

US college football season set to begin early November

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On Thursday, leaders of the Pac-12 college athletics conference unanimously voted to resume playing football games this fall. The announcement follows that of the Big Ten conference, which last week announced that they will also return to playing games. Both conferences had previously voted to postpone their seasons in August in response to the coronavirus pandemic and a growing wave of opposition among players.

With the exception of these two conferences and a number of smaller schools, college football, a multibillion dollar business, has been underway with only minor adjustments since the beginning of the month. There have been outbreaks among players at many schools including Texas Tech, the University of Oklahoma, Notre Dame, and several others.

The Mountain West conference, a so-called "mid-major" conference which signed a new \$270 million TV deal in January, also announced that they would be resuming competition on October 24th.

The Pac-12 will play a seven-game season starting on November 6th and will conclude on December 18. The games will be held without fans in attendance, but they will be broadcast on television. The conference announced a plan that involves daily testing of athletes in an attempt to prevent a COVID-19 outbreak among players.

A major aspect of the plan is a partnership the Pac-12 made with the diagnostic health care manufacturer Quidel Corporation. Quidel will provide daily rapid COVID-19 tests for all athletes in the conference, which is currently being distributed to schools. However, this testing will not be made available for the general student body. University students have been among those groups with the fastest number of infections since the reopening of schools this fall.

Pac-12 commissioner Larry Scott called the testing "a game changer." He added: "This enables us to know every day, before every athletic practice or game, that everyone participating tested negative for COVID-19."

Yet while the access to rapid testing can tell if athletes do or do not have COVID-19 at the moment of the test, they cannot guarantee that an outbreak will not occur. Student athletes, even though they often receive access to special amenities, will still have to live and go to school in communities where there are mass outbreaks. In a full contact sport like football, just one player could easily infect dozens in the course of a single game or practice.

It is highly unlikely the conference will make it through the proposed season without an outbreak among players. At Pac-12 member school University of Colorado Boulder, the administration issued an order banning all gatherings of college-aged residents in the community after 1,198 students tested positive for COVID-19, the largest outbreak in the state.

The virus has spread among other college football teams who have implemented similar testing precautions. Notre Dame, normally an independent but competing in the Atlantic Coast Conference this season, has canceled their upcoming game after at least seven players tested positive for the virus. The school has an additional 408 confirmed cases among the wider student body. The University of South Florida, Notre Dame's most recent opponent, announced that a number of players have tested positive for COVID-19, although they did not specify how many.

Leading up to the Pac-12 announcement, it was not entirely certain that all the member schools would be in favor of reopening. In particular, reports indicated that Stanford University was initially opposed to the plan to reopen.

However, Stanford's opposition was not out of concern for the health of their players but out of concern that special treatment for players would undermine the sham "amateur" status which allows schools to pump out billions in revenue through players' uncompensated labor.

In July, a group of Pac-12 players, later joined by Big Ten players, formed a organization called #WeAreUnited to protest the original unsafe plans to open the football season. One of the key demands of the organization is hazard pay for athletes and the right to organize, which would mean all but ending their status as "student athletes."

In this context Stanford and other schools feared giving any credence to the demands of athletes by giving them access to special testing regimes on par with professional leagues such as Major League Baseball and the National Football League. Stanford has gone as far as to deny football players housing for the season, leaving them to scramble to find their own off-campus housing. In 2018, Stanford's Athletic Director Bernard Muir appeared before Congress to threaten that if students were allowed to unionize, the school would disband its football program.

Although the details of the discussions on Thursday's meeting are not public, ultimately Stanford was won to the position of reopening and voted to approve the plan. A major factor for all the universities is the loss of revenues from the major TV broadcasting deals. Under a deal which began in 2012 and runs through 2024, the Pac-12 receives approximately \$250 million per year from ESPN and Fox for broadcasting rights. In addition, the Pac-12 also and Big Ten also have their own proprietary cable networks which generate millions more in revenue. In 2019, the Pac-12 reported \$530 million in total revenues, about \$32.2 million per member school. Since the TV deal began, the Pac-12 has seen its annual revenues increase by approximately 60 percent.

One college football player has already died from contracting COVID-19. 20-year-old Jamain Stephens, who was known fondly by teammates and friends as "Juice," played at California University of Pennsylvania, which competes in the lower-level NCAA Division II and had already canceled its season. Stephens, the son of a former NFL player, contracted COVID-19 while living in university-sanctioned

housing and died from a combination of pneumonia and a blood clot caused by the virus. The blood clot was the result of an enlargement of the heart that has become commonly found among athletes that test positive for the virus.

In an interview with the *New York Times*, Stephens' mother Kelly Allen told reporters, "My heart is shattered in a million pieces. I can't even describe the pain I feel. But do I have fight in me? Absolutely. If it will save some parent's grief, absolutely." Allen has been speaking out on her son's death and is warning players and other parents that playing is not worth the risk of losing a child. When asked about the decision by other schools to play football this season, Stephens' father remarked, "It's all about the money."



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