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A college basketball season unlike any other — is it worth it?

The 2020-21 men's college basketball season has been unlike any other in the sport's history since World War II. An indoor sport played by athletes who have no financial stake in a multi-billion-dollar operation has forged ahead with a season, playing games in nearly empty arenas and trying to salvage some semblance of normalcy during a pandemic.

Halfway through the season, it's an experiment that has come with predictable results. Postponements tied to COVID-19 cases have put schedules in perpetual flux, with programs and entire conferences beset by positive tests, postponements and cancellations.

Through it all, a question has periodically emerged, one raised by some of the game's higher-profile figures — is all of this really worth it? And are they at a point where the season should be paused?

"I think we are, but nothing is going to happen," Pitt coach Jeff Capel said on Jan. 14 when asked about a possible pause. "We're going to play. ... If you look, it's dangerous. When I listen to what the experts say, they're telling you not to travel. They're telling you not to do these things. And these aren't professional athletes. That's a completely different thing in my opinion. These aren't ... well, we say they aren't professional athletes."

As one of the ubiquitous faces of college basketball on ESPN, Jay Bilas has been traversing the country the past two months calling games.

Immersed in the sport for the better part of 40 years, he said nothing about the experience has felt comfortable or familiar. The signs of the ongoing pandemic are unavoidable. Arenas that would have been pulsating for a national television broadcast are either empty or hosting a limited number of spectators. Coaches and players are masked and spaced apart on what are customarily crowded sidelines, some of which are surrounded by plexiglass.

At each of his stops Bilas, who played his college ball at Duke, will speak with the teams' coaches, probing for information and generally catching up. This season, many of those conversations have taken a similar detour.

"At one point or another, they'll say 'What are we doing? I don't feel comfortable with this,'" Bilas said. "But they press on because it feels like it's necessary."

The stop-and-start nature of the season has been felt locally.

Such stoppages are one factor among many that makes college basketball a much trickier endeavor than college football, which encountered problems of its own.

Part of it is timing. The season began on Nov. 25, when 185,509 new positive cases were reported in the United States, the fourth-highest daily figure since the pandemic began. Once games started, those case numbers continued to rise, peaking at 314,093 on Jan. 8.

Compounding that problem is that basketball is played indoors, in confined environments with much less ventilation and much higher air recirculation than open-air stadiums. Schools have tried to mitigate those risks by restricting in-person attendance at games. Pitt, for example, doesn't allow more than 500 people total at the 12,508-seat Petersen Events Center. While the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention recommends limiting high-intensity sports when indoors, Dr. Todd Franco of Allegheny Health Network said athlete-to-athlete transmission is rare and that it's more likely to occur in the locker room or in the community than on the court.

Regardless, extra precautions have been instituted at some schools. A Jan. 5 contest between Boston University and Holy Cross saw both teams wearing masks during the game because of a policy at BU requiring face coverings to be worn at all times while in shared spaces on campus.

"I don't think from a risk-benefit ratio it's in an athlete's favor to wear it at this time," Franco said.

Mentally tough

The hurdles over which basketball players and other athletes have jumped just to compete has added more mental strain to what can be a hectic and taxing lifestyle under normal circumstances.

"We asked them to come back, to do their practice, to go through all of their protocols and policies with regards to COVID and to stay away, to stay away from peers on other teams, to stay away from families," said Kristen Mackel, the lead clinical counselor for Pitt athletics' mental health counseling program. "And yet none of the fears go away — the fear that someone they love is going to contract the disease, the fear that someone they love is going to be killed, the fear that they might be the one who accidentally gets infected and then unknowingly infects somebody else. There's a lot of pressure to be everything and be everywhere and do it all perfectly. That really added to what was already there."

Those fears shared by coaches, players and parents were exacerbated in early December, when Florida star Keyontae Johnson collapsed early in his team's game against Florida State. He reportedly was diagnosed with acute myocarditis, an inflammation of the heart that has been linked to COVID-19, which Johnson reportedly tested positive for over the summer.

A top NBA draft prospect and seemingly healthy young athlete ending up in critical condition in a hospital stood as a nightmare scenario for those involved in the sport. It was a situation Pitt athletic director Heather Lyke said her department's medical staff role-played and that shortly after Johnson collapsed, she and others in the department were on a call discussing how they would manage such an episode.

"You don't want to overreact, but you really don't want to underreact," Lyke said.

For some coaches, much of the joy they were once able to find in a lucrative-but-draining profession has been sapped this season.

“Going into these arenas with no fans, there’s no energy. It’s just empty,” Capel said. “Then every day, you’re waiting on test results, seeing who you can have in practice. Can you practice? Who’s going to be available? Who can be available? It’s not a lot of fun.”

