

Major League Baseball plans to open season in midst of pandemic

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On March 12, Major League Baseball (MLB), in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, suspended spring training and postponed the start of the 2020 regular season.

Initially, the opening of the season was to be delayed for just two weeks, but this was pushed back in response to updated recommendations issued by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), which urged restrictions on events of more than 50 people for eight weeks.

On March 27, MLB and the Major League Baseball Players Association (MLBPA) finalized an agreement that established a potential framework for the 2020 season. Players would receive pro-rated salaries for the number of games played. Players and owners were willing to stretch the postseason well into November in order to maximize the number of games played.

In the ensuing weeks, various scenarios were proposed as to when and where to start the season. In early May, based on the expectation that the COVID-19 spread would be contained, MLB announced an 82-game season that would begin by the first week of July, with spring training resuming by June 10. Teams believe most pitchers need about four weeks to get ready, and position players need about three.

MLB's plan, which calls for "frequent" but not daily testing, quarantines only individuals who test positive and contravenes federal guidelines that advise individuals who come in contact with a confirmed infection to quarantine for at least two weeks.

The Harvard Global Health Institute recommends states conduct at least 152 tests per day for every 100,000 people. But only four out of the 17 states with MLB teams currently meet that standard. How MLB avoids competing for desperately needed resources has gone unanswered.

With MLB losing roughly \$75 million a day, according to estimates by Patrick Rishe, director of the sports

business program at Washington University in St. Louis, officials are contemplating a half-season plus expanded playoffs—well over 1,200 games across the nation. Baseball contends it can counteract the virus by disinfecting baseballs, deep-cleaning clubhouses, and, at least initially, banning paying customers from the ballpark.

MLB will need help from state and local health officials to address ongoing concerns in most major league cities. In recent weeks, MLB Commissioner Rob Manfred has lobbied governors and other officials in many of the places baseball is played.

Manfred's attempts to win over governors underscores the power they have over MLB's plans. In Florida, Governor Ron DeSantis, a Republican who played college baseball at Yale, has been at the forefront of Wall Street's reopening campaign. On May 13, DeSantis announced at a news conference, "All professional sports are welcome here for practicing and for playing. What I would tell commissioners of leagues is, if you have a team in an area where they just won't let them operate, we'll find a place for you here in the state of Florida."

Manfred also has a close relationship with President Trump. He golfed with the president in October during the World Series, and visited him at Trump Tower before the 2017 inauguration.

The president of the New York Yankees, Randy Levine, is a former deputy mayor of New York City under Rudy Giuliani, Trump's personal lawyer. Levine was considered a candidate to be Trump's chief of staff. Giuliani's son, Andrew, is now the official White House sports liaison and a frequent Trump golf partner.

Currently, many Major League cities still restrict gatherings to a limited number of people. In Los Angeles, a hotspot of COVID-19 and the home of the Dodgers, Mayor Eric Garcetti said restrictions will remain in place for three more months. But Democratic governors Gavin

Newsom of California and Andrew Cuomo of New York, and Texas Republican Governor Greg Abbott, signaled their support in May for pro sports to return soon in those states.

Most recognize that MLB's attempt to play baseball this summer is a high-risk venture threatening the health of many people, even if it is played before no fans.

"If we get the plan going and everyone does what it takes to get this to work, and then it just infects the system, it might induce a panic throughout the country," said pitcher Brent Suter, the Milwaukee Brewers' player representative. "Like, 'Oh my gosh, they couldn't even do it with all of these precautions.' That's a fear of mine, for sure."

Baseball played through the 1918 outbreak of the Spanish flu, which killed roughly 675,000 Americans and 50 million people worldwide.

Babe Ruth fell ill in the spring of 1918 with what likely was the same strain of the flu, and another Hall of Famer, White Sox pitcher Red Faber, missed the 1919 World Series because of lasting effects of the illness. One player, outfielder Larry Chappell, died, along with several prominent sportswriters, umpires and others surrounding the sport.

"What's at stake here is a human life," said Andy Dolich, a Bay Area consultant who has worked as a senior executive for teams in every major sport, including the Oakland A's. "That might sound overdramatic, but it doesn't sound overdramatic to me. All the people involved, that's a person, with a name, who has a family."

Many players, despite their economic concerns over not playing, have expressed fears that playing will put their health and that of their families at risk.

Los Angeles Angels second baseman Tommy La Stella said he wants to make sure baseball "is smart about it and not pushing to get back on the field to make money at the expense of our safety... It's not the corporate heads who are in compromised positions, it's going to be the producers."

The Angels' Mike Trout, the highest-paid player in baseball, is expecting his first child with his wife, Jessica, in early August. "My wife is my biggest concern," he told ESPN. "With the season and stuff, we'll just play it by ear. Obviously, you don't know what it entails yet, but we'll go down that road when that happens. But it's a scary, scary time for my wife. I don't see us playing without testing every day."

Professional athletes, because of their youth and

conditioning, are generally at low risk of dying from the virus, but "are the demographic most likely to be asymptomatic" carriers, said Will Humble, the former health director for the state of Arizona.

Many others, however, who will be in close contact with players are in the high risk category, including eight umpires and seven managers who are over 60. Moreover, there are players with serious pre-existing medical conditions. Carlos Carrasco of the Cleveland Indians was diagnosed with leukemia last year. At least three players, Dodger Scott Alexander, the Atlanta Braves' Adam Duvall, and St Louis Cardinal Jordon Hicks have Type 1 diabetes, and others, such as Dodger Kenley Jansen, have heart issues.

Beyond their families, teammates, managers and other baseball personnel, players also will be exposed to a broad range of people from hotel staff to security personnel, and from bus drivers to flight attendants. MLB's plan does not say anything about testing for these workers.

Financial issues between the owners and the players have again arisen to further complicate any proposed opening. Last week, MLB dropped the 50-50 revenue sharing split concept and proposed a sliding salary scale, in which the highest paid players would take the largest pay cuts and the lowest paid players would be made close to whole. The players' union had rejected this demand. It has accused the owners of attempting to divide the players and claims that the pay proposal is a union-busting attempt.

Scott Boras, baseball's best known agent, who represents 71 players, said, "Remember, games cannot be played without you. Players should not agree to further pay cuts to bail out the owners. Let owners take some of their record revenues and profits from the past several years and pay you the prorated salaries you agreed to accept, or let them borrow against the asset values they created from the use of those profits players generated."

As baseball attempts to finalize its reopening plan, the monetary interests of the owners continue to supersede the health and welfare of the players, their families and their communities.



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