

Collegiate Athletics and the Coronavirus Pandemic
How can the Northeast 10 Conference complete a successful spring sports season?

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I was just hired as interim Associate Director of Strategic Communications and Operations for the Northeast 10 Conference tasked with devising a plan to successfully complete a spring sports season beginning this coming February. The research question I am pursuing is what set of guidelines and protocols that other conferences have used can we implement and see similar results. I will be writing the recommendation report for the Commissioner of the league and Board of Directors.

This Recommendation report focuses on if it would be plausible for the Northeast-10 Conference to hold a spring sports season for its student athletes. The report will focus on procedures and protocols from conferences who went forward with playing sports this fall, interviews with student-athletes and the dynamic data associated with Covid-19 statistics. This serves as a comprehensive report that addresses all aspects of what holding a spring sports season would look like, and if it can be done safely at all. I concluded that, at this point the Northeast 10 Conference should move forward with devising a plan for return to play. If Covid numbers keep rising, and it is determined that it is not plausible to have a spring season, a plan will already be ready for implementation next fall.

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Executive Summary

As leaders of the Northeast 10 Conference, it is vital that we make a decision regarding college athletics of our member schools that is in the absolute best interest of our student-athletes. We must exhibit a sense of transparency with the student-athletes themselves, coaches, officials, faculty and the NCAA. The difficulty of this situation cannot be understated, as we cannot make an official decision until we see how the virus spread trends until the end of the year. As 2020 has taught us, we must stay on our feet and constantly adapt, or risk folding all together, as some conferences have. Our Mission Statement mentions “high-level athletics competition”. If we deem that conditions are unsafe or don’t promote a healthy athletic environment, we refuse to put our student-athletes in a dangerous situation. Our Vision Statement mentions “Promoting the health, well-being and holistic development of each individual”. If our student-athlete mental or physical health is disrupted in any way, causing academic and life problems, we would be doing ourselves and the student-athletes a disservice. Lastly, it mentions “Embracing creative ways to convey the distinctiveness...” We could achieve this by taking advantage of the most state-of-the-art technologies to keep our student-athletes safe, regardless if there is a full season in the immediate future or not. As the COVID-19 situation continuously develops, we are prepared to do what is in the best interest of our student-athletes. Whether that be holding a near normal season, a season with big changes, such as no fans, or no season at all. As the calendar year winds down, we will develop the necessary plans & protocols so that they are in place when it is safe to play, whether that be in the Spring or Next Fall and beyond. These plans will include

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testing procedures, sanitation protocols, limited capacity, mask enforcement, a Medical Advisory Board and counseling for student-athletes. Ultimately, whether we will move forward with playing this spring, will be decided upon by Government/State officials, our Board of Governors, student-athletes and their families, coaches, faculty.

Introduction

COVID-19 has turned the sports world upside down since March. It has become evident that not only does this have an effect on professional sports, but even more so on collegiate athletics, as they often do not have the same resources to combat this virus and continue playing. The NE-10 was one of the first Division 2 Conferences to cancel its Fall Season, which was obviously the responsible and necessary decision. Originally, the league stated that it would plan to pursue a spring season, as this is what many of its counterparts did. With the recent spike on college campuses and just in general, there has been more doubt about if D2 schools will be able to even successfully complete a spring season. We must do everything in our power to deliver our student-athletes a “meaningful spring sports season”, as we had promised in the memo sent out back in late July. The only way to do this is by learning from other conferences mistakes, and also what they did correctly.

Methods

The information for this report will be gathered by conducting interviews with commissioners of other collegiate athletic conferences, as well as via reports that have been published and data that has been made available to the public. Comparative analysis will be used as it is important to realize the similarities and differences that other schools have faced, and how we could use that experience to provide the best climate for our student-athletes. We will hold meetings and conference calls with the current Athletic Directors at the respective schools in our conference to address their thoughts and concerns. Also, meetings with the student-athletes, coaches, trainers and liaisons will be conducted as we realize that they are the ones on the front lines. They will be asked questions regarding their comfortability, concerns for safety, or just for their thoughts in general. Lastly, we will look into the state-of-the-art sanitizing machines that NFL teams use in their facilities as well as some high-level Division 1 schools. We will look into the financial disparities and see if these measures are fiscally feasible. This research will be conducted over the next month, as a lot of the data necessary to make an informed decision is now available, after pro sports have been playing as well as many college conferences over the past few months. We will also look into the games that have been cancelled/postponed, why, and what could have possibly been done to avoid it. Lastly, I used the insight of two students in our class who responded to my discussion board rough draft, both of which have connections to college athletics and/or the sport management industry.

