

Tennessee high school coach's death underscores dangers of school reopenings and sports

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A Tennessee high school football coach and teacher, 55-year-old David Picklesimer, died of COVID-19 on Sunday, becoming the latest of hundreds of educators that have died from the virus across the US. Picklesimer taught digital arts and design at Siegel High School in Murfreesboro, in Rutherford County.

Picklesimer passed away less than a week after Jeremy Morgan, a 44-year-old football coach at Forney High School in Forney, Texas, died of complications from COVID-19 on December 7. Also in Texas, a husband and wife both died from COVID-19 on Sunday. Paul Blackwell, 61, was a coach and taught physical education, while his wife Rose Mary, 65, was a bilingual second-grade teacher for over 20 years. Both taught in Grand Prairie, Texas.

Picklesimer's death took place roughly two months after Susan Keener, a 53-year-old educational assistant at Walter Hill Elementary in Rutherford County, died from COVID-19 on October 14.

Also in Tennessee, Coalfield High School head football coach Keith Henry died of COVID-19 on December 5. Coalfield, in East Tennessee, has a population of roughly 2,500 and received its name from coal mining camps years ago.

The online publication Education Week is the only online database tracking the deaths of educators, based on news reports. To date, the site has compiled the names of more than 500 teachers, school workers and former school employees in the US who have died from COVID-19. The list includes 31 active school employees who served as coaches that have died from the virus, most of whom passed away between July and November, after schools reopened en masse.

The youngest death on the list compiled by Education

Week, which is undoubtedly incomplete, was Pedro Garcia III, a paraprofessional and assistant wrestling coach at Cozad Community School in Cozad, Nebraska. He was only 27 years old.

In July, Tennessee Governor Bill Lee signed an executive order allowing contact sports, declaring, "Athletics is an important part of our way of life and provides many benefits for our student-athletes."

In Tennessee, with a population of 6.89 million, there have been about 449,000 cases and 5,468 deaths. Texas, home to 29 million people, has seen over 1,473,000 cases and 24,000 deaths.

According to the most recent district data, at least 313 Rutherford County Schools teachers and staff members were in quarantine from Nov. 30 to Dec. 6, during which time there were 102 new confirmed cases among staff. Over the same time period, 2,301 students were in quarantine and there were 270 new confirmed COVID-19 cases among students.

Educators, including teachers, coaches, bus drivers, cafeteria and maintenance workers, are all being placed at risk as state governments follow the lead of the federal government in implementing school reopening policies designed to force parents back to work.

In high schools, there has been a big push to hold the "Friday Night Lights" games with parents and students filling the stands. The young, healthy athletes risk infection to perform, as do their coaches and trainers.

An article that appeared in *STAT News* on November 26, with the headline, "Add Covid-related myocarditis, mechanical ventilation, and death to this year's football risks," noted, "High school coaches and staff have not been spared ... tragic consequences." The article was written by Lisa Kearns, Kathleen Bachynski and Arthur

L. Caplan.

Kearns is a senior researcher in the Division of Medical Ethics at NYU Grossman School of Medicine. Bachynski is an assistant professor at Muhlenberg College, and the author of *No Game for Boys to Play: The History of Youth Football and the Origins of a Public Health Crisis*. Caplan is professor of bioethics and director of the Division of Medical Ethics at NYU Grossman School of Medicine.

The trio of medical researchers and academicians reported on the deaths of middle aged coaches that were attributed to COVID-19 directly, or as a complication from the viral infection. These included:

- 42-year-old assistant coach Nacoma James at Lafayette High School in Oxford, Mississippi, who died in early August.
- 46-year-old volunteer football coach Charles Peterson at Spring Valley High School in Columbia, South Carolina, who died in September after being on a ventilator for almost a month.
- 40-year-old assistant football and baseball coach Ash Friederich in Tolleson, Arizona, who died on October 31 from COVID-19 complications.

Sometimes a whole coaching staff can be infected, as happened at Cook High School in Georgia, when five football coaches were hospitalized with COVID-19 and 100 students were required to quarantine.

For others, the threat of COVID-19 simply becomes too much, which is what happened to successful Alabama high school football coach Mark Rose, who quit his job. “I couldn’t sleep at night if I wasn’t protecting my players, their families and my coaches,” Rose said.

The three researchers explained in the *STAT* article, “In previous years—2017, 2018, and 2019—we surveyed injuries to youth, high school, college, and pro football players, some quite serious and some even career- or life-ending. This year we focus on the effect Covid-19 has had on the game because in 2020 a chief health harm of football at all levels of play hasn’t been the physicality of the game itself but the coronavirus. The spread of Covid-19 associated with contact sports ripples outward from players, staff, and fans to entire communities.”

The tragedy of COVID-19 follows student athletes after they leave high school. Jamain Stephens Jr., who played college football as a defensive lineman for

California University of Pennsylvania, died from a blood clot in his heart after contracting COVID-19.

Some COVID-19 survivors, called “longhaulers,” never fully recover, but instead battle—sometimes for months—COVID-19 symptoms like headaches, fatigue and shortness of breath. Others can experience organ damage that never goes away.

“I’m very, very nervous for these young men and women... These kids, their lives are priceless. And it’s just not worth it,” Jamain’s mother, Kelly Allen, told CBS News.

It is clear that contact sports like football and soccer, as well as basketball and others, can be an important factor in spreading COVID-19, killing educators and coaches, and infecting and endangering the lives of teenage athletes.

Humanity has sought exercise, relaxation, diversion and comradeship in team sports for thousands of years. But games must be played safely. With over 314,000 American deaths and COVID-19 becoming the leading cause of death in the United States in 2020, there can be no joy in participating in sports, or spectating, during this horrific pandemic. All contact sports should be halted and schools closed until the population is vaccinated and children can safely return to classrooms and sports.



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