Duquesne, which had at least 10 players test positive for the coronavirus in December, went a full month between games. Robert Morris has had eight games canceled. Pitt has had five postponements since Dec. 28 and at one point had played just one game in a 24-day span. Between the three Pittsburgh-area Division I schools, as of last Thursday, 33 of a possible 51 scheduled games have been completed.

“I don’t know if the answer is we should play or we shouldn’t play,” Duquesne coach Keith Dambrot said. “I don’t know if we did the right thing or the wrong thing. It feels kind of funny. It does.”

Big money

So why are they trying to play out a full season? Money.

College basketball’s major conferences have lucrative television deals and, in some cases, their own networks, arrangements built on the promise of carrying live games. While it doesn’t generate the same huge sums as football, men’s basketball brings in money that helps fund the rest of the athletic department. The financial implications of not playing games are staggering, especially as athletic departments across the country have furloughed employees and eliminated positions over the past 10 months.

Nothing factors into that multi-billion-dollar equation more than the NCAA tournament. Last year, after the tournament was canceled, the NCAA distributed \$225 million across its roughly 350 Division I schools, less than half of the \$600 million it was originally set to allocate. Should the tournament not be played again, the fallout could be catastrophic, not just for college basketball, but college athletics as a whole.

The most crucial element to achieving the goal of playing in the tournament is the athletes. As many universities have transformed the way they go about their business, switching to hybrid or online-only instruction models, their athletic departments are still sending out basketball players for games, albeit in dramatically different environments that require them to be regularly tested.

To those like Bilas who have advocated against the amateur model that touts major-revenue-sport athletes as regular students who happen to play sports, the past several months have reinforced the points they’ve been making for years.

“You can’t with a straight face tell me we’ve not treated these players as if they’re essential workers. They are,” he said. “They’re being treated like essential workers. They’re tested every day. They’re being kept in bubbles and they’re being trotted all over the country to play for money. Health-care workers on their own campus don’t have those protections.”

To leaders in college sports, the argument for playing goes beyond dollars and cents.

The mental health of athletes has been an oft-discussed concern, especially as many around the country grapple with feelings of isolation and anxiety. As the argument goes, allowing athletes to continue playing the sports they love and from which they derive part of their identity, has been more beneficial than keeping them idle.

“Student-athletes, if they’ve been working out or playing basketball or swimming or running every day of their life or a great majority of their growing up, and all of a sudden, you go from 120 miles per hour to nothing and you take that away, I think it really rattles their mental state,” Lyke said. “As long as the medical team could tell us we could do things safely and we put protocols in place we would absolutely follow, it’s better to be engaged in something than not, right now.”

But the slew of stoppages and positive tests raised questions about whether alternative paths could have been forged. Bubbles similar to the ones the NBA and NHL successfully implemented last year were suggested, though Lyke said such ideas weren’t “financially prudent or even logistically realistic.” Rick Pitino, whose Iona team hasn’t played since Dec. 23, had repeatedly proposed pushing the start of the season back to March and having the NCAA tournament in May.

In the minds of some administrators, like Lyke and Penn State athletic director Sandy Barbour, the chosen route has worked fine.

“As long as we can do it safely — that means with an acceptable level of risk because nothing’s with zero risk — as long as we can do it safely to give our students the opportunity to train, to compete, to do what it is they love to do while going to school, we’re going to bust our butts to do that,” Barbour said. “So yeah, it’s worth it. Every bit of it.”

With the NCAA tournament’s Selection Sunday six weeks away, the season’s much-anticipated endpoint is getting closer and the numbers look better.

Over the past two weeks, new cases have dipped considerably nationally, from 247,071 on Jan. 15 to 133,913 on Jan. 25. The number of postponed or canceled Division I games per week has decreased, too, going from 71 from Jan. 1-7 to 57 from Jan. 22-28.

But there’s some uncertainty among those in the sport about whether languishing teams will finish their seasons, similar to college football programs that chose to decline bowl invitations.

For those who make it to the tournament, the NCAA is taking strict measures to ensure it can be played with few interruptions, if any. The entirety of the 68-team competition is taking place within a 70-mile radius of Indianapolis, the home of the NCAA’s headquarters.

Perhaps then, at the end of the Final Four when the confetti falls on the champions and “One Shining Moment” plays over the loudspeakers, the question of whether the juice was worth the squeeze will be answered.

“I’m not saying it’s wrong, but the public is not asking those questions. They’re just watching the games,” Bilas said. “When Hollywood puts a movie out, I don’t ask how they made it. I watch it. But we haven’t had that national discussion. Not ‘Can we play?’ Of course, we can. We’re showing that we can. But should we play in the middle of all this? What about all the long-term health and safety concerns? There’s nobody that can tell us the health issues from COVID what the long-term implications are. We don’t know.”