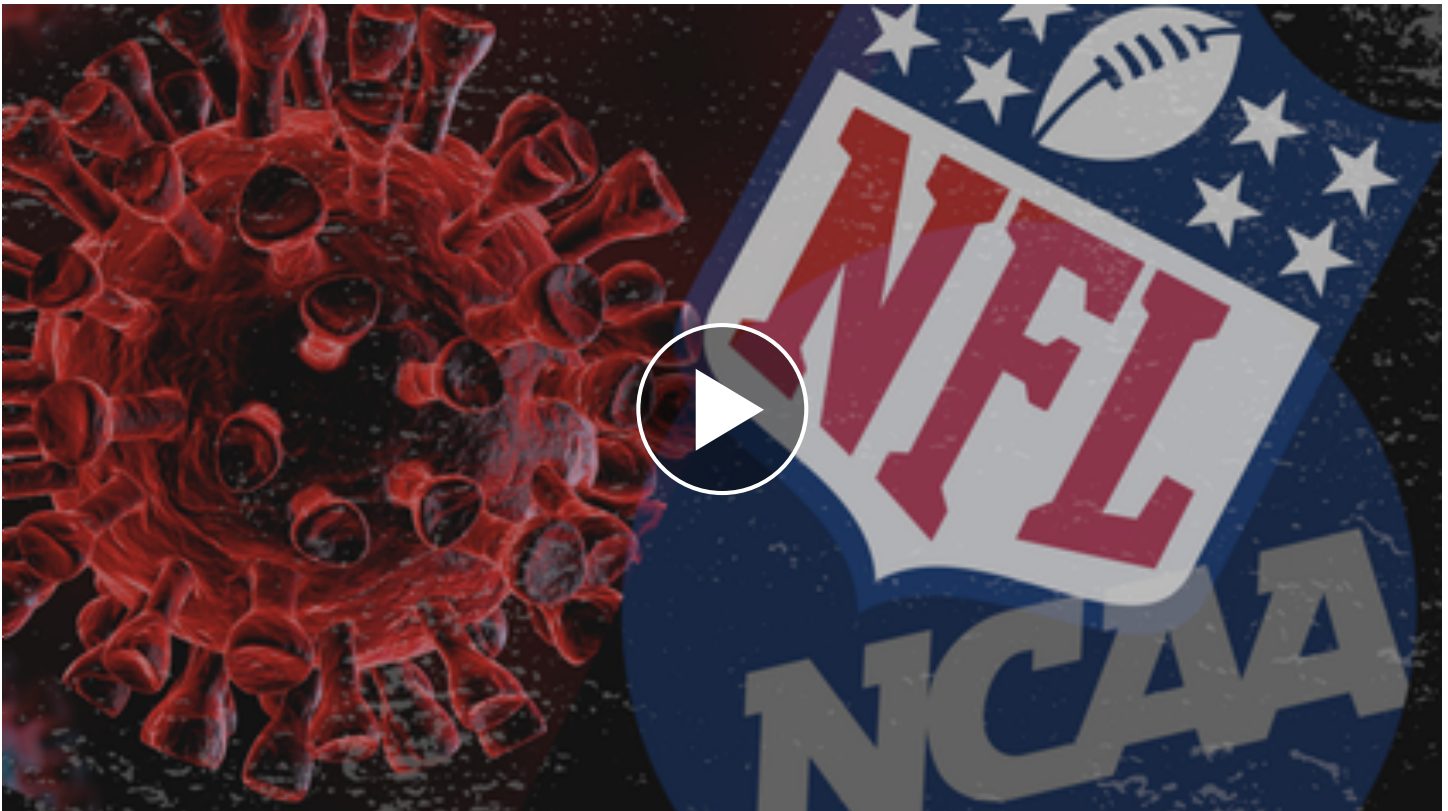




Playing college football in the spring might sound easy but plenty of hurdles and questions exist

PAUL MYERBERG | USA TODAY | 16 hours ago



SportsPulse: Between the huddles and collisions there's no escaping the fact that football is a sport that can't avoid close contact. We discuss if the sport is even feasible during a pandemic.

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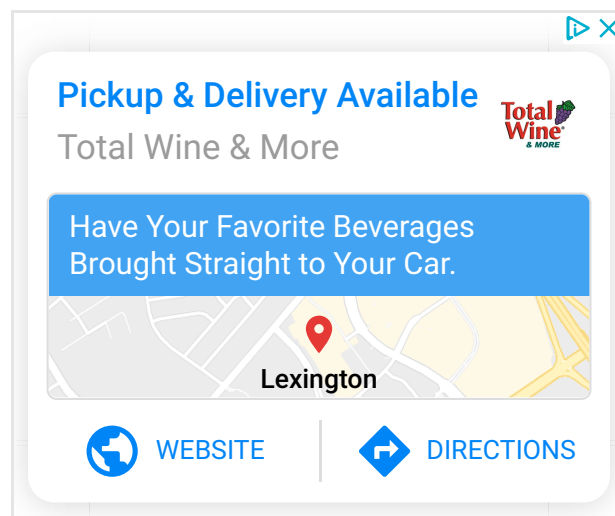
All this week, USA TODAY Sports will examine the possibility of a fall without football, and what that would mean in a country where the sport is king.



During an education roundtable last week with Vice President Mike Pence and other White House officials, LSU coach Ed Orgeron called football “the lifeblood of our country, in my opinion,” adding that as a country, “we need football.”

