

US football stadiums packed to the brim while COVID continues to surge

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Labor Day weekend 2021 inaugurated the American college football season with stadiums from coast to coast packed to the brim with exhilarated fans, hardly any wearing a mask, in complete defiance of the COVID pandemic.

The number in attendance at some of the country's biggest stadiums was staggering. The University of Michigan hosted Western Michigan with close to 110,000 spectators standing shoulder to shoulder. The University of Texas defeated Louisiana on Saturday, cheered by more than 91,000 screaming and cheering fans. And the list could go on and on as more than 80 games were played during the long weekend that included Thursday.

There is no question that tens of thousands of people who began this college football season cheering on their favorite team will be dead before it is over. That is the brutal arithmetic of the pandemic, which capitalist politicians, both Democratic and Republican, and their corporate masters are seeking to conceal.

A week before these sporting celebrations, Dr. Anthony Fauci, head of the National Institute of Allergy and Infectious Diseases and chief medical adviser to President Joe Biden, acknowledged that the country could expect more than 100,000 new COVID-19 deaths by December. "What is going on now is both entirely predictable and entirely preventable," he said. "We could turn this thing around, and we can do it efficiently and quickly if we could just get those [80 million] people vaccinated. It's so important that people in this crisis put aside any ideological and political differences and just get vaccinated."

There are no "ideological or political differences" in college football and sports in general. As *USA Today* noted last year, "At stake is at least \$4.1 billion in fiscal-

year revenue for the athletics departments at just the 50-plus public schools in the Power Five conferences—an average of more than \$78 million per school." Ticket sales, merchandising of athletic apparel and television contracts can gross a top university over \$100 million per season. According to *Citadel Today*, "The average game payouts [on TV contracts] run between \$150,000 and \$1.65 million depending on the teams playing and how 'big' the TV ratings are expected to be for that specific game."

In what is perhaps a grotesque irony, the local media celebrated the return of the Iowa Wave in the game between the Hawkeyes and Wyoming Cowboys on Thursday. The tradition started on September 2, 2017, when at the end of the first quarter of every Iowa home game, teams and fans turn towards the University of Iowa Stead Family Children's Hospital and wave to all the patients.

Considering the rising number of pediatric hospitalizations across the country from COVID infections, the Iowa Wave lacked any traditional value. It seemed more of an insult to those families who have lost children to the coronavirus—and those who are going to lose them. Already, more than 204,000 pediatric infections have been reported by the American Academy of Pediatrics for the week ending August 26, 2021, nearing the winter highs in January 2021. Hospitalization rates for those under 18 have risen nearly five-fold since the beginning of summer.

In a show of complete hypocrisy and callousness, the University of Iowa's president, Barbara Wilson, offered the fans and players her many thanks for supporting the football program, assuring the public that the COVID metrics in Johnson County have remained "relatively stable" and offering COVID-19 and flu vaccines to fans before the game.

Television ratings for these events have gone through the roof. As *Newsweek* noted, “The Saturday night game between top-5 teams Clemson and Georgia was the second-most seen season kickoff game—over any network—in the last 15 years, and it’s up 16 percent from a similar game in the 2019 season.” More than six million viewers tuned in to the game between number one-ranked Alabama and number 14-ranked Miami.

Many sports announcers predict even more enormous crowds for home openers on the September 11 weekend which universities like Alabama, Clemson, Georgia, Louisiana State, Michigan State, Notre Dame, Ohio State and Penn State will be hosting.

That these events will become superspreading events is not a question. One only has to take in the chilling scene of jam-packed spectators to recognize the catastrophe in store. Public health officials, such as Dr. Michael Osterholm, director of the Center for Infectious Disease Research and Policy at the University of Minnesota, have warned of the dangers posed by the highly virulent Delta strain, even for people outdoors.

As one senior contributor, Professor Bruce Y. Lee, poignantly asked in *Forbes*, “In fact, could the ‘return of college football’ be like pouring kerosene on a fire and adding fuel to the current COVID-19 coronavirus surge in the US?” To ask the question is to answer it.

The United States has registered more than 40.8 million cases of COVID-19, of which 4.4 million were amassed in just one month or more than one million cases a week. Many of these are linked to the recent return-to-school events that have ignited large clusters of outbreaks in multiple states. It has been demonstrated, again and again, that superspreader events are crucial to sustaining the pandemic.

The average number of daily new cases has risen to more than 161,000. With recurring weekly massive sporting events attended by millions who assemble beforehand for tailgate parties, watch the sporting events and, afterward, celebrate at pubs and dining facilities, the concerns raised within the medical communities are more than warranted.

Deaths continue to climb, with 1,560 people dying each day, a rise of 55 percent in the daily rate. In just one month, more than 33,000 people have been killed. However, the number of excess deaths in this period is twice this figure, highlighting the current surge’s

extreme impact on the health sector and communities’ ability to respond to the crisis.

Present modeling estimates place the number of COVID-19 deaths at more than three-quarters of a million by December 1, 2021. This estimate is an upward modification by 13,000 deaths to the assessment preceding it a month prior. However, one doesn’t need to look up statistics when morgues are overflowing with corpses to understand the disaster compounded on the weight of previous disasters.

The White House and political establishment, working on behalf of the financial markets, have been responsible for conveying the possibility that life could return to normal with the COVID vaccines, creating the illusion that the coronavirus had been “defanged,” as a commentator for Bloomberg put it. As a consequence, mask usage is down by more than 66 percent from its peak, while the number of patrons going to restaurants and stores has neared pre-pandemic levels.



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