

Potential superspreader event as 10,000 Notre Dame fans storm field after college football game

Andy Thompson
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Thousands of college football fans in South Bend, Indiana, stormed the field Saturday night following the home team Notre Dame's victory in double overtime over Clemson, then the top-ranked program in the country. The private Catholic university currently has 208 active coronavirus cases on campus out of a total student body of roughly 12,500.

As with most major programs throughout the country, Notre Dame, one of the most popular college teams in the country with a nationwide following, is playing close to a full season even as the coronavirus continues to spiral out of control. Eleven of a possible twelve scheduling slots have been filled, with six home games.

While Notre Dame Stadium, which normally seats 77,662, has been limited to 20 percent capacity, 11,011 fans were attendance at last Saturday's matchup. Aerial coverage suggests that most of these fans, including virtually all of the student section, rushed the field immediately after the game. Under normal circumstances this a traditional celebration in college football, but under pandemic conditions it is almost certain to be a major superspreader event. The day of the game, 126,156 new COVID-19 cases were reported in the United States, including 4,899 in Indiana. Nearby Illinois, where a large number of Notre Dame fans live, is the current center of the pandemic in the United States.

According to the university's COVID-19 Dashboard, Notre Dame saw a sharp increase in cases in the few days before the Clemson game. On November 4, the school reported 71 active cases. This has since more than doubled to 208.

Clemson University, located in South Carolina, has also seen a rise in cases, with 573 confirmed cases

being reported over the past 4 weeks. Among those infected was Clemson's starting quarterback Trevor Lawrence, who did not play in Saturday's game but was permitted to sit on the sidelines with his teammates.

The Clemson game was held with just two weeks until the end of the fall semester, when thousands of students will disperse across the country. All students are now required to be tested before leaving campus for the winter break, the university announced Sunday, with those testing positive forced to quarantine for two weeks. Students who do not get tested or leave before getting their results will be subject to severe penalties, including being prevented from registering for classes in the spring semester.

On Sunday, Notre Dame's president Rev. John I. Jenkins issued a letter to students blaming them for the event. The letter reads, "As exciting as last night's victory against Clemson was, it was disappointing to see evidence of widespread disregard of our health protocols at many gatherings over the weekend."

Jenkins has come under criticism from Notre Dame faculty members for supporting Donald Trump's nomination of ultraconservative appellate judge and school alumna Amy Coney Barrett for the Supreme Court. The University's Faculty Senate passed a resolution expressing disappointment in Jenkins for appearing at the September event in the White House's Rose Garden announcing Barrett's nomination, another superspreader event which led to the infection of many top Republicans.

But while university officials seek to shift the blame onto the fans, and in particular Notre Dame students, such dangerous scenes were made inevitable by the

reckless decision by college football administrators to play their seasons in front of fans. This decision is driven by purely financial considerations in what is a multi-billion dollar sporting competition. In spite of insincere pledges of commitment to fan and player safety, athletic directors have allowed the season to continue with the full knowledge that it will directly lead to major outbreaks and even deaths.

The leadership of Notre Dame's football team knew full well that that fans would likely rush the field if they won but decided to allow a large attendance anyway. ESPN's Adam Rittenberg reported that Notre Dame's head coach Brian Kelly told players before the game, "When we win this thing, the fans are going to storm the field."

Kelly instructed his players to report back to the locker room as soon as the game ended to limit their potential exposure to the virus. However, many players reported being surrounded by fans and unable to make it off the field without coming into contact with thousands of others.

In an interview with the *South Bend Tribune*, Notre Dame athletic director Jack Swarbrick attempted to downplay the seriousness of the situation, but also admitted that the mass gathering on the field was an expected outcome. "You've got three possible outcomes." Swarbrick said, "One is a loss. You hope that doesn't happen, but you're not dealing with a field storm. One is a decisive victory, and I think you can manage what occurs. The other is a game, whether it's a knockdown, two-point conversion against Miami or an incompletion on the last play of a second overtime, it's one where you know you face the challenge of a field rush."

Despite having "A lot of extra security, obviously, extra police detail and extra ushers," Swarbrick framed the event as inevitable and that there was no alternative to allowing students to storm the field "or you're going to have broken bones and other problems."



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