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Results

The Atlantic Coast Conference is the best to look at comparatively as it is the closest in proximity to the Northeast that has played a full fall college football season, featuring teams like Boston College and Syracuse. The first course of action we ideally would take is creating a Medical Advisory board, which the NE10 conference does not currently have. Back in mid-May, the Atlantic Coast Conference “announced its COVID-19 Medical Advisory Group that includes one representative from each of its 15 institutions. The Medical Advisory Group’s charge is to provide timely updates on the status of, and forecast for, COVID-19 impacts on the higher education community. Its advice will assist with the league’s discussions surrounding return-to-play options. . . . The institutions of the ACC have long been leaders in the medical field and include many of the leading medical experts in the country, which is a tremendous asset for the conference and all its members,” said ACC Commissioner John Swofford. “One of the great things you gain from being in a conference with a culture like ours is the opportunity to share best practices, and the Medical Advisory Group is a great example of that. This group meets weekly and will assist our Presidents and Athletic Directors on the best protocols and procedures for returning to athletics as part of our institutions’ plans.” (ACC, 2020). Although we do not have comparable funding, we still believe some of the measures and protocols they instituted would be feasible for us. The median for a Division 2 football team’s budget is \$7.4 million. The football budget for a Division 1, middle of the pack ACC school, like North Carolina State, is \$90 million. This is over ten times the amount, but I believe that the most important aspects, like player safety should be on par with bigger schools as that should be of the utmost importance, regardless of Division. The discrepancy should be more evident through game-day operations, scholarship money, and other things of that nature. Once the highest standard has been set for public safety, it becomes all the conference's duty to do everything in their power to live up to that standard, regardless of financial limitations. According to Duke University, the ACC updated protocol on November 14th calling for “all team members, and those in close contact with the teams in men's and women's basketball and wrestling, to be tested three times each week on non-consecutive days. One molecular (PCR) test must be administered within three days of the first competition of the week. The visiting team must have results from the test performed within three days prior to the competition before the team travels to the site. A test shall also be administered within 48 hours of the conclusion of a game and may be either a molecular (PCR) or antigen test” (Duke University, 2020). Evidently, the conference realized their testing procedures were not intense enough, allowing numerous outbreaks of the virus in the member athletic programs.

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Aside from sport competition, it is the conference's responsibility to operate in the best interest of its athletes safety. While a main concern is giving the student-athletes the ability to play their sports and represent their schools and family, the procedure after a student-athlete tests positive is equally as important on an individual basis. We have learned that some people are seeing long-term negative health effects as a product of the virus. Although in small numbers, the NCAA and individual conferences could face lawsuit issues if they do not take the necessary steps to promote long-term health after someone has tested positive. The Duke press release discusses these measures, "As previously announced, every student-athlete who tests positive will undergo a cardiac evaluation that includes an electrocardiogram, a troponin test and an echocardiogram before a phased return to exercise" (Duke University, 2020.) This is an important measure not just because it could catch life threatening complications, but also because it shows a genuine concern for the health and well-being of the students-athletes, boosting confidence that they won't be pressured to return prematurely for the sake of winning. This confidence will help boost the comfortability level that these student-athletes have in an already stressful situation. Additionally, the conference updated the in-game operational protocols for basketball games, mandating there be a minimum of 15 feet between the general public and game personnel (players, coaches, referees, score-keeper..etc). This brings about the important topic of having fans at games. After speaking with many student-athletes from a multitude of NE10 sports, most believe that fans should be allowed and it would be up to families' and friend's personal discretion. Despite this, if having spectators was the difference between being able to compete and not compete at all, they would sacrifice having fans, not ideally.

Emily Holland, of the UNH Chargers Women's Lacrosse Team, stated "Right now, it is hard to imagine a meaningful season." This was as of Sunday, November 22nd. She pointed out discrepancies in revenue stemming from differences in ticket prices for fans to enter games. For D2 schools, a lot of that revenue goes right back into operational costs and still operates at a deficit. D1 schools ticket revenue often covers operational costs and even has left over profit after that, making it more feasible to afford the necessary equipment that would put the student-athletes and coaches in the safest environment. She agrees that a Medical Advisory Board needs to be put in place, even if it is at a smaller scale than a conference like the ACC, which is perfectly fine because the NE10 has much less student-athletes than the ACC. Despite this, she believes that this funding should not cut into the budget of the school itself because "at the end of the day, athletes are students as well." As a senior, she points out that she wants nothing more than a meaningful season. Nonetheless, having to wear masks constantly and only being able to practice in small groups, make it "hard to imagine having a real season in only a few months (Holland, 2020).

