

Major League Baseball confronted with major COVID-19 outbreak

Alan Gilman
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Major League Baseball's (MLB) pandemic-shortened season, which began last week, is already in jeopardy after a major COVID-19 outbreak amongst the Miami Marlins involving 17 players and staff.

The Miami Marlins began their season last Friday with a three-game series in Philadelphia against the Phillies. Either late Thursday or early Friday, catcher Jorge Alfaro tested positive for COVID-19 and was quarantined. Three more players tested positive after the second game on Saturday, including the next day's scheduled starting pitcher, Jose Urena, infielder Garrett Cooper and outfielder Harold Ramirez.

Incredibly, in spite of this knowledge, which according to the Marlins was shared with both the MLB front office and their opponents, Sunday's game went forward as planned, after a vote by the Marlins players to take the field. The Marlins won 11-6.

By Monday morning it was announced that 11 players and two staff had tested positive. At that point MLB postponed the Marlins home opener against the Baltimore Orioles, which was scheduled for Monday night, as well as the New York Yankees game the same evening against the Philadelphia Phillies. The Yankees would have been in the same clubhouse the Marlins used last weekend.

On Tuesday afternoon, MLB announced that the Marlins season was suspended for the rest of the week, "to allow the Marlins time to focus on providing care for their players and planning their Baseball Operations for a resumption early next week," according to a statement. The Yankees' four games this week against Philadelphia have also been postponed.

"This is off-the-charts bad," epidemiologist Zachary Binney told the *Washington Post*. "I anticipated an outbreak on a team, especially on a team from a city with a high incidence of the virus. Unfortunately, I'm not surprised to see it happened to a team from Miami," one of the main centers of the pandemic in the United States.

On Monday critics quickly took aim at MLB Commissioner Rob Manfred. "Remember when Manfred

said players' health was PARAMOUNT?!" Los Angeles Dodgers pitcher David Price, who opted out of the season due to the pandemic, asked on Twitter. "Part of the reason I'm at home right now is because players' health wasn't being put first. I can see that hasn't changed."

Washington Nationals manager Dave Martinez told reporters that his concern went from "an 8 to about 12." Martinez, who took a leave of absence for heart surgery last September, added, "I'm scared. I really am." Martinez and the Nationals were slated to travel to Miami for a series against the Marlins this coming weekend, but the players voted to refuse to travel even before MLB postponed the series on Tuesday.

The outbreak raises serious questions about MLB's much-touted 100-plus-page "safety protocols." MLB has not explained why it allowed the Marlins to take the field Sunday even though four players had already tested positive.

Moreover, the incident makes clear that there is no independent decision-making process led by medical experts to suspend games or take other measures to prevent the spread of the virus. According to MLB's guidelines, the season can only be suspended at the discretion of Manfred, who has told media outlets that this has not even been discussed with team owners.

Dr. Andrew Morris, a professor of infectious diseases at the University of Toronto, told the Associated Press the Marlins' outbreak isn't a surprise because Manfred's plan was seriously flawed.

"Baseball is in huge trouble, huge trouble," Morris said. "It makes me wonder if they are listening to the advice of experts or whether their experts are giving them good advice. This was not a plan anyone who knows what they are talking about would have conceived. It's playing out like it was supposed to play out."

Unlike the National Basketball Association (NBA) and Major League Soccer (MLS) which have assembled their teams in quarantine "bubbles" at Disney World in Orlando, Florida, and the National Hockey League (NHL), which will hold its annual playoffs under similar conditions at two

arenas in Canada, most MLB teams are playing in their usual stadiums and following a schedule designed to limit travel.

The sole exception is the Toronto Blue Jays, who have been prevented from playing in their home field by the Canadian government, out of fear that visiting US-based teams could spread the virus into Canada. Instead, the Blue Jays will play their “home games” across the border at a minor league park in Buffalo.

In fact, MLB guidelines implicitly accept that outbreaks are all but inevitable. Team rosters have been expanded to 60 players, with 30 players assembled at a “satellite” location apart from the team’s starters. MLB also allows teams a three-player “taxi squad” of substitutes on road trips. In other words, MLB’s approach has not been to prevent infections, but to assemble large numbers of suitable replacements for infected players.

MLB is providing testing for all players and coaches every two days. However, the test results, which until recently were funneled through a single lab, have taken up to 48 hours. This means that a player can unknowingly infect others for up four days.

Much is at stake for baseball team owners, who are desperate to recoup at least some of their \$10.7 billion in annual revenue. Forty percent of this is normally derived from ticket sales, but without fans in the stands, they are attempting to salvage what they can through broadcast revenue.

“They are kind of at the razor’s edge at this point,” Bob Dorfman, a sports marketing expert at Baker Street Advertising in San Francisco, told Yahoo Sports. “The last thing they would consider doing is canceling the season, and I think they will exhaust every other possibility, whatever that might be. There is just too much money on the line.”

But far more is involved here than the colossal and bloated revenues for American sports, which are heavily subsidized by taxpayer dollars. To call off the season would be a serious blow to the back-to-work drive by the capitalist ruling elite, led by the Trump administration.

If Major League Baseball, with its virtually limitless resources, is forced to shut down because it cannot guarantee the safety of roughly one thousand players, then how can the rush to re-open schools, factories, restaurants, meatpacking plants and other workplaces be justified? This question was raised by one sportswriter in a column for CNN.com, titled, “If baseball can’t be safe, how can schools?”

The worst may yet still be to come. The National Football League (NFL) is scheduled to open training camps next week. It has canceled all preseason games and several players have already announced that they are opting out because of the health danger posed by COVID-19.

The NFL, the most lucrative sports competition in the

world with \$15 billion in annual revenue, will be playing its regular season games as scheduled from September through early January, with its playoffs ending with the Super Bowl in early February. This is the period when the “second wave” of COVID-19 is expected, combined with the flu season.

In June, when asked about football being played this year, National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases Director Dr. Anthony Fauci replied: “Unless players are essentially in a bubble—insulated from the community and they are tested nearly every day—it would be very hard to see how football is able to be played this fall. If there is a second wave, which is certainly a possibility and which would be complicated by the predictable flu season, football may not happen this year.”

Even more dangerous is the looming start of the college football season, similarly a multi-billion-dollar business. However, unlike professional football, amateur college athletes lack the resources to protect themselves from infection. Moreover, because they live in university dormitories, attend classes and interact with other students, infections on college football rosters could easily spread throughout university campuses in general. There have already been dozens of confirmed cases on several high-profile teams even before pre-season camp starts.

Under pressure from large money-making football schools, the governing NCAA has postponed a decision on whether to cancel its non-football fall championships, a move which would pressure football to follow suit. This is in spite of the fact that dozens of smaller, less lucrative athletic programs have already canceled their seasons.

The University of Texas, whose football team generated \$144.5 million in revenue last season, is still considering allowing 50 percent capacity crowds at its home games, more than 50,000 people. Over 400,000 Texans are confirmed to have contracted COVID-19 and more than 6,300 have died, as of this writing.



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