

While COVID-19 continues to surge

40,000 baseball fans crowd Texas stadium

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A near-capacity crowd of 38,238 fans in Arlington, Texas, attended the first home game for the Texas Rangers baseball team Monday afternoon, making it the largest official attendance at a stadium event in the US during the COVID-19 pandemic.

In February in Florida the Daytona 500 car race took place before a crowd of just over 30,000, and the Super Bowl was played before 24,835 fans, including 7,500 vaccinated health care workers, in Tampa's Raymond James Stadium. At those events, the attendance was about one-third of stadium capacity, in contrast to Monday's attendance at Globe Life Field, where the Rangers played the Toronto Blue Jay in a stadium at 99 percent capacity.

The Texas Rangers had announced plans to fill their stadium to capacity after Texas Governor Greg Abbott ended restrictions on all business operations as well as all mask mandates on March 2. "We're very confident we won't be a super-spreader event," said Ranger's CEO Neil Leibman, shortly after Abbott lifted COVID-19 protections.

"With all the protocols that we're following, we'll be extremely responsible and provide a very comfortable environment for somebody to enjoy the game without worrying we're going to be a spreader event," Leibman said. "We will require all those who enter Globe Life Field to wear a mask or face covering, and are working with Major League Baseball on some additional protocols required for player health and safety."

Fans were told to wear masks unless eating or drinking. Inside the stadium, signs reading "wear your masks" were plastered on various walls and occasional reminders to keep masks on and social distance rang out over a loudspeaker. These "rules," however, were universally ignored by those in attendance.

Although many fans entered with masks, once they

took their seats and the game began, most took off their masks and kept them off. Season ticket holder Randall Henley told the *Dallas Morning News* that he was "just amazed at the number of people who aren't wearing masks. Henley said there was little policing throughout the game and the usher in his section was "non-existent." He said "he didn't hear a single person tell others to put on a mask."

All other Major League Baseball teams are also welcoming fans to their ballparks as the new season has begun. Depending upon local regulations, each team will be allowing various numbers of fans to attend its 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.

All of this is taking place as more infectious and lethal COVID-19 variants envelop the country that are resulting in a fourth wave of the pandemic. Texas has had 19,404 confirmed coronavirus cases and 590 deaths in the last seven days.

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 would be walking among 40,000 fans on opening day. This figure is likely an underestimation considering that testing in Texas, as well as in most parts of the country has been significantly reduced.

President Biden weighed in on this issue last week when he told ESPN that it was a mistake for the Texas Rangers to allow full capacity at their ballpark. Biden did not address the dangers posed to tens of thousands

of other baseball fans who will be attending other games throughout the country.

In Michigan, for example, based on current skyrocketing infection rates, it is likely that among the 8,000 who attended the Detroit Tigers home opener at Comerica Park, there were at least 80 infected fans, more than at the Texas game. While the crowd was smaller, there was little more observance of mask-wearing and other coronavirus safety measures than in Texas. Tigers opening day was originally to be limited to 1,000 fans, but Governor Gretchen Whitmer lifted restrictions and allowed up to 20 percent of capacity to attend games.

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 his strong support for a campaign to move this year's All-Star game, scheduled to be played later this summer in Atlanta, Georgia, to another city. This campaign is in response to new legislation recently adopted by the Republican-led Georgia legislature restricting voting rights in that state after it went narrowly Democratic in the last election.

A few days later MLB Commissioner Rob Manfred announced that in consultation with owners, former and current players, the Players Association and the Players Alliance, "I have decided that the best way to demonstrate our values as a sport is by relocating this year's All-Star Game and MLB Draft ... Major League Baseball fundamentally supports voting rights for all Americans and opposes restrictions to the ballot box."

Whatever the genuine outrage among baseball players over the anti-democratic measures enacted in Georgia, as far as the owners are concerned, moving the All-Star game is a cheap diversion from the massive injury to public health for which they are responsible, by reopening the 30 Major League Baseball stadiums and bringing in hundreds of thousands of fans, in order to boost their profits and considerable fortunes.



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