Richard Hauser, Sport Management Major at the University of New Haven, is someone who wants to work in the sports industry. He pointed out the discrepancies in budget and how much of this often stems from attendance. At this point in time, most conferences that did play this fall season, did not allow fans into the stadium. For this reason, there won't be any statistics available from this year in relation to revenue and budget. Richard stated, " At the moment with

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how COVID-19 is progressing, I do not believe that there will be a "meaningful" spring sports season for the NE-10. Unless the COVID-19 vaccine is released, then there will be very little chance of having these seasons. However, it may be possible to have a shortened spring sports season without fans and using certain rules that the bigger Division I members in the larger conferences use including the SEC, ACC, and Big 10" (Hauser, 2020). This is becoming more evident every day as the numbers are getting much worse, not better, and have been trending this way for an extended period of time. It is certainly understandable how being a Sport Management student himself, Richard understands the logistics that go into sporting events. Operations are much different logistically in these larger conferences than in the small NE10, both from a game-day and behind-the-scenes standpoint. As a Sport Management major myself, I understand the depth that these classes go into to understanding the logistics of how College Athletic Programs are run. That being said, from some perspectives, it certainly seems unfeasible that a small D2 conference with a fraction of the funding, would be able to emulate what a larger D1 conference did. The only way to make a possibility of this is to look at it at scale, and cut out non-essential functions. Some argue that just because certain larger conferences were able to play, does not mean others should "follow along". It can be argued that it was in a sense, natural selection. The conferences that had the means to play this season did, while other conferences that deem athletics "less essential" more than likely did not. Many look at this year as a time for D2 and D3 to focus on academics, practice and regroup for next season. Another way to look at the situation is that the virus won't be completely "going away" anytime soon, so regardless these protocols will have to be implemented, whether that be spring or next fall. Many believe, instead of rushing, it would likely be wiser to shift the focus to next Fall when things should be more under control. This seems sensible at the Division 2 level but it would have a lasting effect on the athletic department budgets of some Division 1 schools, who have big TV deals and other large promotions.

Recently, we have seen a multitude of games get cancelled across Division 1 College Football. Namely, Ohio State this past weekend, which was the second game they've had cancelled. CBS Sports Senior Writer, Jerry Palm, wrote "No. 2 Ohio State announced late Friday that it had to cancel its game with Illinois on Saturday due to a COVID-19 outbreak of some scale within the program...What we do know is that the Buckeyes have now had two games canceled -- the other was Nov. 14 against Maryland -- and that is the most they can have drop off their schedule and still remain eligible for the Big Ten Championship Game. We also know that the first two Big Ten teams to have a game canceled due to a COVID-19 outbreak on their own squads did not just have one game drop off their schedules but two... The Big Ten rule on conference title eligibility states that a team must play at least six games unless the average number of games played by each team in the league is less than six with that average is rounded to the nearest integer. In that case, a team can qualify if it plays a minimum of two fewer games than that average. Even if Ohio State can qualify for the Big Ten Championship Game, any players who have a confirmed positive test on Saturday or later would not be eligible to play in that game due to COVID-19 protocols that require players who test positive to sit out 21 days...There is no minimum in terms of games that must be played for Ohio State to qualify for

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College Football Playoff consideration. As of now, the CFP Selection Committee has not set any such requirement, and there never has been a rule that a team be a league champion or even play in its league championship game (Palm, 2020). This brings up the related but completely separate issue of competitive advantage. Is it fair that Ohio State may not be able to play enough games to qualify for the championship or playoff, due to the amount of games they've had cancelled. Many argue that this is a product of a lapse in judgement within the organization, which they should be held responsible for. Another point of view is, it's almost inevitable that the virus shows up on a college campus and it doesn't necessarily have to be someone's "fault". I understand both these arguments and find myself somewhere in the middle. Nonetheless, 2020 is ever-evolving and dynamic. Sacrifices must be made in terms of "fairness", if they want to complete the season in a respectable manner. Many even argue, nothing about 2020 has been fair, so "just deal with it". This is the mindset of people who are willing to do whatever it takes to have a season, which is understandable.

