

TWINS

Coronavirus fears force Twins to rethink fan interactions

Players are trying to avoid physical contact.

By Phil Miller (<http://www.startribune.com/phil-miller/102061883/>) Star Tribune |

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FORT MYERS, FLA. – Taylor Rogers sat down at a table in the Twins clubhouse Thursday morning and began signing his name, around several teammates' signatures already there, on a couple of dozen baseballs boxed up in front of him.

“Coronavirus balls,” the Twins closer said. “It’s a good idea.”

The idea is, players will sign baseballs in the clubhouse and hand them out to kids after their workouts. “We’re not trying to avoid interacting with fans,” Rogers said. “We’re just trying to be cautious right now.”

Until the contagious COVID-19 virus has been contained or eradicated, he means. Major League Baseball has recommended to each team that players curtail avoidable physical contact with fans, or each other, as much as possible. No more high-fiving players as they run by, no more handshakes when greeting each other — and no more signing autographs if it means using a fan’s pen.

“When you’re signing autographs for fans, some of them are standing there waiting with their pen in their mouth. And then they hand it to you,” Rogers said. “There are times when you touch 50 people’s hands in a day. And the message from the team is, there are small things we can do to be more careful. We’re trying to be smart about it.”

The Twins medical staff met with players Thursday morning to pass along their advice, “and it’s really the same stuff you hear on TV — wash your hands. When you’re not feeling well, don’t come to the ballpark until you’re evaluated,” Rogers said.

Security guards addressed fans gathered as usual around the team’s practice diamonds and batting cages, asking them not to request autographs.

Thursday’s game with the Orioles was in Sarasota, one county away from where a coronavirus case in Florida was confirmed recently. The Pirates, located even closer, had their entire spring complex disinfected during an off day Tuesday. Half the Twins roster departs Friday on a one-day trip to the Dominican Republic. And the Twins’ season-opening road trip takes them to Oakland and Seattle, two areas where U.S. cases of coronavirus have been most concentrated.

So far, though, the Twins have not been affected by the virus, which has been blamed for 3,000 deaths worldwide. “Nobody is in freak-out mode. We’re just trying to do a good job of staying ahead of it,” Rogers said. “It’s a little weird” not signing autographs, “and I’m sure a few of them weren’t too happy. But hopefully everyone understands that it’s for everyone’s safety.”

Manager Rocco Baldelli said the Twins hope to find ways to connect with fans while the medical situation plays out. “Fan interaction and the fan experience, we know it’s a huge part of what goes on” at spring training, Baldelli said. “We’re not going to be sharing pens and cards and baseballs that come from the fans. We are just going to bring our own. Let them know what’s going on, but still give them some of what they are looking for.”



CARLOS GONZALEZ – STAR TRIBUNE

Twins prospect Royce Lewis signed autographs for fans on Feb. 21 in Fort Myers.

Phil Miller has covered the Twins for the Star Tribune since 2013. Previously, he covered the University of Minnesota football team, and from 2007-09, he covered the Twins for the Pioneer Press.

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