

Cancellations and postponements as disaster in college football continues

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The college football season continues into its 14th week in the United States despite having proven to be an absolute disaster. Over 100 college games have been canceled so far this year due to players testing positive for COVID-19.

The University of Michigan has canceled its game this upcoming weekend against the University of Maryland. The *Detroit Free Press* cited an anonymous source close to the team who said that the school has at least 12 positive cases inside its football program. However, the exact number is not certain because the University of Michigan, like many other football programs, is not making their number of positive tests publicly known.

Michigan Athletic Director Warde Manuel is hoping that the team can return their players to the roster before the upcoming game against their rival, Ohio State. The game between these two schools is one of the highest profile games in college football. Already having canceled two games this season due to COVID-19 outbreaks, Ohio State is one missed game away from being disqualified from the Big Ten championship game.

Elsewhere last week, Vanderbilt University brought on Sarah Fuller, a player on the women's soccer team, to be the football team's kicker in its matchup against Missouri, which had previously been postponed in October. As was widely reported, Fuller became the first female to play a down in a major conference game. However, less reported was the fact that Fuller was brought onto the roster as an emergency replacement after the special teams unit was decimated by COVID-19-related absences. She is currently the only active kicker on the team's roster available for this weekend's game against Georgia.

The unseriousness with which the college football

establishment is taking the pandemic was demonstrated this week when Kirk Herbstreit, an ESPN college football analyst, baselessly accused Manuel of using COVID-19 as an excuse to avoid playing Ohio State, a team Michigan is predicted to perform poorly against. Manuel denied the claim calling it "ridiculous" and that he was "infuriated by the insinuation that Michigan would do anything other than play a football game."

This was not the first time an accusation of this kind has been made this year. Last month, Dabo Swinney, the head coach for Clemson University, accused Florida State of using COVID-19 as an excuse to avoid playing their scheduled game because Clemson is higher ranked and was expected to win. The game was called off by medical officials from both schools after players from Clemson had tested positive.

The accusations are absurd, and there is nothing to suggest that any team faked a COVID-19 outbreak or avoided playing. The opposite is the truth. In the face of the greatest health crisis in over a century football programs big and small have continued to play games regardless of the consequences on players, their families and the community.

The only other sports competition in America that can be compared to the recklessness of college football has been the professional game in the NFL. Despite major outbreaks among players and team staff, no NFL games have been canceled. There have been numerous games postponed or rescheduled but so far the NFL has gone to great lengths to keep games on television and ad revenue coming in.

Last weekend the Denver Broncos were forced into the absurd scenario of having to play a game without a quarterback, after their starter and both backups were forced to quarantine. Wide receiver Kendall Hinton was activated from the practice squad and pressed into

service as the starting quarterback only days before the game, a 31–3 loss to the New Orleans Saints whose outcome was guaranteed from the start.

It is unclear why the NFL refused to allow the game to be postponed. Another game between the Baltimore Ravens and the Pittsburgh Steelers was postponed multiple times and finally played on Wednesday after 17 Ravens players were added to the COVID-19 reserve list. It is apparent, however, that the league office and Commissioner Roger Goodell have been wildly inconsistent in their enforcement of the league's COVID-19 guidelines, at times appearing to make it up as they go along.

Even though thousands of fans have been allowed to attend games in-person, depending upon local government orders, the league has rigidly enforced mask-wearing by players and coaches on the sideline, a laughable precaution meant only for public consumption, given the physical nature of the sport. Players are not required to wear masks while in the field of play.

As in other workplaces throughout the country, there are indications that football programs are attempting to cover up infections and skirt around the health guidelines to avoid postponements or cancellations. Throughout the year players have reported being threatened with losing their starting positions or scholarships if they raise an alarm about outbreaks.

After the CDC announced it was shortening its mandatory quarantine guidelines on Tuesday, coaches and athletic directors rejoiced. Now players only have to isolate for 10 days after being exposed to the virus, or 7 if they test negative.

Shane Lyons, the athletic director for West Virginia and member of the NCAA Division I Council, told *Sports Illustrated* that, “This is big news, especially for basketball season,” which began late November and is nearly as lucrative as the football season, “and as we finish play in football the next month and a half.” Jeff Dugas, the team doctor for the University of Troy and the chair of Sun Belt's COVID-19 advisory panel, said that the new guidelines are going to be used almost immediately. “I expect sports leagues and organizations and conferences are going to adopt that policy very quickly,” he said.

Even though the United States continues to shatter records for infections and deaths on a virtually daily

basis, there is no suggestion that any major sports league, college or professional, will stop play in order to avoid further spread of the disease. As with the decision to maintain production in the factories, the reason is that there are billions of dollars at stake.

One of the claims to justify this decision is that the virus will not impact players severely because they are young and healthy. However, here are just a few examples of football players who have become severely injured, ill or worse due to infection with COVID-19:

- Xavier Thomas, a 20-year-old player for Clemson, contracted COVID-19 early in the year but had lingering symptoms, including difficulty breathing, for months after. He was not cleared to play again until September but still reports only feeling about half as healthy as he was before.

- At least two high school football players, both 14, have been hospitalized from COVID-19 complications. One of the two, Keyshawn Parrish from Georgia, developed myocarditis. This condition has been commonly reported among young people after having contracted the virus. Myocarditis can be incredibly dangerous, even deadly if left untreated.

- At least 3 high school football coaches, all in their 40s, have died from COVID-19. Five other high school coaches in Georgia alone have become critically ill and been hospitalized.

- In perhaps the most tragic event yet, Jamain Stephens, a player for California University of Pennsylvania, died on Sept. 9 after contracting the virus. He died from a blood clot that had formed in his heart after being infected with COVID-19 and developing pneumonia. He was 20 years old.



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