

College football season continues in front of full crowds, risking massive COVID-19 super-spreaders

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With the college football regular season continuing into its fourth week of games, a major public health disaster is looming. Despite the continued spread of the more infectious Delta variant, colleges and universities have essentially removed any safety measures and are allowing games to resume with full audience capacity.

The motivating factor for the schools to allow these deadly events is profits. In the last year's season, limitations on in-person attendance, imposed in piecemeal fashion by state and local governments, as well as a handful of game cancellations due to outbreaks in teams caused schools to lose out on hundreds of millions in anticipated revenue.

College football in the United States is among the most-attended sporting competition in the world, with more than 42 million tickets sold to Division 1 games in 2019, according to the National Collegiate Athletic Association, the governing body for college sports. The top 25 college stadiums all have a capacity of 69,000 people or more, and seven stadiums hold over 100,000. The largest is Michigan Stadium in Ann Arbor, home to the University of Michigan Wolverines, with a capacity of 107,601.

Most major programs, including Michigan, Penn State, Ohio State and Texas A&M, are not requiring fans to show any proof of vaccination or enforcing mask wearing. Some schools like Louisiana State University are requiring guests either show proof of vaccination or a negative COVID-19 PCR test.

However, these limited measures are only intended to save face, not prevent the spread of the virus. They are fully in line with the Biden administration's insistence that the population must "learn to live with the virus," or in plain language, to live with constant infection and

death as all measures necessary to end the pandemic are being rejected out of hand by both Democratic and Republican politicians.

It has been well documented that tens of thousands of "breakthrough cases," or infections of vaccinated individuals, have taken place each day for the last several months, driven by the surge of the more aggressive Delta variant. In an environment of tens of thousands of people who are encouraged to scream and yell, mass transmission is practically guaranteed.

In Georgia, where the University of Georgia has held two home games with over 90,000 fans in attendance, COVID-19 cases are higher than they have ever been. The state has seen a seven-day average of over 5,000 new cases since August 9, reaching a high of 15,000 new cases on September 13. Deaths in Georgia continue to rise and are at their highest point since the previous peak last winter, with a current seven-day average of 125 deaths per day.

But the danger of holding these massive events is not limited to the surrounding school community. Last year ESPN published an interactive article, Mapping College Football Crowds and Covid Risks, using information gathered from epidemiologists and anonymous cell phone data which mapped out how far the virus could potentially spread after being contracted at a game.

For example, after a game in front of 99,590 fans at Alabama's Bryant-Denny Stadium, within just 18 hours fans traveled back to their homes throughout the region in neighboring states, including Mississippi, Georgia, South Carolina, Tennessee and others. At another game in Nebraska, fans traveled from southern Florida, Illinois, Oregon and Connecticut.

The amount of wealth caught up in college football is staggering. The annual revenues generated by the top NCAA schools has exceeded \$4 billion. In 2019, 39 schools saw revenues of over \$100 million with the top 3 richest football programs, University of Texas, Texas A&M and Ohio State, each bringing in over \$200 million.

While the financial data for the 2020 season has not yet been made publicly available, initial reports suggest that many teams earned millions less than expected due to game cancellations and reduced ticket sales due to COVID-19 restrictions. Another significant loss of revenue came from the cancellation of almost all non-conference games last year for major programs.

In non-conference games, schools make agreements directly with one another for large sums paid to the visiting team, frequently a weaker team brought in for an easy win, while the home team earns money off ticket sales, TV deals and advertising. According to a report in *USAToday*, the non-conference direct payments alone for 2021 add up to over \$171 million. Kent State is earning the most off these deals, bringing in over \$5.2 million for its non-conference guest appearances. Forty-five other schools will bring in over \$1 million from these contracts.

There are 50 non-conference games planned this year that have at least a \$1 million contract agreement, and 289 non-conference contract games in total planned for the 2021 season. In one of these games, played on September 11, Ohio State paid \$3.5 million to the University of Oregon.

In order to recover their losses from last year's cancellations, teams are planning as many non-conference games as they can. Some canceled games, like that between Kent State and Penn State, have been "rescheduled" several years in the future to make up the millions in lost payments.

Mario Moccia, the New Mexico State University athletics director, told *USA Today* that in the last year the school ended with a \$3.5 million loss. "Those [non-conference] games alone added up to \$2.725 million," he said. "It just shows, if you're just going to play those two games, the economic impact wouldn't have been nearly as drastic for us."

Any interests of the health and well-being of students, athletes, fans and ultimately the population as a whole have been totally abandoned in favor of the profit

interests of the billion-dollar college football industry. The colleges and universities with major athletic programs have been completely transformed into businesses, with financial resources monopolized by athletic departments. At some schools, such as Louisiana State, the athletic department receive more in alumni donations, which are then squandered on expenses such as futuristic locker rooms, coaching salaries and stadium expansions, than the university itself.

As with other major industries the decision has been made by the schools that not a single dollar more can be spared to protect human life. The continuation of the massive super-spreading games will have a devastating impact on the population already reeling from the pandemic.



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