

# Major League Baseball season on brink of collapse as COVID-19 continues to spread

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Major League Baseball's (MLB) season began on July 23 and has already been forced to postpone 17 games due to COVID-19 outbreaks. As many as 21 members of the Miami Marlins, including 18 players (or 60 percent of its game day roster), tested positive for the coronavirus last week. Over the weekend, multiple St. Louis Cardinals players and staffers tested positive as well, along with at least two staffers on the Philadelphia Phillies.

These teams cannot play until their remaining players test negative for at least three to four days. Although MLB tests all of its players and staff every two days, because of delays in testing results a positive case can go up to four days before being diagnosed.

The infected teams, their recent opponents and their upcoming opponents all have to postpone their games. Fully 20 percent of MLB's weekend games, which typically receive the highest viewerships, have had to be postponed.

MLB's plan has been to play a shortened season, originally consisting of 60 games played over 66 days. To make up for these postponed games MLB intends to schedule multiple double headers with the standard nine inning games being reduced to seven. Playing so many games in such a short period significantly increases the risk of injuries to players, particularly pitchers.

On Friday Major League Baseball Commissioner Rob Manfred told MLB Players Association Executive Director Tony Clark that if the sport does not do a better job of managing the coronavirus, it could shut down for the season. According to official guidelines, Manfred has the sole discretion to suspend the season.

The almost immediate collapse of MLB's return to play exposes the absurdity of attempting to play professional sports in the midst of the most serious

public health crisis in modern history.

The multibillions of dollars that are at stake have certainly played an important role in MLB's reckless decisions. But more is at stake than the revenue streams for team owners.

The reopening of sports leagues is part of the broader return-to-work drive by the entire ruling class and is an attempt to "normalize" the pandemic, even as over 1,000 Americans continue to die each day.

But if MLB, in spite of billions in resources, is unable even to protect the health of a relatively small number of mostly young adults in peak physical condition, this campaign will receive a serious blow. There can be no doubt that MLB is under intense political pressure behind the scenes to not abandon the season.

By Saturday Manfred was shifting the blame to the players. "The players need to be better, but I am not a quitter in general, and there is no reason to quit now. We have had to be fluid, but it is manageable."

In reality, MLB's "safety protocols" were always grossly inadequate and doomed to failure, and public health experts have stated so. Although these protocols require daily temperature checks, regular testing, and sanitization of club houses, MLB declined to set up a quarantine "bubble" similar to other US sports leagues. Instead, games are being played without audiences in teams' normal venues, leaving players and staff at high risk of contracting the virus as they travel.

The fact that a central element of the "protocols" is the near-doubling of roster sizes and the establishment of "taxi squads" of replacements for road trips demonstrates that league's primary concern was not preventing outbreaks, but that suitable replacements could be found to play games in spite of outbreaks.

The fact that the Miami Marlins elected to play their scheduled game against the Philadelphia Phillies last

Sunday, in spite of having four confirmed cases already on their roster, testifies to the lack of any independent decision-making process led by medical experts.

Moreover MLB has no qualms about the risk that players are compelled to assume as they travel to and from Miami, Houston, and Los Angeles, three Major League cities that currently have among the highest number of COVID-19 cases in the world.

Before the season began, 18 players opted out of playing the season out of concern for their own health and those of their families. This weekend they were joined by three others, Isan Diaz of the Miami Marlins, Lorenzo Cain of the Milwaukee Brewers, and Yoenis Cespedes of the New York Mets. Also on Sunday, Cincinnati Reds All-Star first baseman Joey Votto was placed on the injury list after reporting COVID-19 symptoms.

Eduardo Rodriguez, a 27-year-old pitcher of the Boston Red Sox, has developed lingering complications from the coronavirus and will sit out the season. Even though he had tested positive on July 7 and recovered in time to join the team for spring training, a routine physical revealed he had developed myocarditis, or inflammation of the heart. Recent studies have shown that a large percentage of recovered COVID-19 patients have suffered from heart inflammation, including myocarditis.

Rodriguez told the press last month that he felt about “100 years old” with the virus. “I’ve never been that sick in my life,” he added, “and I don’t want to get that sick again.” The fact that a pro athlete in peak physical condition could develop such severe symptoms exposes claims that only the elderly and infirm are at risk.

The problems plaguing baseball are also appearing in football as the National Football League (NFL) and college football open training camps.

The NFL and the NFL Players Association agreed to a plan that allows players to opt out of the upcoming season if they are uncomfortable with the COVID-19 health protocols put in place. High-risk individuals could opt out and receive a \$350,000 stipend, less than the minimum salary for rookies, whereas those less at risk would receive a \$150,000 stipend. Players have the ability to opt out later in the season, as well, in the event that a family member becomes sick.

So far 39 players have opted out, including eight from the New England Patriots. Many opted out last week

after witnessing the debacle in MLB. Instead of attempting to address the justified fears of its players, the NFL is attempting to stop the flow of players opting out by imposing a Wednesday deadline, by when they can exercise this option.

There are also over 60 NFL players on what the league describes as Reserve/COVID-19 list. This category includes players who have tested positive or have been in close contact with someone who has. This present list includes two starting quarterbacks, Mathew Stafford of the Detroit Lions and Gardner Minshew of the Jacksonville Jaguars. According to the NFL, these players have to remain apart from the team until they are “healthy.”

Far more dangerous is the situation facing college football players. Most small college programs will not be playing, but the multibillion-dollar business of major college football is scheduled to start later this month.

As college training camps open, many teams have reported significant numbers of players testing positive. Moreover, these amateur “student-athletes” are being brought back to campuses where in most cases the student body will remain at home for some or all of the semester. Many players and their parents have complained about the hypocrisy of having them continue to play and travel while it is deemed too unsafe for other students to be on campus.

Among college players there is growing opposition to these plans. A group of football players from the PAC-12, the West Coast Conference containing major programs such as UCLA, Berkeley, Stanford, and Oregon, wrote a letter to the conference declaring that they would opt out of fall camp and games unless the league meets several demands.

These include allowing players the option to opt out without losing athletics eligibility or a spot on their team’s roster, prohibiting or voiding all agreements that waive liability for the conference and its schools and player-approved health and safety standards enforced by a third parties.



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