write it again with feeling. It didn't take much for COVID-19 to make my unexciting life hell. Imagine the increased risk for someone who actually hits and hugs and huddles and hangs out with other people?

The novel coronavirus is not a statistic. It's not an agenda. It's not a debate. COVID-19 is real enough to rise up and beat me senseless. We need to stop giving it license to do the same to others.