

Altoona Curve

In a “normal year”, whatever that means anymore. It is difficult enough to work in the tourism industry for a minor league baseball team like the Altoona Curve. There are so many things to compete with in the age of smart phones, social media and short attention spans. We are tasked with competing with all other entities in both the tourism and entertainment arenas. Each season presenting a new set of challenges and so many things that are already out of our control.

We have no control over the players on our roster, decisions that are made by Major League Baseball and unfortunately most of all the weather. 2020 added the biggest uncontrollable problem that our industry and world has ever seen, in COVID-19. The shutdowns and governor’s restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic affected us in two distinct ways.

The most obvious of the two is economically. Not having a season was a difficult enough pill to swallow. We had a pretty good idea by the end of May that was going to be the case but were not officially told by Major League Baseball until late June. As a staff we did everything that we could in order to maintain high morale not only in our office, but in the community. 2020 brought a 96% loss and what business can survive that and we continue to smile and provide for our community despite getting rejected on several covid relief programs especially the Shuttered Venue Grant, which pertains to operators of live venues. We supposedly do not have “Live” entertainment but the last time I checked, that is exactly what you come to a baseball game to watch.

We offered up the use of Peoples Natural Gas Field for food distributions, mask giveaways, Nuts for You giveaways and a farmers market in order to help other local businesses and our community during the hardest time in our lifetime.

One of our biggest disappointments was being unable to help so many in our community who have come to rely on us over the past 20 plus seasons. When you come out to a Curve game, you will notice that each of our concessions stands are staffed with volunteer groups from various non-profits within our community. At the end of the season these non-profits receive hundreds of thousands of dollars in donations back from the Altoona Curve in order to help fund all of the good that they do for our community.

Our gameday staff is an extension of our full-time staff. The relationships and bonds that they have with each other, season ticket holders and first time visitors to the ballpark is unmatched. They are what keeps people coming back, what turns one game into two, one visit and hotel stay in Altoona to 10 or 20 over the years. Many of these positions are staffed by those who are retired or high school students getting their first experience in the workplace. They too rely on us for income throughout the spring and summer months.

The restrictions unfortunately largely limited what we were able to accomplish in 2020. We scheduled additional community events like our Fabulous 4th of July Fireworks show, Trivia Nights, baseball tournaments and live music in order to try to make ends meet, while keeping people safe. It was difficult for us to wrap our heads around how indoor dining and other inside events were often able to operate at a higher capacity percentage than our outdoor facility. We understand the policies were created with public health and safety in mind, but unfortunately our plans to host more people for events at the ballpark safely and socially distant fell on deaf ears.

Having these plans rejected did not leave us with many options, which brings us to the second way we were affected. When we knew there would still be attendance restrictions for our Fabulous 4th of July fireworks show, we were left with no choice. Our leadership team began to put into place our plan for the remainder of 2020, two weeks prior to the 4th of July fireworks show out of respect for our employees. We then had what hopefully in the future we can look back on and say was the worst day in all of our professional careers.

We had to meet with our talented staff members many of whom had moved to Altoona from outside of not only our area, but the state of Pennsylvania and let them know that we had to furlough them. In total 65% of our staff had to be furloughed. This day was made all the more difficult because of the amount of time that we spend together as a staff all throughout the season. We see the staff more than we do our own families throughout the spring and summer and we become one giant family.

Fortunately for us, we were able to bring a few of them back this past month (3 to be exact) and the others we were able to help find full-time jobs so that they could keep working. Many of them chose to stay in our community largely based on the experiences that they had while working with the Curve. The economic impacts of these restrictions have been immeasurable from a business side, but we lost over 65% of our most valuable commodity, our employees.

These employees are what make the long days throughout the summer worth it. They make the tough times easier and good times that much better for our other employees, fans, community and visitors that we have each year from all over the country.

As For 2021, will it be any better? As I have told our staff, stay buckled because it will still be a bumpy ride. We obviously are hopeful that the 6' distance could be reduced to 3' very soon but as we stand here today, Right now, we have no choice but to plan for the Altoona Curve Opening Day on May 4th with well less than the 50% of capacity that we are allowed to be at effective April 4th. 50% would get us to 5,000 fans. But with the current 6' rule also in place, we are looking at closer to 2,200 fans in the park. With only 2,200 fans, we won't be able to bring back all Full-Time staff and game staff employees (and we employ 250 game day staff), bring back our non-profits that work our concession stands and our ability to operate will be tremendously hampered. Our sponsors will be pulling money, and we will continue to lose money, on top of no real revenue since Labor Day of 2019. It's obviously frustrating being an OUTDOOR, open-air venue, having to live by the 6' rule, when INDOOR schools are moving to 3', the CDC has given guidance about 3' being OK, and restaurants and other INDOOR venues are able to increase their capacities to 75%. If we can get to 5,000 people, that would be a game changer for us and our community and non-profits that rely on us – but we can't do that and adhere to the current 6' rule. Put simply – until we know when 6' is changing to 3', we really can't sell tickets, can't bring back game staff employees, and can't see profitability. We presented three different plans to our local government, a 6 ft plan, a 3ft plan and a hybrid plan in which the hybrid plan is designed to have vaccinated sections and would help us get closer to the allowed 50% capacity. We were respectfully denied but was told our plans were very well thought out and put together.

We are looking forward to getting back to better days, with fewer restrictions and doing our best to return smiles to the faces of so many members of our Central Pennsylvania community. Thank you for your time