

Despite COVID outbreaks, NFL season continues in front of tens of thousands of spectators

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In spite of coronavirus outbreaks in two different teams in the National Football League (NFL), the season for the world's most lucrative sporting competition continues unabated. Cam Newton, the star quarterback of the New England Patriots, tested positive for the virus on Saturday. In a mass outbreak, the Tennessee Titans reported that 20 players and staff had tested positive.

The Titans announced Monday morning that there had been no additional cases reported and are planning to resume play by October 11. The NFL COVID-19 regulations state that a team can resume activity after just two consecutive days without a positive test.

Newton's positive test caused last Sunday's planned game against the Kansas City Chiefs to be postponed one day, to Monday night, to allow for players to be tested. With no additional positive tests reported, the game went forward and was played in Kansas City with 16,000 fans in attendance. Only Newton was excluded from the game while he recovers from the virus.

The NFL has carried out the least restrictive COVID-19 measures of any other professional sports league. It has not implemented a quarantine "bubble" like the National Hockey League (NHL) and the National Basketball Association (NBA). Nor has it even barred fans at all of its venues from attending in person, like the Major League Baseball (whose pandemic-shortened season was almost derailed as soon as it began by several major outbreaks).

In the NBA and NHL, players and team staff lived completely isolated when their seasons restarted over the summer. The leagues played out their seasons in a small number of venues, where players lived in nearby hotels with no contact with anyone outside the bubble.

No fans were permitted, and all games were broadcast on TV only.

Instead, the NFL has taken an approach similar to college football, relying only on regular rapid testing of players. In college football, this has already produced disasters, with outbreaks occurring in several teams. Hundreds of thousands of fans have attended college games, possible "super-spreader" events which could contribute to a surge in new cases.

Outside of testing, players' lives are continuing normally, without restrictions on their travel or contact with family members and others who may be infected with COVID. The daily routine of the season, including daily practices and games surrounded by dozens of coaches and staffers, reporting staff, and thousands of fans in some cases, continues much as it has before.

The league is trying to shift the blame for outbreaks from the front office and team owners onto the players and personnel. Commissioner Roger Goodell announced in a league-wide memo sent out on Monday that several players and coaches were being fined for violating COVID guidelines during games. Several coaches were slapped with \$100,000 fines each. The Las Vegas Raider fined 10 players a total of \$175,000 for not wearing facemasks at a media event.

Goodell stated in the memo, "Protocol violations that result in virus spread requiring adjustments to the schedule or otherwise impacting other teams will result in additional financial and competitive discipline, including the adjustment or loss of draft choices or even the forfeit of a game."

In reality, the NFL long ago accepted outbreaks of the virus as the inevitable and necessary cost of doing business. In an interview Sunday, the league's chief

physician Allen Sills told CBS: “We said consistently that we expect to have some positive cases and that our goal is to prevent any positive cases from spreading around the teams.”

In reality, social distancing is impossible in a sport which consists in large part of three hours of prolonged and violent physical collisions between players. Indeed, the league has for years buried and evaded scientific studies linking head trauma experienced by football players and debilitating neurological problems, including dementia and chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE), even after several high-profile suicides and untimely deaths of former stars.

The potentially most dangerous component of the NFL’s anti-coronavirus “plan” is that fans have been admitted to watch the games at a number of stadiums. There is no leaguewide policy on fan attendance in place. Instead, the decision rests with the individual team owners, except in cases where public health measures prohibit large gatherings.

However, many local and state governments have simply voted to allow in-person attendance at games in spite of broader lockdown measures. The New Orleans Saints, who play in one of the cities hardest hit by the virus, were given special permission by the state government in early September to play in front of 25 percent capacity crowds, or roughly 18,000 people. The team still awaits the city government’s approval and hopes to have thousands of fans in attendance as early as this Sunday.

Because most stadiums have a maximum capacity of 60,000 to 80,000 persons, even a reduced capacity game could still be “super spreader” event. Fans will still share restrooms, purchase concessions, and otherwise be in close contact with thousands of other individuals. Anyone who has ever attended a major sporting event knows that even in the best of times, sports stadiums are unsanitary places where viral infections can easily spread.

The driving force behind opening the NFL season during the pandemic is, of course, the same for baseball, basketball, college football, and Ford Motor Company: profits. In 2019 the NFL reported a record \$9.5 billion in shared revenue across all its teams, an average of \$296 million per team.

However, this sum is only about half the picture. According to information released by the Green Bay

Packers, the NFL national payouts are mostly from TV deals and other major sponsorships. Each individual team also generates its own local funds, which do not contribute to the annual total league count.

The Packers, the only team which makes this information public, reported an additional \$210.9 million, bringing its total profits in 2019 to over half a billion dollars. Three of the league’s 32 teams are among the top 10 most valuable sports teams in the world, according to Forbes (only three teams in the top ten are from outside of the United States). The Dallas Cowboys hold the number one spot at \$5.7 billion in estimated total value. The least valuable team, the Cincinnati Bengals, are worth “only” \$2 billion.



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