

Transcription for

THE KEY WITH INSIDE HIGHER ED

EP. 10: COLLEGE ATHLETICS AND A 'WEIRD FALL'

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THE KEY INSIDE HIGHER ED

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VOICE: This episode is sponsored by the ECMC Foundation, which supports building a postsecondary education system that works for all learners through its grant making focus areas of college success and career readiness.

PAUL FAIN: Hello, and welcome to another episode of The Key with IHE. I'm Paul Fain, a news editor at Inside Higher Ed and the podcast host. This show is focused on the pandemic and the recession and all the uncertainty this is causing for college students. In addition to those huge stories, we, like everyone else, focus on the unrest and police brutality and racism. This week we talk about all three of the issues in an episode about college athletics.

For the discussion, I was joined by Welch Suggs, an associate professor of journalism at the University of Georgia. Suggs is a former journalist who covered college sports for the Chronicle of Higher Education. He also worked as a university administrator and as an associate director for the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics. Big-time college football is starting up soon, really, right now, and Suggs and I talked about what that means amid the current backdrop.

WELCH SUGGS: We have football players who are coming back to campus right now, getting ready to start workouts next week, when our campus, even our administrators and essential workers aren't coming back until June 15th. And so it does maybe raise some questions about the value we're placing on the health of lot of those athletes. And I think that's something that colleges and athletic directors and coaches need to have transparent about, about what they're doing, and how they're evaluating and mitigating risk for that population.

PAUL FAIN: We also talked about the growing number of team cuts by cash-strapped colleges that we're seeing around the country, as well as efforts to diversity non-revenue athletics programs. Let's get right into it.

All righty, I'm speaking with Welch Suggs. Good to see you virtually.

WELCH SUGGS: Likewise, Paul. How are you doing?

PAUL FAIN: I'm doing all right. How about yourself.

WELCH SUGGS: Doing okay, given these times.

PAUL FAIN: Yes indeed. So speaking of the times we live in, there's quite of bit of uncertainty in higher education. We had a Senate hearing yesterday about reopening campuses, but we're also past Memorial Day, and for a lot of people, college football's right around the corner. And that is up in the air right now, it appears. Is that your general read?

WELCH SUGGS: I still think there are so many question marks out there, Paul. I can remember back in the mid-90s when we thought that BCS as a big deal and an existential question for college athletics. And that is nothing compared to what we're going through now. And there are still so many more question marks. We're starting to see players trickle back to campus. With that, we're seeing a few campuses where football players are testing positive for COVID-19, and so that's going to create a lot of fits and starts for teams trying to come back. And it's just a real question about whether we're going to be able to make it back, either with full teams as of labor day, or with full stands, and there's a lot of debate going on about that right now. So yes, I think that there's still more question marks than there are periods at this point. And given that we're what, two and half months out from the start of season,

that seems a little concerning.

PAUL FAIN: Yes, indeed. And you know, our coverage at Inside Higher Ed has increasingly to some extent convinced me some institutions may have the testing capacity to do what experts think is necessary to resume in-person instruction. You know, I didn't think that three weeks ago, but it's starting to seem like there's some consensus there. But, you know, you mentioned that some players have already tested positive. I would assume it's very expensive, very difficult for a college football program to start right now where we are in the pandemic. And when you get a positive test, I would image that that throws everything in disarray. Correct?

WELCH SUGGS: It does. The NCA released guidelines for coming back to campuses and recommending what we've all heard that you should do, is to make sure that you quarantine for 14 days. If you're traveling from someplace else, to quarantine from some time before you go into a building. But players are all over the place. There's one of Oklahoma's state players went to protest this week, as so many have, and tested positive after that. It will say that there's obviously a divide between the haves and have-nots. And I'm at the University of Georgia, where our program has more money than God. And so we also have a very good sports medicine staff. So they probably have a good process in place for testing everybody. But that's not going to be the same at all 2500 colleges that have some kind of athletics this fall. So I think people are still very much on edge about what's going to happen next.

PAUL FAIN: I'm glad you brought up the divide there. There's a lot riding on big-time college football, including big TV deals and lots of financial incentives. But it seems to me that we are seeing some slightly different messages from different programs right now about how optimistic they are for a fall season. The SCC pretty early followed the NCAA's voluntary workout guidelines. I don't think we've seen anything from the Big Ten yet. Are you potentially thinking that we might have some major variability, even among those big conferences?

WELCH SUGGS: I think it's possible just the same way we've seen variability among states. And, unfortunately, a lot of that breaks down along political lines. But I am seeing some governors starting to make some proclamations. I know yesterday the governor of Texas said that stadiums could reopen this fall at 50 percent capacity. I'm not sure if he set a date on that, but that could apply to both professional and college sports. Just today the Athletic quoted my president at the University of Georgia, Jere Morehead, as saying he was hoping for full stadiums this summer, but he was waiting for the public health experts to make a final decision. But I think this is going to break down in the way that we have seen that different parts of the country respond to this differently. It wouldn't surprise me at all if we see different conferences, different parts of the country respond to this in different ways when it comes

to college sports.

