

Interview with water polo referees Marco Ercoli and Giuliana Nicolosi

Marco Ercoli:

“During work the fear disappears”

International water polo referee Marco Ercoli is one of those unnamed heroes who are battling in the front line in these terrible times. The Italian ref is working as a doctor in the Augusto Murri Hospital in the city of Ferro where all those scenes happen on a daily if not hourly basis we are hearing about in the news. That is one of the hardest hit regions in the country and Marco and his colleagues are working around the clock to save lives. During a rare rest period he was ready to answer our questions – and his honest answers might help to further understand how tough are the challenges the medical personnel face on the field.

At the end of the interview you’ll find his Facebook post, a mind-blowing raw message why people should really take the lockdown measures pretty seriously.

As I imagine, in normal times doctors got used to strict rules and protocols – but as we see on TV, in Italian hospitals rules and protocols might no longer be valid since quite a while. How did it affect you that everything has been turned upside down?

We have always been used to being closely tied to protocols. Fortunately, this did not affect the clinical and professional capacity of each of us. Once we understood that the rules had changed, we immediately put in place alternative ideas and new protocols, which still change daily as the situation changes. It is difficult and tiring, but certainly rewarding from a professional point of view.

Have you ever imagined a situation similar to this? Have you been trained at least theoretically what to do when such a pandemic hits a country and have those trainings really prepared you for this?

Imagine? Unfortunately yes. Though the system was not exactly ready for all of this. I personally have USAR (urban search and rescue) training from the Italian civil protection authorities and I have a master's degree in Medical Disaster Management. These skills have certainly helped me, even if the training for the emotional part can only be taken on the field.

Is there any difference between the challenges of each day? One is tougher than the other – or can we say that each is the toughest one you’ve ever experienced?

In this battle, each challenge is unique, because even in the same clinical situation patients have different histories. Each of them is a story that leaves a memory, unfortunately not always a nice one...

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Have you been in a situation when you had to make a cruel decision? When your heart was almost broken? Or in these times a doctor simply cannot be too sensitive?

Fortunately, the decisions I had to make were always in line with my code of ethics. In some situations, where cruel decisions were required, the professionalism and ethics of colleagues from other departments allowed us to always choose the best for whom we were assisting.

We've learned in shock that at least a hundred medical personnel died from Covid19 in Italy. Do you work in fear or there is no room to worries when you are called on duty?

Obviously I'm worried, like all my colleagues. Especially for our loved ones at home, as we have the fears in our minds of being able to infect those we care about. But during work the fear disappears, while maintaining a high degree of attention we do not spare ourselves, this is our environment, we must remain concentrated professionals.

How is your body and soul? Do you have any time for just a short recharging or it's a constant battle?

The time for a refill to the physical part is there, the constant battle is in the mind. It is very difficult to be able to rest the brain, but I try to do my best to recover mental energies by taking care of my family.

I guess you miss water polo – as we all do. Do you wait for the time to return to the pool deck?

The perception of time in these weeks is strange. Not having my weekly pool dispositions makes it even more surreal. After so many years it's a very strange effect, I can't wait to go back to whistling.

How do you see the future of water polo and sport after these troubled times?

Unfortunately it is a question I can't answer. It is the same that I do for everything else, from work to community life, what will change in our habits after all this? Usually from moments of crisis always great ideas come out, we hope our sport is one of those realities that take advantage of this break to bring out captivating proposals, otherwise we will all suffer.

Marco's Facebook post:

Hello, I present to you CoViD!... basically I understand you, I understand who continues to go out to do maybe just two steps ignoring the indications, after all you have never seen him, only told on TV by the commentator on duty who maybe calls him "little more than a flu "And then, if you feel like it, take two minutes to get to know him ...I introduce you to him as Anna knew him (the name has obviously been changed), who arrives one night in an emergency room. Anna is a middle-aged lady, three children and 4 grandchildren, for a few days she had a little fever and if she was at home,

