

# Will the college football season be sidelined by COVID?

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(HealthDay)—The odds are not good for college football conferences

that have decided to press forward with their fall season despite the coronavirus pandemic, experts say.

The Big 10 and PAC 12 have decided not to play sports in the fall, but the SEC, the Big 12 and the ACC say they will proceed with [college football](#) while still keeping players safe from the [coronavirus](#).

"I do predict, because we've already been seeing it in those sports that have been very diligent, that there will be transmission and they will have to stop their games," said Dr. Colleen Kraft, an NCAA medical adviser and a professor of infectious diseases with Emory University School of Medicine in Atlanta. She was one of several experts who recently briefed the media on navigating college sports during the pandemic.

Ultimately, the nationwide debate over college football is occurring because the United States has failed to tackle the COVID-19 pandemic in an effective manner, said Dr. Brian Hainline, senior vice president and chief medical officer of the NCAA.

"When we started talking about return to sport in April, we were envisioning there would be a continued downward trajectory of COVID-19 new infections and deaths, that there would be a national surveillance system, national testing and national contact tracing that would allow us to really navigate this pandemic," Hainline said. "That hasn't happened, and it's made it very challenging to make decisions as we approach fall sport."

About 1% to 2% of NCAA athletes are already testing positive for COVID-19, Hainline noted.

Despite this, and despite increasing COVID-19 infections and deaths, some conferences have decided to "sort of dip your toe in and see what

happens," Kraft said.

Colleges are taking steps to protect players, including having them practice in small units and experimenting with innovations such as internal face masks that are part of the football helmet, Hainline said.

The problem is that no matter how stringent your university's COVID-19 policies, your players will be sharing the field with another team at game time, Hainline said.

"The greatest risk when it comes to football is when you have one team competing against another team and you have to be certain both teams have been following very strict standards, so you're not taking one team that's been a relatively secure bubble and all of a sudden expose it to another that's not," Hainline said.

## **Campuses a hotbed for COVID spread**

Also, no matter how hard school officials work to make sports an infection-free environment, players will still be spending a lot of time off the field in situations where they face infection they can then spread to their teammates, said Dr. Carlos del Rio, an NCAA health adviser and executive associate dean of Emory University School of Medicine.

"We can do all the planning we want to have safe sports, but what happens outside of sports is really where the problem is," del Rio said. "It's the fraternity party. It's the other things that can happen."

This month already has produced a number of examples of college students thumbing their noses at COVID-19.

University of Alabama athletic director Greg Byrne tweeted a photo Sunday showing dozens of tightly packed people, most without masks,

waiting to get into a popular bar.

"Who wants college sports this fall?? Obviously not these people!!" said Byrne, whose team is in the SEC.

ACC member University of Louisville kicked three soccer players off its team and suspended three others after they hosted a COVID-19 party, according to news reports. The men's and women's soccer teams, field hockey team and volleyball team had to cancel their workouts after 29 COVID cases were reported.

Meanwhile, an entire sorority house at Oklahoma State University is under quarantine and isolation after 23 members of Pi Beta Phi tested positive for COVID.

"I would encourage schools that there be significant education for those athletes about how to minimize their risk of getting infected," del Rio said. "Their risk of getting infected is going to be in the community, because there's so much transmission in the community."

Athletes infected with COVID-19 face serious and potentially career-threatening illness, Kraft and del Rio said.

For example, they are at increased risk of myocarditis, an inflammation of the heart caused by a viral infection that can cause dangerous irregular heart rhythms.

"You can absolutely not train when you have a viral syndrome because there's a risk of myocarditis. This has been around for a long time," del Rio said.

## **Some warning-sign guidelines**

The NCAA has set a five-item mandate under which schools must pull the plug on their athletic programs, Hainline said.

These include:

- A lack of ability to isolate positive cases or quarantine high-risk cases of COVID-19 on campus.
- Insufficient ability to test for COVID.
- Campuswide or local community COVID rates that are deemed unsafe by local public health officials.
- Inability to contact trace and prevent outbreaks.
- A lack of capacity in local hospitals to deal with a surge in COVID cases.

"If the local [hospital] infrastructure of a particular school is really imploding and can't accept any new cases, you can't go forward with fall sports," Hainline said.

Del Rio noted that in Georgia, 98% of the hospital beds and 97% of the ICUs are now filled.

"My advice is that we hold off and control this virus," del Rio said. "That would be my priority number one as a nation."

Colleges that press ahead with fall football have one other hard decision—what to do with the fans.

Schools like Texas A&M University and Florida State University have announced that football attendance likely will be limited to a quarter to a half of their stadium's capacity, *Bloomberg News* reported.

**More information:** The NCAA has more about [its COVID-19](#)

[response.](#)

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