“I don't think we can take this away from these players, take this away from our state and our country,” Orgeron said. “It gets everything going, it gets the economy going, the economy of Baton Rouge, the economy of the state of Louisiana.”

This football-or-bust mindset is shared across the Bowl Subdivision, as conferences embrace optimism in the face of the bleak landscape for sports posed by the coronavirus.



The same leagues have also embraced their options. One is to eliminate all non-

conference games. Another is to play fewer games altogether. And given what's at stake — from a financial perspective, over \$4 billion in fiscal-year revenue for public schools in the Power Five alone — a third alternative to ensure that football exists in some fashion remains under consideration: moving the sport to the spring.

At the most basic level, the unconventional plan has traction. The stadiums and facilities used by the FBS generally won't be occupied during the spring. After being separated this past spring, teams would have more than enough time to get physically ready to compete with the start of the second semester. In terms of film study, practice and walkthroughs, coaches and players could treat the fall as an extended offseason. In a vacuum, the concept is simple: It's football, just in the spring.

Nevertheless, there are hurdles that must be addressed before the FBS can change seasons, including issues related to health and wellness, recruiting and scheduling. Foremost is the presence of a vaccine that can prevent transmission of the coronavirus during team activities and competition.

Given the uncertainty around college football's next step, several athletics directors and coaches contacted by USA TODAY Sports for this story declined to comment or suggested speaking directly with conference commissioners.



When would the year begin and end?

The spring season would likely be tabled until February, after the end of the NFL playoffs and Super Bowl, to avoid competition with a sport that dominates the first

month of the calendar. A slight delay avoids that head-to-head conflict.

Under a plan that features 12 regular-season games, conference championships and then bowl season, culminating in the College Football Playoff, a season that begins in February could end as late as June. Playing only conference games might allow the season to end in May.

LSU and coach Ed Orgeron are not sure when they can start defense of their national title.

JASON GETZ, JASON GETZ-USA TODAY SPORTS

Every potential roadblock to spring football stems from this schedule. Mapping out games from February through May or June is easy; the resulting fallout may have a rippling impact on the 2021 season and beyond.

What about player safety?

While a vaccine could eliminate coronavirus-related concerns, springtime football would create another issue related to player safety: From a health perspective, is it possible to play two seasons within a calendar year?



Under normal circumstances, teams go eight or nine months between the end of one season and the start of another. If held until the end of May, a spring season would trim the gap between games to only three months and allow for as few as two months of recovery time before teams returned for preseason practices.

“When you play 2,000 competitive reps, your body is not ready for contact in three months or two months,” former Ohio State coach and current Fox Sports analyst Urban Meyer said earlier this month. “It’s not. I would not put those players in harm’s way.”

Will college stars opt out?

Players already pegged for the first round of the NFL draft will be forced to weigh the benefits of playing in the spring against the potential costs. One is injury, which would be an issue even under traditional circumstances but is of even greater concern given that an injury suffered in early April, for example, might cost a player all or a part of his rookie season — in turn leading to a plummet on NFL draft boards.

Even without injury, scheduling again comes into play. According to the league's 2020 schedule, NFL teams begin a "Rookie Transition Program" in late June and then begin preseason workouts with rookies "seven days prior to the club’s earliest permissible mandatory reporting date for veteran players," typically by the middle of July.



A season that ends in May or June wouldn't conflict with the NFL schedule. It might, however, force one or more of college football's biggest stars to ask whether playing in a potentially condensed spring is worth the impact it would have on the start of their NFL careers.

What to do with early enrollees?

The NCAA will have to rule on the eligibility of those early enrollees who join programs in the spring to get a head start on their freshman seasons. Would true freshmen on campuses be allowed to compete in a spring season? If so, would that season count against their eligibility clocks?

If allowed to be eligible, these recruits suddenly become an even higher priority for programs who can paper over roster holes with immediate additions. Given that a few states have already decided to cancel the fall season for all sports, including California, the number of high-profile recruits who attempt to enroll early is bound to increase compared to the recent past.

What about the recruiting calendar?

For most prospects, the inability to play a traditional senior season may profoundly impact the recruiting process. Not being able to play in the fall will also impact how programs recruit for the current signing class, since coaches will have fewer data points on which to base their evaluations.



That there are issues on both sides — for recruits and for coaches — could lead to changes to the recruiting calendar, and specifically to the second national signing day. The first, in December, could still exist for those enrolling early. Traditionally held in February, the second might need to be pushed back to the late spring or early summer.

Can there be a traditional coaching cycle?

Coaches on the hot seat heading into the fall will get a springtime reprieve, with ramifications that could drift into the following season.

Typically, programs engage in a firing and hiring spree beginning in late November or early December, with as many as two dozen teams making coaching changes before the end of the postseason. With no season this fall, that cycle would be pushed back to May or June.

With another season looming just months away, is it possible — or even beneficial for an individual program — to make a coaching change without giving the new staff the typical amount of time needed to overhaul and install new schemes? At any rate, many programs might not have the wherewithal to make a coaching change given the unsteady state of finances in college athletics.



Given the combination of a shortened gap between seasons and the heavy burden of payouts and buyouts, a spring season may force coaches and schools to stay together for another year.

Would weather be a concern?

While some states may see dips in temperature and snowy conditions in November, most of a traditional college football season is played under near-perfect conditions – even if some regions can be excessively hot in August and September.

Football is played in all weather conditions outside of lightning. And even if a good portion of the country would play in frigid conditions, weather's impact on games wouldn't dissuade a move toward the spring.

Nonetheless, playing in the second semester of the academic year would make weather a deeper factor than during a traditional season.



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