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Covid-19 is Number One

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SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE - COVID-19 IS NUMBER ONE
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Heading into December, the college football season has reached that point when teams are trying to position themselves for conference playoffs and championships, and for the elite the CFP National Championship Game. Lesser teams are trolling for bowl games, great and small. In addition, men's and women's college basketball and hockey are underway. College basketball opened on Wednesday with a bundle of cancellations.

This has been a strange college football season in many ways. Stadiums have limited numbers or no fans in attendance. Teams find themselves short-handed and unable to compete at their normal level, while some are not able to compete at all. Some find their head coaches and assistants in absentia.

According to the NCAA, as of this past weekend, 150 college football games have been cancelled or postponed. Two of the major conferences, The Big Ten and Pac-12, started their seasons late. The Pac-12 cancelled nine games in its first four weeks. Thus far, Arizona State has played one conference game. In the Southeastern Conference, teams have played as few as two games and as many as five. In the Big Ten, the number of conference games played varies from three to six.

Given this spread of games played within conferences, how will conference playoff positions be determined? On the national level, how will teams with different numbers of games played be judged in qualifying for the CFB National Championship Game? In one scenario Ohio State could not play enough games to qualify for the Big Ten Championship game, but given the belief that it is one of the best teams in the nation it could be in the national championship playoff.

How is it that college football is now in such a position? Who thinks that playing football in the midst of a pandemic was, and remains a good idea? Certainly, many players want to play, and coaches want to coach. Television networks, particularly ESPN and the FOX networks, want football because without it there would be a huge gaping hole in their programming schedules. Universities and their athletic departments want the games to be played to avoid a gaping hole in their budgets.

And so, week after week, as games are cancelled and postponed because Covid-19 has infected teams, coaching staffs, and athletic departments, not to mention the university itself, the games go on. Teams play without their stars; some play with severely reduced rosters; others watch their games rescheduled in defiance of the athletic and academic calendars; and now the first bowl game has been cancelled.

Fortunately, for those people making these decisions, not to mention the players, only one player has died. That was at a small college and just before the regular football season began.

There have been some astounding statements coming out of the mouth of football coaches in the football obsessed southeast. Dabo Sweeny of Clemson complained when their game with Florida State was cancelled only hours before the game. He accused FSU of using Covid as a way to avoid playing Clemson. At least he didn't use the word "chicken." And a few weeks ago, Florida head coach Dan Mullen called for The Swamp, the Gator football stadium, to be jammed packed for the Gator's next game. He apparently hadn't heard about limits on crowd size and social distancing, but then Mullen was focused on important matters. Academic leaders have displayed similar mental density.

As football is winding down, basketball is starting up, and the emerging pattern looks much the same. Cancellations and postponements precipitated a mass of schedule changes across the county. Most notably was the decision by the University of Connecticut's women's team to cancel its first four games and cease all basketball activity. The University of Tennessee did much the same when in the face of a number of positive Covid-19 were reported. A number of early season tournaments have been cancelled, and several women's teams have canceled their seasons, including Bethune-Cookman University and Florida A&M. The Ivy League cancelled all winter sports.

There were 100 games on last Wednesday's opening day, at a time when public health officials are warning Americans not to travel. University officials warned their students to exercise caution while traveling home for the holidays, and many of these students will stay at home to finish the fall semester remotely. But the basketball teams will be traveling, some on commercial airlines, potentially becoming the latest form of Covid super spreader.

In one of the first of what will no doubt be many reckless events, Gonzaga University had two of its players test positive for Covid just prior to a game at a Fort Myers Tournament. This did not stop the remainder of the team from playing. Positive Covid tests didn't seem to faze Gonzaga basketball officials, Florida authorities, nor the medical staff of the four teams participating in the Ft. Myers tournament.

To the surprise of some, there was one voice of reason in the midst of these developments. Rick Pitino is seldom thought of in these terms, but it was Pitino who called for a postponement of the season with March Madness being replaced by May Madness rather than proceeding with December Madness.

With its third cancellation, Florida State football has now achieved the "cancellation hat trick," while a total of 19 games were wiped out this past weekend. With the number of Covid cases spiking nationally, players and coaches testing positive in large numbers, the decision is to move forward. Cancellations and postponements continue to mount, but the start of basketball season and the football championships are to be valued above all.

This strange year seems to be getting stranger.

Who's Number One? My vote goes to Covid-19.

Pandemic! What pandemic?

On Sport and Society this is Dick Crepeau reminding you that you don't have to be a good sport to be a bad loser.

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Next time a look at the NFL