Another topic that must be discussed is the unknown long-term damage COVID-19 could cause. Most specifically addressed by the NIH Directors, was the possibility of long-term heart damage. Dr. Francis Collins, of the government sponsored blog, writes "One of the sticking points has been uncertainty about how to monitor the health of student athletes who test positive for SARS-CoV-2, the novel coronavirus that causes COVID-19. As a result, college medical staff don't always know when to tell athletes that they've fully recovered and it's safe to start training again...The lack of evidence owes to two factors. Though it may not seem like it, this terrible coronavirus has been around for less than a year, and that's provided little time to conduct the needed studies with young student athletes. But that's starting to change. An interesting new study in the journal *JAMA Cardiology* provides valuable and rather worrisome early data from COVID-positive student athletes evaluated for an inflammation of the heart called myocarditis, a well-known complication." In a study done by Ohio State University, which featured 26 male and female athletes all who has mild or asymptomatic cases found that, "MRI scans, taken 11-53 days after completion of quarantine, showed four of the student athletes (all males) had swelling and tissue damage to their hearts consistent with myocarditis. Although myocarditis often resolves on its own over time, severe cases can compromise the heart muscle's ability to beat. That can lead to heart failure, abnormal heart rhythms, and even sudden death in competitive athletes with normal heart function (Collins, 2020). Also, 31% of those tested were found to have evidence of a myocardial injury, which was shown by late "gadolinium enhancement". This is an obvious concern as it is immoral and unethical to put student-athletes in a position where they may suffer long-term health effects, over playing a game. Furthermore, it could lead to legal issues in the future if lawsuits are being filed over the school's/conference's negligence. This could lead to insurmountable budget deficits and loss of respect for schools, such as the University of Maryland suffered after a student-athlete died during a football workout on the watch of the training staff.

A truth that not many people want to discuss, is the fact that there is no evidence to support the idea that student-athletes will be any safer if they do not participate in a season. If

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they no longer have games to prepare for, they now have more free time on their hands, less structure, and are more likely to party and not socially distance. Looking at it from this vantage point may cause people to think you're playing "devil's advocate", but it is simply true. Speaking from experience, I was on the football team at UNH this fall, and the lack of a sports season led to people going to the bars more, and allowed ample time to hang out with non-athletes. It could be argued that having a more secure ecosystem with structure is safer for these student-athletes than just telling them to go live a "normal college student life", which they never had. This leads me to believe that it would be more beneficial to have no athletic team activities whatsoever, if they are not playing a true season. It seems that the student-athletes don't have the incentive to be extra cautious, when other non-student athletes are going out, if they don't even have a season to worry about. This in essence allows these student-athletes to act as if they're "regular college students", but at the same time can cause outbreaks on specific teams and throughout the whole athletic department, as we saw. It started as just a few teams with a few players who "may have come in contact", and next thing you know the entire Athletic Department was shut down temporarily.

Conclusion

After conducting comprehensive research, I conclude that the Northeast-10 Conference may possibly be able to feasibly conduct a "meaningful" spring sports season as it promised the student-athletes back in July. This is completely contingent upon if the virus can be contained to an extent by the end of the year. Although there are discrepancies in the budgets of the schools that have been able to successfully compete this fall, I believe cuts can happen in other areas, such as scholarship awardance. The most important thing at this time is that the conference shows diligence in devising a plan that will allow the athletes to compete safely this spring, IF the virus begins to trend negatively. As we've learned all year, it is important to continually adapt and it would be foolish to not learn from the conferences/programs that went forward with competing this fall. As we've seen from other conferences, there may need to be games cancelled, but it would be most beneficial to enter this difficult situation with a, "Hope for the best, plan for the worst" mindset because college athletics is the only motivation and structure for some students. Being that the NE10 will be doing this at a smaller-scale than the conferences currently playing, it should be easier to contain outbreaks and isolate those infected when necessary. The situation should be monitored on a day-to-day basis until a final decision must be made taking into account advice from Government/State Officials, NCAA Officials, and the voices of players/coaches.