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then from today afternoon suddenly a very strong cough that almost no longer lets her breathe, then the call to 118 and the transport to the PS. Come in and we welcome you immediately, as always ... exams, plates, therapy, as always ... Anna gets worse, does not respond to our attempts, the exams go wrong ... sometimes it happens unfortunately, as always ... but this is where our friend introduces himself, Mr. CoViD, and this is where what never happens happens ... in these cases one of us immediately leaves the emergency room and rushes to the waiting room, where 1,2,4 family members eagerly awaiting news that we always try to provide quickly, especially when they are not encouraging ... the other night we have not been able to do this ... the hospital is isolated, ban on access to relatives in order not to transmit the virus ... we recover a cell phone number and we try to say through a phone the news that nobody would ever want to receive: "his mother / wife / daughter is dying" ... and on the other side silence ... what else to expect? There are no eyes to look at to relieve the pain a bit, there are no hands to squeeze to feel closer, there is no embrace that only the presence in silence can give ... and after this surreal call we return to Anna , and you don't know how to explain to a lady who until last week prepared sweets surrounded by family members the reason for, as she says "nobody is here near me?" This is CoViD-19, or coronavirus, or whatever you want to call it, if you ask me if it is the worst disease I have seen I tell you, yes, and you know why, because it leaves you ALONE! If you are lucky, it will be a period in which in the hospital you will see only the eyes of the doctor or nurse behind the mask, otherwise you end up closed in a bag (because this is the disposition) and buried without anyone can see you anymore or greet you, not even for the last kiss. Now that I hope I have introduced you to it a little better, while some of us are forced to risk our skin every day and would like to be your place, I hope you think about it at least 3 times before going shopping every day, to take a walk with the dog or chat around the street ... STAY HOME !!!

I embrace you,
Marco

Giuliana Nicolosi

“As for the vaccine, we are not very close”

Less than three months ago Giuliana Nicolosi whistled the women’s semi-final at the European Water Polo Championships in Budapest (Russia v Netherlands) and back then she didn’t think that the news coming from China on a new virus would hit our world so hard soon. While she is considered one of the best female referees around, today her focus is solely on the battle against the Covid-19 as she works for a huge pharmaceutical company’s research department.

When you were refereeing at the European Water Polo Championships in Budapest this January, the first news from China already hit the headlines.

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Did you think in those days that soon you and your colleagues would be involved to the battle against this virus?

No. We didn't realise that the situation was so serious and we thought that Europe wouldn't be affected as hard as it is now.

Can you describe your institution's role in the ongoing researches?

I'm a member of the R&D Medical department of a big pharmaceutical industry company and as a doctor with a specialization in allergies and immunology, my job is to introduce new drugs to doctors for patients care and find new solutions.

We can say that today all eyes are on the medical personnel who try to help for the infected thousands – but every other day these eyes turn towards the researchers as we all hope you'll find the solution. It means, you'll find a weapon to win the war against Covid19. What is your personal opinion: are we close to find that weapon?

Currently there is a drug therapy to combat the symptoms but for the vaccine we are not very close. Right now the only weapon that works is social distancing to allow hospitals not to collapse.

Researchers used to work in silence and calmness and come up with the results once they reached a fine conclusion. How does it feel to work under this kind of pressure that all the world is anxiously waiting that you find the solution miraculously? Though we all now that science is not about making miracles. So how does it feel to do the researching job as if all eyes follow every step you take in the labs?

You are right. Science is not founded to make miracles. Science work is about understanding how to resolve the problems. At this moment, expectations are very high, but we must take thoughtful steps to find a good solution for everyone.

We've learnt that the scientific community has never been so open and supportive to each other, all results and discoveries in relation to Covid19 are immediately shared on the web. Is it still the case? How much this openness and flow of the information eases your job?

Sharing data and experience is the most important thing. Medicine is not an exact science but now we must think about how to win this battle.

Do you think it is possible that different researchers will create different vaccines for example which can both be effective against the virus? Or usually there is only one good solution?

There may be multiple solutions to solving the disease but what matters is the end result.

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Can you describe your days and weeks? Is it a kind of constant progress or there are failed experiments which make your team a bit disappointed, then you'll see positive results which then help to step forward?

Currently I'm working from home and in constant contact with pulmonologist doctors to discuss and choose the right therapy for patients.

How is your body and soul? Do you have any time for just a short recharging or it's a constant process?

I feel a little under stress but I know that working is the only thing to do. In my free time I watched some games from the Budapest 2020 European Championships and some games from the earlier Olympics in order not to forget the dreams of all of us.

I guess you miss water polo – as we all do. Do you wait for the time to return to the pool deck?

My last WP game was on 7th of March without spectators and it was very strange. I really miss water polo and all the big family of water polo.

How do you see the future of water polo and sport after these troubled times?

Surely I think there will be a period of adjustment but we will return stronger and more united than before.

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