

Omicron surge wreaks havoc on professional and college sports

Alan Gilman
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With COVID-19 now being fueled by the highly contagious Omicron variant, infections have skyrocketed across the country. One of the most highly publicized impacts of this new wave has been on professional sports, as hundreds of players and staff have tested positive for the virus, causing the cancellation and postponement of numerous games.

The National Football League (NFL) on Friday postponed three games scheduled for the just concluded weekend due to COVID-19 issues. Saturday's scheduled game between the Cleveland Browns and the Las Vegas Raiders was rescheduled to Monday. That decision came after 23 Cleveland Browns players landed on the NFL's COVID-19/reserve list in recent days, including the team's starting quarterback Baker Mayfield and backup quarterback Case Keenum, as well as Browns coach Kevin Stefanski, who all tested positive for the coronavirus earlier in the week.

Sunday's scheduled games between the Washington Football Team and the Philadelphia Eagles and between the Seattle Seahawks and Los Angeles Rams were both postponed until Tuesday. As of Friday, the Rams had placed 29 players on the COVID-19/reserve list. The Washington Football team has 23 players on its list, including its starting and second-string quarterbacks.

The NFL describes the COVID-19/reserve list as being for players who either test positive for COVID-19 or who have been quarantined after having been in close contact with an infected person or persons. NFL teams are not permitted to comment on the medical status of players other than referring to roster status. Clubs may not disclose whether a player is in quarantine or is positive for the virus.

In the National Basketball Association (NBA), the Chicago Bulls are the only team to have games postponed thus far, but the Brooklyn Nets were on the border last week when they played against the Toronto Raptors with just eight active players, the minimum for a game to be played. Later the team announced that its three top stars, Kevin Durant, James Harden and Kyrie Irving, had all entered the

COVID-19 protocol. Irving was the highest-profile vaccine refuser among NBA players, while Durant and Harden were vaccinated.

Many of the NBA's biggest stars including Giannis Antetokounmpo and Russell Westbrook were among the dozens of players to test positive last week. On Sunday five Cleveland Cavaliers tested positive, jeopardizing their game later that night with the Atlanta Hawks.

The NBA was the first sports league to react to COVID-19 and its suspension of its 2019–2020 season on March 11, 2020, was one of the first indications to the wider American public that the pandemic would prove to be a massive disruption of everyday life.

On Friday the National Hockey League (NHL) announced that all Colorado Avalanche and Florida Panthers games would be postponed through December 26 over COVID-19 concerns. Then on Saturday the NHL announced that the Boston Bruins and Nashville Predators would also have their seasons postponed through the league's holiday break. In addition to these four, the Vancouver Canucks, Toronto Maple Leafs, Calgary Flames, Carolina Hurricanes, Montreal Canadiens, Boston Bruins and Minnesota Wild have postponed two or more games.

On Thursday Montreal played in front of an empty Bell Centre and the Ontario government has curtailed capacity to 50 percent for Toronto Raptors NBA games and for Toronto and Ottawa NHL games.

College basketball also has been impacted by COVID-19 and has in the last week canceled or postponed more than a dozen games, impacting many of this season's top teams, including UCLA, Ohio State and Seton Hall.

College football on Friday played the first of 42 bowl games that will conclude with the four-team playoff that begins December 31 with its championship game scheduled for January 10.

"Of course, we're aware of what's happening and we're monitoring the situation," said Bill Hancock, the executive director of the College Football Playoff, who added that no changes have been made to bowl itineraries or fan

guidelines.

Last year 19 bowl games were canceled, media interviews were done remotely and teams often arrived in town the night before the games. No such restrictions have as of yet been mandated for this year's bowl games and playoffs.

Professional sports beginning last year imposed some of the strictest protocols to assure games could be played. These included daily testing, masking, social distancing, contact tracing, as well as the creation of "bubbles" where all teams would be confined to various hotels in the same city.

Beginning in the spring of this year, as a result of vaccinations, these protocols were significantly relaxed, although testing on a weekly or daily basis (for the unvaccinated) continued.

Even though these protocols have been weakened, they are in most cases stricter than even those that apply to most health care workers. These recent outbreaks in professional sports, despite their stricter protocols, provide a more accurate measure as to how rampant the spread of the virus has become throughout the country. The lack of mass testing in the US has served to mask the true extent of the spread of this latest surge.

"What's happening in sports is a mirror of what's happening in society," said John Swartzberg, an infectious disease and vaccinology professor emeritus at the University of California, Berkeley.

What most disturbs these sports leagues about these latest disruptions caused by COVID-19 is that the vast majority of athletes are vaccinated—around 95 percent in the NFL and NBA and 99 percent in the NHL.

The heavily vaccinated and tested American sports world, perhaps the most committed to the strategy of mitigation propounded by the Biden administration, thought it had returned to normalcy, a notion that has been upended by these recent events. The Omicron surge has demonstrated once again the necessity of an elimination strategy as opposed to "living with the virus."

In contrast to the NFL, professional and college basketball as well as professional hockey still have months remaining in their seasons to take account of any disruptions. The NFL, however, is nearing the end of its season with playoffs commencing in January, leaving very little scheduling flexibility.

As a result, instead of increasing protections against COVID-19, the NFL is now in the process of lessening them. This process began when Alan Sills, the chief medical officer of the NFL, said on Wednesday that two-thirds of NFL players diagnosed as positive are asymptomatic, and most of the rest have mild symptoms.

On Friday Tampa Bay Buccaneers coach Bruce Arians and

Dallas Cowboys owner Jerry Jones followed the lead from Sills by proposing that asymptomatic players should be allowed to play. "If you're asymptomatic, you should be allowed to play," Arians told reporters.

Jones, a billionaire and Trump supporter, told radio station 105.3 The Fan, "I think we will get to a point, probably this week, that we'll only test if symptomatic, that's if you've been vaccinated. That's a good thing. Test when you're symptomatic and that's it."

Predictably the next day NFL and the National Football League Players Association announced the implementation of "enhanced" COVID protocols that include changes to the testing cadence for fully vaccinated, asymptomatic players and staff.

A memo from NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell, obtained by NFL Network Insider Ian Rapoport, sent to all 32 teams states that fully vaccinated, asymptomatic individuals will no longer be subject to weekly testing.

Goodell in his memo went on to declare, "Medical information strongly indicates that this variant is significantly more contagious but possibly less severe than prior variants, particularly for people who are fully vaccinated and have received a booster shot.

"Our experience with the Omicron variant is fully consistent with this expectation—while more players and staff are testing positive, roughly two-thirds of those individuals are asymptomatic, most of the remaining individuals have only mild symptoms, and the virus appears to clear positive individuals more rapidly than was true with the Delta and other variants. In many respects, Omicron appears to be a very different illness from the one we first confronted in the spring of 2020."

The NFL had until this week engaged in extensive testing, and as a result more accurately mirrored the true extent of infection that is now rampant throughout the country. In response to the rapid Omicron spread, however, it is now implementing a new policy of not testing asymptomatic players in order to allow them to play. This amounts to embracing the utterly stupid claims of Donald Trump that if you test less, you'll have less infection.

By doing so the NFL is now more accurately mirroring the true policy of the ruling class—COVID is here to stay so learn to live with it—and when necessary, die from it.



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