Recommendations

As far as recommendations, it would be wise to closely follow the Atlantic Coast Conference's guidelines and procedures, while correcting the flaws to keep positive tests to a minimum. The difficult part would be reworking budgets to make this possible, but one thing to

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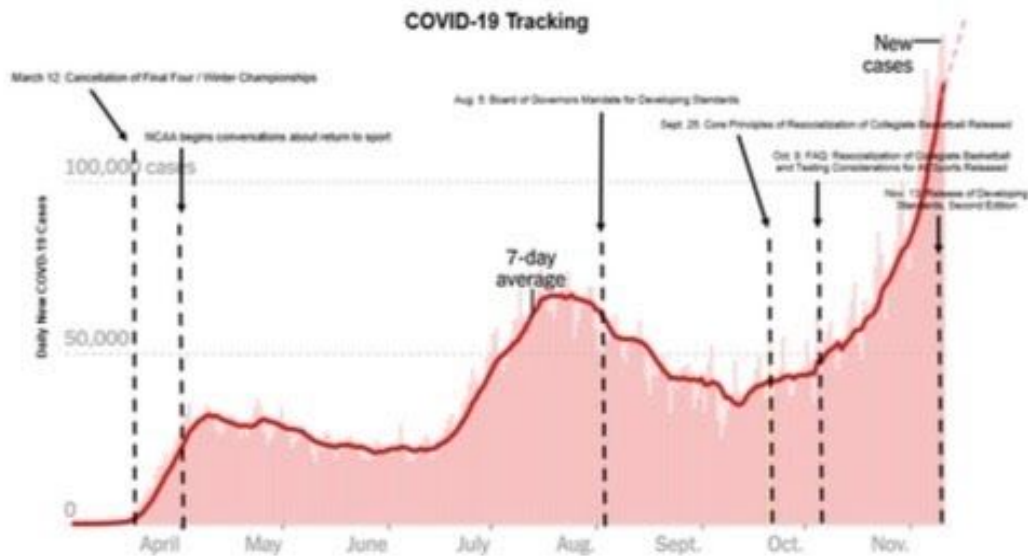
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also realize is that it'd be done at a significantly lower scale. Less student-athletes, less teams, less coaches and other personnel, less fans...etc. This makes it much more feasible for a smaller conference like the NE10 when you see the discrepancies in athletic budgets. We owe it to our student-athletes to do everything in our power to conduct a spring season, as conference officials said they would. This being the case, we also owe our competing student-athletes the most state-of-the-art sanitation devices. Some of these include a chamber you walk through after practice to kill virus germs, face shields to stop the transmission of fluid at practices, as well as socially distanced lockers and showers with built in sanitation devices. As of now, we should still hold our plan and schedule to play in the spring in place, but also be ready to change and adapt wherever necessary. Once these measures have been finalized and universalized throughout the conference, student-athletes will feel as comfortable as possible given the circumstances, allowing the Northeast 10 Conference to feasibly conduct a season, given other circumstances. Despite this being the case, the COVID-19 situation is dynamic and ever evolving. As we have seen recently, there have been spikes for a sustained amount of time and it continues to get worse. Due to this, it has brought back a feeling of uncertainty that we'd be able to conduct a spring season. Under no circumstances will we put our student-athletes, coaches and other athletic personnel in a situation that we deem unsafe. At this point, we should move forward in developing plans and protocols for if we were to have a season. This is also dependent on a timely vaccine release and enough availability so that all college students and faculty who want it, can get it. It would be unfortunate if after a lockdown or wide spread vaccine release in January or February, the virus was contained, and we were unprepared to conduct a season, letting our student-athletes down. I advise that the Board of Directors begin to build contingency plans for if the government and state officials decide it is safe for us to conduct a season. The first step in this would be putting together an official Medical Advisory Board that features representation by student-athletes, coaches, faculty and other staff from all member schools. Of course, if they or we decide it would not be safe to move forward with conducting the spring season, we will shift the focus to next fall's sports season, and the board and other necessary measures will already be in place.

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These documents were published at important points in time with respect to knowledge of COVID-19 and student-athlete practice and competition timelines. This Second Edition document is written at another important time: As the figure below indicates, the United States is now entering a third wave of COVID-19 spread, with some predicting a "dark winter" of rampant COVID-19 societal spread.



Appendices

Decision Matrix

	Cost	Safety	Mental-health
Spring Season with little modifications (10 pts)	2	1	2
Spring Season with major modifications (10 pts)	9	6	5
Shift focus to Fall Season (10pts)	5	7	8

***Note- Mental-health is measured by a balance of student-athletes being able to play their sport, but also in a safe manner with the necessary measures. If student-athletes cannot

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participate in sport it could negatively affect their mental-health, just as if the protocols/ procedures and environment are too overwhelming on a daily basis could have the same effect.

Spring Season with little modifications- 4 Total

Spring Season with major modifications- 20 Total

Shift focus to Fall Season- 20 Total

It would be wise to begin constructing a plan to play the Spring Season with major modifications if it is deemed safe at the new year, and if not the focus can be shifted seamlessly to next Fall's Season.

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