

Resuming college football driven by financial interests

Andy Thompson
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Despite a dramatic increase in new COVID-19 cases in July and expectations of another surge in the fall as schools reopen, US colleges and universities are moving forward with plans to operate their college football programs with minimal changes.

It is practically guaranteed that the opening of the 2020 football season and the fall college semester will spark new outbreaks of COVID-19 among players, the general student population and the surrounding communities. The average student is at an even greater risk because, unlike players, they will not have access to the testing or dedicated health resources reserved for athletics.

Although ostensibly an amateur competition (although under-the-table bribes are common practice to secure commitments from top high school recruits), college athletics in America is a multi-billion dollar business, with attendances and TV audiences equal to, and in some cases greater than, professional competitions. Top college football coaches, who at public universities are technically state employees, make salaries similar to those of CEOs of Fortune 500 companies.

In the intense struggle for fan interest and revenue, top schools routinely funnel hundreds of millions into their athletics programs even as their academic infrastructure crumbles. Last year's football champion, Louisiana State University, receives more in donations each year from alumni to its athletics program than to the actual university. The contrast between its decision to invest millions into a futuristic locker room for the football team and the continuously-flooded basement of the school's library was widely covered in the press last year.

At lower, less lucrative levels of competition, hundreds of programs have already canceled their seasons. All championships for the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division II and Division III have already been canceled, the sport's governing body announced yesterday. Many programs in Division I's lower-level Football Championship Subdivision have also canceled fall sports.

But at larger, more lucrative programs, university administrations are proceeding full speed ahead. Many schools have not even made the decision to play without fans. The University of Texas, whose football stadium is in the middle of downtown Austin, one of the most populous cities in the country, plans on playing its home football games in front of 25 percent capacity crowds, or 25,000 people. Similar schemes are in the works at the University of Georgia, Ohio State University and other schools. Not even Major League Baseball, whose reckless return to play is on the verge of collapse after several outbreaks, has allowed fans into its stadiums.

In June, the NCAA announced that it would permit schools to allow student athletes to return to campus for summer workouts and pre-season training. Most football programs jumped at the opportunity to get their players back to training, in order not to lose an edge on their competition. Almost immediately, large-scale outbreaks occurred on team rosters. Both reigning champion LSU and the previous year's champion, Clemson, confirmed over 30 cases each on their teams.

The NCAA had stated that athletes would be given access to testing, facilities monitored by health professionals and other amenities to prevent an outbreak among the teams. Despite these measures the results so far have been a disaster.

At Rutgers University, nearly 30 football players and several team staffers have tested positive for COVID-19. The players have been sent to quarantine in on-campus dorms, which are often cramped and close-quartered.

New Jersey Governor Phil Murphy told reporters Tuesday that he will not order the university to cancel the season, explaining that the outbreak among players has not changed his previous decision to allow the season to move forward. Murphy insists that the decision to cancel the season is not with him, but with the NCAA and the Big Ten Conference, of which Rutgers is a member.

Rutgers stands to lose \$50 million if the season is canceled. This is actually one of the lower projected losses

for a canceled 2020 season. Ohio State would be expected to lose over \$104 million in revenue should the season be canceled.

On Wednesday, the Big Ten put to bed any speculation that the season would be shut down when it released the conference's 2020 football schedule. It is projected to start on September 3 with a contest between Ohio State and the University of Illinois.

The only significant disruptions to football schedules have been the cancellation of out-of-conference games by the Big Ten and the other "Power Five" conferences which monopolize the sport's revenues. While the ostensible purpose is to provide schools with flexibility to reschedule games, it is more plausible that the pandemic is being seized on as an excuse to further entrench the cartel system which controls the sport's highest levels.

So far, only one top football program, the University of Connecticut, has announced it will not play in the 2020 season. However, even in this case, financial considerations likely play a role, as the school's football program has been hemorrhaging money for years and the school faces pressure from boosters to abandon football altogether in order to concentrate resources on the school's more successful and lucrative basketball program. While it is possible that more schools will individually cancel their season in the coming weeks, at this point it does not appear to be the norm.

There are growing signs that schools are attempting to cover up outbreaks on their football teams. According to a report by CBS Sports, multiple Colorado State football players and staff members claim the school is attempting to hide an outbreak among the players and threatening students with losing their position on the team if they report symptoms.

One student interviewed told CBS, "We had a player who definitely had coronavirus symptoms, coughing at practice and he wasn't wearing a mask and I was next to him, touching him and there was spit and sweat. I told him he needed to get tested but he really didn't want to because then he would be out. The next day he is not at practice. [If he tested positive] he already had spread the virus. That's why a lot of players don't feel safe at football practice."

A staff member told CBS: "There are some red flags in the athletic department but the common denominator with this administration is to protect the coaches before the student-athletes and that makes them feel more like cattle."

Resistance to the drive to reopen is emerging among athletes themselves. A group of players in the Pacific-12 Conference (Pac-12) has written an open letter to the NCAA with a list of demands regarding the 2020 season. They write, "Because we are being asked to play college sports in a pandemic in a system without enforced health and safety

standards, and without transparency about COVID cases on our teams, the risks to ourselves, our families, and our communities, #WeAreUnited."

The players' demands include health and safety protections, the ability for students to opt out of the season without consequences, and a prohibition on compulsory COVID liability waivers. They also state their opposition to the shutdown of less profitable sports programs, several of which have been cut from various schools. The letter also calls for an "end to racial injustice in college sports and society" and for "economic freedom and equity." Specifically, the letter states this would mean players would form a "civic-engagement task force." They are also demanding that they receive a percentage of sports revenues and rights to accept sponsorship deals, effectively acknowledging them as professional athletes and ending the age-old sham of their "student-athlete" status.

Almost immediately after the letter was published, players began being threatened by coaches for organizing opposition to the 2020 season. One player at Washington State, Cassidy Woods, told the *New York Times* that when he called his coach to tell him he wanted to opt out of the season because he had been diagnosed as high risk for sickle cell disease, his position on the team would be at risk.

The coach told Woods that his scholarship could be honored for this year because of health reasons, but that if he was part of any organized action against the season that it would be handled differently and his position on the team could not be guaranteed.

As of Wednesday morning, players from the Big Ten have released a similar list of demands as the Pac-12. These players also call for protections against COVID-19, and added language calling for students who report symptoms or violations by the school to be protected against repercussions.



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