

College football season in doubt after Big Ten and Pac-12 postpone fall sports

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The Big Ten and Pac-12 announced Tuesday afternoon that they would cancel all fall 2020 games due to the coronavirus, in a major reversal which places this fall's college football season in doubt.

Until this week all signals pointed to most major college football programs going forward with plans to play at least abbreviated schedules this season, in some cases in front of large audiences. While hundreds of smaller schools had already cancelled all fall sports, the University of Connecticut had been the only school at the sport's highest level, the NCAA Division I Football Bowl Subdivision, to cancel its season.

The Big Ten, which had already released its 2020 fall football schedule, said it would postpone to the spring when another attempt at the season will be made.

The immediate context for the decision to postpone the season were signs of rapidly growing opposition among college players. Significantly, this found its most organized expression among players in the Big Ten and Pac-12, indicating that this was likely a major, if not decisive, reason behind the conferences' sudden reversals.

Players from both conferences have circulated a list of demands for the season. This includes the ability to opt-out without fear of losing their scholarships or other reprisals from coaches; regular testing, including before and after games; hazard pay; and the right to form a union, effectively ending their bogus "student-athlete" status, which has allowed universities to make billions of dollars through their uncompensated labor. Over the weekend, several of sport's top stars met online to discuss a list of demands for the entire "Power Five," which largely coincide with these demands.

The other three of the so-called Power Five conferences which dominate the sport have yet to announce if they will follow the Big Ten and Pac-12

and cancel their games. The Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) remains persistent in its plans to begin games in September.

On Tuesday Dr. Cameron Wolfe, the chair of the ACC medical advisory group, told reporters the conference believes it can "mitigate the risk of bringing COVID onto the football field or into the training room at a level that's no different than living as a student on campus."

This outrageous statement from an infectious disease researcher is hardly reassuring, given the high potential for infection in cramped university dormitories and shared living spaces. The risks associated with opening universities in the fall semester are immense.

Moreover, Dr. Wolfe's impartiality is suspect. According to his Duke University bio page, Wolfe was the lead investigator in clinical trials of Remdesivir in COVID-19 patients, for which he received grant money from pharmaceutical company Gilead Sciences. Remdesivir is the "miracle drug" falsely promoted by Trump in late April as a breakthrough as the president escalated his campaign against state lockdowns.

Duke has two current biochemistry professors who are Nobel Laureates, and the ACC contains several of the most prestigious medical schools in the country aside from Duke. The fact that Wolfe, a relatively young associate professor with ties to a drug promoted by Trump, chairs the ACC's medical advisory group suggests the group has been engineered by the ACC to rubber-stamp the conference's return to play this fall.

By Monday morning it was already being widely reported that the Big Ten and the Pac-12 would postpone their seasons. This sparked a wave of indignation from several politicians, including President Trump, who denounced it on Fox Sports Radio as a "tragic mistake."

On Monday, Trump tweeted, “The student-athletes have been working too hard for their season to be cancelled. #WeWantToPlay” and later, “Play College Football!” Florida Governor Ron Desantis joined the president in calling for the season to continue, saying that if the Southeastern Conference decides to have a fall season that, “I’m happy to help out with the effort.”

One of the more despicable comments came from ESPN commentator and former Notre Dame head coach Lou Holtz, who implied in a Fox News interview that it was the players’ patriotic duty to risk infection and death by playing football: “Let’s move on with our life! When they stormed Normandy, they knew there were going to be casualties, [that] there were going to be risks.”

The move is a political blow to the back-to-school drive spearheaded by Trump but backed by both major parties. If major college football programs, which until last week were preparing to sacrifice the safety of players and students to preserve the billions of dollars of revenues generated by college football, now acknowledge that conditions are too dangerous to play, then clearly they are too dangerous to reopen universities and public schools.

After these statements and other high-profile opposition to canceling football were raised, the Big Ten and Pac-12 were quick to clarify that they had not yet officially canceled the season but only postponed it to the spring. There are doubtless financial considerations behind this, for example, the possibility that in-person attendance will be more viable early next year.

However, it remains to be seen what the conditions of the pandemic will be like in the spring. If there is no season at all, losses to the schools’ revenues will be in the billions of dollars.



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