Drive to play college football continues as evidence mounts that games could be “superspreader” events

Andy Thompson
4 September 2020

While the COVID-19 pandemic continues to rage through college campuses, dozens of major college football programs are moving forward with their plans to hold the regular fall season.

To date, only the Big 10 and Pac 12 conferences have postponed their seasons, after facing an incipient rebellion from players. A handful of independent schools, which are not affiliated with any conference, have cancelled their seasons. The other “Power Five” conferences, the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC), Big 12, and Southeastern Conference (SEC), all still plan on having their fall season. That means that 77 out of the 130 major college football programs will hold their season in the fall.

Since the beginning of the fall semester there have been at least 26,000 COVID-19 cases reported at over 750 campuses, with at least 64 deaths in US colleges and universities. Schools have rapidly become epicenters for the pandemic. The close quarter dormitories and in-person classrooms are the ideal conditions for the virus to spread quickly among young people, who are more likely to be asymptomatic carriers.

There have large outbreaks among college football teams, despite athletes having access to exclusive facilities and health staff. Defending national champion Louisiana State University had at least 30 players on its team test positive for the virus over the summer. At one point last month all but four of the team’s offensive linemen were quarantined due to exposure. The previous year’s champion, Clemson University, saw an outbreak of 37 cases, which is about one third of the team’s roster. Both schools are moving forward with their games scheduled later this month.

In many areas games are being planned while their campuses are in a state of disaster. Several schools, including the University of Illinois and the University of Mississippi, are seeing huge COVID-19 outbreaks only a few weeks after schools we reopened.

Most notable is Iowa State University, where the test positivity rate is over 28 percent. Ames, Iowa where ISU is located, was recently ranked the highest in the country for COVID-19 cases per capita.

Despite the stark figures, ISU’s administration held onto plans to play their next scheduled game on September 12 with 25,000 fans in attendance. When Iowa Governor Kim Reynolds was asked by reporters about plans for the mass gathering during a global pandemic, she responded, “If you don’t feel safe, don’t go.”

The decision to cancel in-person attendance at the ISU stadium came only after hundreds of students and teachers at the nearby University of Iowa staged a sickout to protest unsafe in-person classes. ISU only canceled the normal attendance in the stadium in an attempt to head off a social explosion and protest from students.

However, they are continuing to hold the game in an empty stadium, and it will be broadcast on television. Even still, this will involve hundreds of people working in close proximity, including both teams, coaches and supporting staff. Given the inherently physical nature of the sport, there is no reasonable way to prevent transmission between players.

The danger to players and the wider community goes further than the virus itself. A recent report from Penn State’s director of athletic medicine, Wayne Sebastianelli, found that 30-35 percent of Big Ten athletes who tested positive for the virus had myocarditis, an inflammation of the heart that can be deadly when untreated. This new finding only adds more risk to the health and lives of players, fans and ultimately the entire population, if the games are to go forward.

© World Socialist Web Site

In an interactive article on *ESPN* titled, College Football Crowds and Covid Risks, writer Kyle Bonagura explains how football stadiums, should they be opened to fans, have the potential to spread the pandemic not just on college campuses and in their immediate surroundings, but across entire states and even the country.

The article was based on an analysis of anonymous cell phone data of fans that attended games last year. Bonagura found that within just 24 hours of the start of a football game fans returning to their homes traveled several hundred miles away from the stadium. At just one game in Nebraska examined by Bonagura, fans traveled from southern Florida, Chicago, Oregon or Connecticut.

Despite the risks, many schools still plan on holding games with fans in attendance. Most schools, including Clemson, Florida State and Georgia, Tech have said they will "only" allow 20 to 25 percent capacity crowds at their stadiums. However, given the extremely large capacities of many college football stadiums, this still amounts to around 20,000 to 25,000 people. While some schools have announced plans to hold games with no fans, others are biding their time and have not yet announced any plans, leaving open the possibility of playing in front of crowds.

Even at limited capacity the games could become a super-spreading events. Under normal circumstances, attendance at games for top programs are equivalent to the populations of small cities. When the University of Nebraska's Memorial Stadium is full it is equivalent to about 5 percent of the state's total population. The University of Michigan brags that its stadium, which has the largest capacity in the western hemisphere, becomes the state's 7th largest city during games.

While both schools are members of the Big 10 and therefore have postponed their seasons, similar conditions exist elsewhere. Outside of the Big 10 and Pac-12, there at least 12 college football stadiums with capacities of at least 80,000, and five with capacities of more than 100,000.

In spite of its sham status as an "amateur" competition, college football in the United States is big business, with billions of dollars in television, advertising and ticket revenues at stake. The enormous costs associated with fielding competitive teams have something of the character of a cancerous growth on ailing public university budgets, as they have long functioned to siphon resources and institutional attention away from academics. In most US states the highest-paid public employees, by orders of magnitude, are college football coaches at the state's major universities. At some universities, alumni donations to the athletic department even exceed donations to the actual schools.

But more is involved in the drive to play the season than revenue. To postpone or cancel the season would seriously undermine the nationwide back-to-school campaign, spearheaded by the Trump administration but supported by politicians from both parties across the country. If college football cannot be played safely, what justification can there be to expose millions of students to infection?

On Tuesday President Donald Trump announced that he had had a discussion with Big Ten commissioner Kevin Warren to push for a reversal of the conference's decision to postpone its season. According to Trump, the call was "very productive, about getting Big Ten playing again and immediately. And let's see what happens. He's a great guy. It's a great conference. Tremendous teams. And we're pushing very hard."

Last week reports emerged hinting that the Big Ten and Pac-12 are trying to backpedal on their commitments to postpone their seasons until the spring, and might try and resume their season shortly after Thanksgiving. To this Trump responded in a tweet, "No, I want Big Ten, and all other football, back—NOW."

The Big Ten issued a statement after the call with the president in which it said it is "exhausting every resource to help student-athletes get back to playing the sports they love at the appropriate time in the safest and healthiest way possible." While there has been no official change in policy from the Big Ten as of yet, there is immense pressure from the White House and other financial interests to resume the football season as quickly as possible.

To contact the WSWS and the Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact

© World Socialist Web Site