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Opinion: Here's how college basketball should play this season during COVID-19

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The fall semester has not yet begun, and debates on college football are in full gear. The Big Ten and the Pac-12 have already delayed (interpreted as canceled) play until the spring, with the Atlantic Coast Conference, Big 12 and Southeastern Conference still pondering their position but planning to start the season. Not far behind is college basketball, which ushered in the COVID-19 era with the cancellation of March Madness.

Teams are hungry to get back onto the court, and all indicators suggest that they can.

The lesson learned from Major League Baseball is that infections can and will occur. The bigger issue is how well they can be contained. Several college football teams like Clemson and LSU saw initial spikes of infections, and then with appropriate procedures, and uniform cooperation of all players and coaching staff, the number of new cases dropped.

This demonstrates that if everyone, players and coaching staff, diligently follow the necessary steps to avoid infections, get tested every 2-3 days, and are forthright if exposed, teams can stay intact, and, ideally, virus free. However, if there are any lapses, even just one person, a well thought through plan can quickly unravel.

College basketball has the luxury of observing the start of several professional leagues in front of them. Data gained during this period will be invaluable to demonstrate that keeping entire teams infection-free is achievable and reasonable to expect. At the same time, infections are waiting to occur if anyone lets down their guard and takes unnecessary risks that expose them.

The health risk to players is minimal. A large proportion of infected young people are either asymptomatic or show mild symptoms. Concerns about myocarditis can be resolved by screening players who have recovered from COVID-19, similar to how teams would screen any player with any underlying health condition.

The real risk is for older coaches and those with underlying health conditions that predispose them to poor outcomes with COVID-19. In the five power conferences (Big Ten, Big 12, Pac-12, Atlantic Coast Conference and Southeastern Conference), there are more than 40 men's team and women's team coaches over 55 years of age, with 12 of them over 65 years old. This does not include others on the coaching staffs and support personnel.

Players cannot wear masks during games or in practice, while coaches can as necessary. This means that the best way to keep teams playing is to keep everyone associated with the team from becoming infected. This will require vigilance, discipline and personal sacrifices to remain virus free. Everyone is motivated, since one infection can mean the end of a season.

One advantage that basketball teams have over football teams is the smaller size of their bubble. Frequent testing, typically every 2-3 days, will overcome problems with false negatives, as well as detect asymptomatic or presymptomatic infections. Games will likely need to be played with few or no spectators, as we are seeing with professional baseball, basketball and hockey.

Opponents should be chosen as teams that maintain the same level of vigilance. Virus transmission can occur during games only if an infected player participates, so keeping such player off the court is critical. Instead of reducing the number of games, limiting games only with teams who commit to the same level of caution is the key to reduce risk during games.

We cannot keep delaying and putting off activities that can be adapted to a COVID-19 world. College basketball is poised to adjust. There will be unexpected infections, leading to some players forced to sit out games, or even games canceled.

However, a season with canceled games is better than no season at all. This is the new environment for team sports like college basketball. Shifting expectations from winning championships to participation and safety for all is a leap forward during these challenging times. The march to March Madness should begin now.

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