



By Ryan Kendall

For many of us in the military we have experienced countless training events, deployments, and educational courses, for the sole purpose of defending the country and its interests. During one of the most significant crises in our history, instead of taking the fight to the enemy, we are focused on keeping soldiers and their families safe through social distancing and hand washing.

We will not defeat COVID-19 with attack helicopters, Hellfire missiles, or indirect fire. No maneuver formation can gain a position of relative advantage on the virus. The invisible nature of this enemy makes most of our traditional military practices not suited for this fight.

Members of our military who haven't been the main effort in previous fights are now on the

front lines -in our own Country. Our outstanding medical personnel, Garrison Commands and support channels, Army Corps of Engineers, and the National Guard are the players on the court. This role reversal creates a new dynamic, with most organizations finding themselves on a metaphorical bench. How can we contribute to the team in our new role? How can we be great bench players?

Sports history gives us plenty of examples of great bench players. In football, some have stepped in for an injured quarterback or followed a legend after they retired. In baseball, players like Kirk Gibson came off the bench at the most crucial time to hit the winning home run. Basketball gives us a different kind of backup. A player who is an integral part of the game plan and a leader on the team. They can reinforce momentum or stifle a surge from the opposition.

Players like Detroit's Vinny "The Microwave" Johnson and San Antonio's cbecame famous for their play off the bench. Each played an outsized role in their teams, winning multiple NBA championships. For those of us old enough to remember, Vinny Johnson even had his own [poster](#). Both Johnson and Ginobili led from the bench, prepared to serve any role their team needed when they needed them. What made them successful, and how can we learn from their example? Here are some thoughts from their successes and how to be a great bench player during the current crisis.

Know your role

Teammates and coaches revered Johnson and Ginobili most of all because of their humble nature and dedication to being a bench player. They understood that by focusing on how they can best fill their roles, their team would be exponentially better. This crisis is no different. We are for the most part the supporting, not the supported. Therefore, we should constantly look for ways to help, rather than finding ways to argue why we are not in the starring role. We know the power of gratitude for those on the front lines. Genuine

leadership embraces the role and ensures those who need the support get it.

Bring lots of energy

Positive energy and leadership are incredibly crucial during periods of increased uncertainty. Those in the game need a loud, engaged, and positive bench. Thank them for what they are sacrificing. Encourage others on the team, like your extended community, your fellow soldiers, and their families. Find ways to strengthen the fabric of your local community through local businesses and charities. Extend your message to your family and friends through video conferencing, letters, and phone calls. Maintaining energy and morale will be critical to meeting this challenge.

Sit up straight and don't slouch

The best bench players lead by example even when they're not in the game. On a sports team, body language on the bench can help ensure everyone is ready to go. Their verbal and non-verbal messages set the tone. Military organizations stress the same principles. Great leaders set the example by being even better followers.

Demonstrating best practices in both your home and professional life is incredibly important. The videos, tweets, and posts coming out of the Army leadership in Korea are great examples. Those senior leaders are paving the way for us at the lower echelons to understand which standards are essential, and which run counter to prevent the spread of the virus.

The virtual world is not any different. When you are not in a front-line role, it is easy to pick up a pitchfork and a crate of rotten vegetables and join the masses criticizing different segments of society. Participating in Twitter bashing can be cathartic at times, but the feeling is short-lived. Could we have been better prepared? Arguably yes, but focusing on that now does little to help lead us through this situation. When you're down twenty points going into the half, no one wants to hear what you would have done if you had been in the

game.

Instead, focus on demonstrating how you are fighting the virus in your daily life. Be a good digital citizen and fight misinformation. In periods of increased uncertainty, credible information is the currency of the realm. Finding ways to flatten the flow of credible information through non-traditional means, such as virtual town halls, helps reduce uncertainty for families while reenforcing the behaviors critical to fighting the virus.

Study the new playbook

This is a different game that requires different skill sets. While this is concerning, we have recent experience and history from which to draw. Multiple outlets have been revisiting the Spanish Influenza pandemic and the combined response to Ebola. The DoD's role in hurricane responses, such as Katrina and Sandy, also provides examples of Domestic Support to Civilian Authorities (DSCA). Each event impacted the Army in different ways and required leaders to quickly adapt to new requirements and an ever-changing environment.

Additionally, it would serve us well to consider possible security scenarios on the backside of this crisis. How do you quickly rebuild readiness in your unit after the crisis? How will the surge in social program requirements affect available funds for readiness and modernization? Most pressing, how do we fight in during this pandemic should it be required? Leaders should take time while sitting on the bench to think through answers to these questions.

Stay ready

Just like any military operation, uncertainty will rule the day. At the front end of this crisis, there is no doubt our traditional role is different. However, if the crisis continues, there is a possibility there will be more of a need for DoD support. Furthermore, we will return to our posts as soon as we can. The view from your foxhole will be different as the strategic, operational, and tactical considerations will no doubt have changed.

The current threat is real and it is significant. Leaders have to think about how to preserve the force against the current threat, while not losing sight of future threats. Leaders manage uncertainty best when they talk with subordinates in terms of risk. Open discussions of risk help leaders at every echelon manage the current fight while staying ready for future ones.

A good bench player successfully manages the transition from being on the bench to being in the game. Transitions bring with them increased risks. As leaders, we keep ourselves and our soldiers ready for that transition by staying engaged, staying informed, and, most of all leading from the bench.

This crisis continues to remind us that the military does not own the market share on leading in uncertainty. National security is a team sport, and sometimes it's not always an away game. The rules continue to change as we live through the crisis. It has never been so vital for us to be good team players, to embrace our role, to set the example, and to be ready to come off the bench.

Ryan Kendall is a Lieutenant Colonel in the US Army currently pursuing his PhD as a Goodpaster Scholar at the University of Texas, LBJ School. He is an Aviation branch officer with previous assignments in the 25th Infantry Division, 101st Airborne Division (AASLT) and the 3d Armored Cavalry Regiment.

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