

# Baseball season opens with thousands in attendance as pandemic surges towards fourth wave

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As more infectious and lethal COVID-19 variants envelop the country, Major League Baseball welcomes tens of thousands of fans to its ballparks for the beginning of a new season Thursday.

The teams and the media celebrate opening day as an annual rite of spring, now with a return to “normalcy” as all of its stadiums are opened to fans. This is in sharp contrast to last year’s pandemic-shortened 60 game season played without fans in attendance.

Major League Baseball (MLB) in conjunction with the Major League Baseball Players Association (MLBPA) had issued earlier this year a 108-page manual setting forth agreed-to protocols involving players and staff being tested every other day, mandating the wearing of contact tracing devices and face coverings, as well as social distancing practices including being confined to hotels during road trips, to mitigate the risks of COVID-19 infections.

Three days before the season began, however, MLB and the MLBPA issued a new memorandum to obviate most of these restrictions by agreeing that once 85 percent of players and staff are fully vaccinated, they would be able to disregard most of these protocols. This would then allow for example, players and staff to meet outdoors with anyone on road trips, eliminating the restriction limiting them to household and family. They also would no longer be required to let club compliance officers know when they are leaving team hotels, and they would be allowed to stay at personal homes on road trips without a need for family quarantines or testing.

This new and much less restrictive protocol is being utilized to incentivize players and staff to be vaccinated. It ignores, however, that those vaccinated

can still be infected and may well infect others, as well as the increased risks associated with constantly traveling throughout the country.

None of these measures, however, apply to fans who are now allowed and encouraged by MLB to attend games. MLB had emphasized the declining infection rate and vaccinations to justify having stadiums open to various numbers of fans and the need to return to normal.

Jerry Reinsdorf, the Chicago White Sox owner, sounded this theme when he stated, “We are proud of the important and historic role baseball plays in our country, offering respite during some of the most difficult times or in providing fans with a sense of comfort when circumstances seemed uncertain. We believe this is a moment when baseball can indeed serve our fans and our communities again as we all hope for a gradual return to normal.”

Brian Cashman, the New York Yankees’ general manager, was blunter in stressing the economic impact of baseball’s return to normalcy. “When the Yankees fly into Chicago to play the White Sox, we will take 80 percent capacity of a hotel, driving business for all their workers, the hotel property, food service group, the airline industry. The economic impact during spring training alone, in all of these communities, along with fans coming down, that’s hugely impactful.”

Many prominent epidemiologists, however had been warning since late January that because of more infectious and lethal variants, in the absence of lockdowns and strict mitigation, a fourth surge of infections was likely by late March.

Despite such warnings, Republican and Democratic Governors throughout the country since the beginning

of the year have been implementing “grand re-openings” of businesses and schools. These policies have resulted in COVID-19 infections once again surging throughout the country with over 76,000 new cases recorded on opening day.

Despite the extensive measures taken to protect players, MLB was forced to postpone the opening game between the New York Mets and the Washington Nationals because three and likely four Nationals tested positive for COVID-19 on March 31.

With one other game postponed because of weather, the remaining 13 scheduled games were played before tens of thousands of fans. Each team, depending upon local regulations, will be allowing various numbers of fans to attend games in person. Capacity will be limited to about 12 percent in Boston and Washington, most other teams will be allowing between 20 percent and 33 percent, Colorado is at about 43 percent and Houston is at 50 percent.

In Texas where Texas Republican Governor Greg Abbott has removed all COVID-19 restrictions, including the wearing of face coverings, the Texas Rangers have outdone their in-state rival, the Houston Astros, by announcing they will play their home opener on April 5 before a capacity crowd of 40,300 fans.

“The Rangers are encouraged that the Governor’s Office has given clearance for us to fully open Globe Life Field at the start of the 2021 Major League Baseball season,” Neil Leibman, the Rangers’ president of business operations and chief operating officer, said in a statement announcing the plan.

Tarrant County, where Globe Life Field is located, reached its peak infection rate in January. According to *USA Today*, at the county’s peak in January, a filled stadium, on average, would have had 375 recently infected fans inside. Based on the weekly COVID rate on March 29, 26 recently infected fans could be walking among 40,000 fans on opening day.

This apparently was a bit too much for President Biden, who told ESPN on Wednesday that it was a mistake for the Texas Rangers to allow full capacity at their ballpark for their first game. Biden did not address the dangers posed to tens of thousands of other baseball fans who will be attending games throughout the country.

Instead of addressing the health risks to players and those around them and to the homicidal policies of

encouraging tens of thousands of fans to attend baseball games, Biden pivoted to focus on whether this year’s All-Star game, scheduled to be played later this summer in Atlanta, Georgia, should be moved to another city. This in response to new legislation recently adopted by the Republican-led legislature restricting voting rights in that state after it went narrowly Democrat in the last election.

The very real threat of voter suppression, part of the ongoing assault on democratic rights, is now being used disingenuously by the Biden Administration, the team owners, and the MLBPA, to divert attention from the ongoing threat posed by COVID-19 to the health and lives of baseball players and fans, in order to facilitate MLB’s most important need—the generation of billions of dollars of revenue.



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