


12-3-2020

Covid-19 Covers Against the NFL

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Recommended Citation

Crepeau, Richard C., "Covid-19 Covers Against the NFL" (2020). *On Sport and Society*. 854.
<https://stars.library.ucf.edu/onsportandsociety/854>

SPORT AND SOCIETY FOR H-ARETE - COVID-19 COVERS AGAINST THE NFL
DECEMBER 3, 2020

For the NFL, the push to the playoffs begins in December as the contenders are separated from the pretenders. The Super Bowl is still eleven weeks or so away, but those who hope to be there are fine-tuning their game to make the run to Super Bowl LV in Tampa.

It has been a zany season in the NFL as Covid-19 has visited the locker rooms and administrative offices of every team except the Seattle Seahawks. These visitations started slowly and have picked up momentum over the past twelve weeks. Coming as a surprise to the NFL, this pattern seems to reflect that of the nation itself.

There is a feeling, based on reality, that the NFL stands above and beyond the forces governing ordinary mortals. Over the course of its history, the NFL has become an extremely powerful institution that controls politicians; local, state, and federal government; television and advertising executives; and the habits of the nation. It is a cultural force that has become an obsession of Americans.

It is no wonder then that the NFL has acted as if the League is more powerful than the ordinary rules of public health and infectious diseases. At the beginning of the season, league officials boldly announced that it would go forward with its full season without fear and with minimal caution. At the same time, all exhibition games were cancelled, and training camps were abbreviated or cancelled.

Unlike the NBA, the NFL would not have a bubble. Travel would not be restricted or curtailed as teams went back forth across the nation. While ordinary citizens were urged to restrict their travel, the NFL barely broke stride.

The NFL has not had a uniform policy on fan attendance at games. That has been left for teams to decide based on with local regulations. Therefore, these numbers varied widely from zero to thousands. The leader in fan attendance is the Dallas Cowboys where the King of Revenue Maximization has been able to accommodate about 150,000 fans for their first six home games. This is twenty-percent of the total NFL attendance. The largest

crowd, 31,700, came on November 8 for a game against Pittsburgh. The Thanksgiving attendance was just under 31,000.

At the beginning of the season there were very few problems. Then slowly, Covid-19 joined the NFL and began to affect players and front office personnel. A positive test here and a positive test there left some players in quarantine and missing games. Then, more players were being infected, and teams found themselves losing several players at a time. Training facilities and team offices were being closed. Games were postponed and rescheduled and the NFL found itself shuffling its schedule. Bye-weeks were moved around, one change often necessitated more changes. Still, it could be handled.

According to the November 13 *New York Times*, there have been nearly 8,000 positive Covid tests in the NFL. About one-third of these have been players, and there is little evidence that these positives came from on-field contact. Most originated outside the team facilities. As cases in the general population have spiked in the last few weeks, the number of cases in the league have risen as well.

The first rescheduling of games came in Week Four when two games were moved. The Tennessee Titans were sidelined for two consecutive weeks as the virus spread through the team. In Week Seven, four games were impacted, including the first meeting of the Pittsburgh Steelers and Baltimore Ravens. The Steelers and New England Patriots seemed to be the leaders in schedule movement with the Patriots being infected and the Steelers simply being moved by their infected opponents or being impacted by other schedule shuffling. Four Steeler players were infected in early November but were able to avoid postponement of their Week Ten game.

In the past two weeks, there have been some remarkable Covid-19 induced madness. The second edition of the Pittsburgh/Baltimore game was scheduled as the third game of the Thanksgiving football troika. Then, Covid-19 hit the Ravens, and the game was moved to Sunday, then Tuesday, and then Wednesday, when it was played in the afternoon. The Ravens were without their quarterback and several other impact players. Will this be a trend? Are you ready for some Wednesday Afternoon football?

Also featured in Week Twelve was a game in which one team had no quarterback. All four of Denver's quarterbacks were out with the virus or exposure to the virus. The four held a quarterback meeting in which no one wore a mask. Denver requested a

postponement of the game to Monday or beyond so they would have a quarterback ready to return to the active roster.

The league denied the request, as well as a request to sign one of their coaches to a player contract. So, Denver pulled a quarterback out of their practice squad, a player listed as a wide-receiver, and they managed one pass completion, two interceptions, and scored three points in losing to New Orleans, 31-3. So much for the NFL protecting the integrity of competition. Vegas showed more concern for integrity by taking the game off the betting boards. In an interview yesterday Roger Goodell ducked the question about the Denver situation, in his usual disingenuous manner.

Meanwhile, things were spiraling further downward. On Saturday, the San Francisco 49'ers were faced with a ruling by Santa Clara County that all contact sports would be prohibited in the county for the next three weeks. The Niners were left without a home stadium and without a practice facility. They will now play their next two home games in the Glendale, Arizona. It is not entirely clear how practices will be handled.

What the final five weeks of the regular season will bring is anyone's guess, but with the virus numbers spiking nationwide, it is likely that the same trend will be seen in the NFL. One thing is clear, the NFL is determined to stick to the basic calendar of its schedule and not make any adjustments in the dates of playoffs or the Super Bowl. The League seems determined to show that it cannot be pushed around by a virus.

In the past few days *New York Times* columnist Kurt Streeter asked, "Do We Really Need Football?" The NFL's answer is a simple and resounding YES!

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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