PAUL FAIN: You know, it's hard to talk anything these days with talking about THE story, the widespread unrest around police killings and racism. You know, when you think about the liability, the responsibility of institutions to preserve the health of their students, that goes for football players too. And it feels like the stakes are pretty high right now.

WELCH SUGGS: It does. And it makes me, I guess, a little squeamish, I guess, as a very privileged white male faculty member, when we have football players who are coming back to campus right now, getting ready to start workouts next week, when our campus, even our administrators and essential workers aren't coming back until June 15th. And so it does make we raise some questions about the value we're placing on the health of a lot of those athletes. And I think that that's something that colleges and athletic directors, and coaches need to be very transparent about what they're doing and how they're evaluating and mitigating risk for that population. We already know that African Americans are already at a higher risk for more severe cases of the coronavirus, based on what we've seen so far. So this does have me worried about what's going to happen as we progress through the summer.

PAUL FAIN: Again, an institution like Georgia, others in the Big Power Five, probably best able from a capacity, financial, just the health centers that they have, the experts they have working with them, to do a better job than those that don't have those sort of resources. And in the last few weeks, we've seen quite a few athletics programs fold, you know, cutting teams, not football yet I don't believe, maybe one actually. But generally, you're seeing more the Olympic sports at a couple of institutions. I mean, how widespread is that and how worried are you about closures becoming pretty broad?

WELCH SUGGS: Well, I mean, it seems like, Paul, we've got sort of three massive forces that are all sort of bearing down on education and society, frankly, in different ways. But you've got the COVID-19 pandemic and public health concerns going on there. You have got the budget situation that many colleges are going to be facing, both in terms of pressure on state budgets as well as on tuition dollars, and whether people are coming back to campus. And then, of course, in the last week, we've seen the huge pressure to think about race relations and disparate policing and other ways in which African Americans have been disadvantaged has been brought into such sharp relief. And so we're all struggling and muddling through this.

And so with sports and sport cuts I feel like all of those issues are kind of coming in together and being shaped in different way. There's been a bit of an outcry because Brown University opted to drop its

track team, men's track team, among 11 different programs, which is a pretty significant change even for an ivy league program that has, you know, dozens of athletic programs. And concerns about racial diversity raised there. I've been seeing an interesting conversation on Twitter going on around that.

But yes, golf teams, tennis teams, swim programs, all of these have been on the chopping blocks at different points over time. I can think back to the 1980s, in early 80s when colleges faced the recession of those days, and that led to a bunch of sport cuts. And that was even before Title IX was in force. And so I think you're naturally going to see a lot of those sports cut, which always kind of gets stuck in my craw a little bit, because those are athletes that are there ostensibly for the reasons we athletics in higher ed anyway, right? They're there for the love of the game, to compete, and learn that lessons that sport teaches.

Football and men's basketball, the revenue sports generally aren't touched even when some of their practice seem a little dubious, like staying in hotels the night before home games and things like that. And so I think that that is going to be a big factor, especially for those schools that are trying to play at the highest level, but don't have access to the 9000-seat stadiums and the massive TV deals that the Big 10, the PAC-12, ACC, the SCC all have.

PAUL FAIN: We're going to take a quick break now. Please stick with us. We've got more to come.

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You know, I want to go back to the Brown decision. Brown's found itself in the news a lot these days with the pandemic. You know, when Appalachian State or I think it was ECU cut a few sports, they cited the state budget, the severe revenue budget picture they face right now. Can you talk a little bit about what went into Brown's decision and whether that is indicative of what others may follow?

WELCH SUGGS: I will tell you I don't have any inside information there, but what it appears is the way Brown is spinning it as focusing its resources on a smaller number of sports in which they can be competitive. So, for example, skiing is another sport that they got rid of, and I'm perfectly willing to believe you can ski very well in Providence during the winter.

Having said that, you know, cutting track seems a little harder to explain and to get at, because it's the cheapest sport, and, you know, in the interest of full disclosure, I was Division 3 track athlete, so the sport has a special place in my heart. But it did seem like an odd choice among those. And so, you know, within the Ivies, I'm sure they have the resources to continue, and I would love to have a conversation with the AD about how they reached those decisions, and why is it they think they're going to be more competitive in the sports that they chose moving forward. But given that they got rid of several core sports that all the other Ivy League schools have, it did seem like a very strange decision.

PAUL FAIN: Apologies for asking such broad questions. It seems inescapable in these days. But, you know, it feels like a long time ago now, college athletics to some extent in an unflattering light around the Varsity Blues scandal. We know that there's quite a bit of recruiting of students to participate in sports who can pay full freight, may in some cases be sought after because of that, let's put it that way. Given all that's going on, from the pandemic to the unrest over racism in society, do you see potentially big shifts in how colleges do those sort of athletics programs, and are there any kind of best practices out there that you might point to where institutions have diversified their teams in ways that others should look at?

WELCH SUGGS: So to sort of break those issues apart a little bit, you know it's important to notice or to note that with something like the Varsity Blues scandal, that's going to affect only that handful of schools that are highly, highly, highly selective, where those admission slots are so valued because they're accepting 4 percent, 5 percent, 10 percent of their applicants. Those schools, as particularly the Ivies and the New England Small College Athletic Conference, the Williamses and the Amhersts, and so on and so forth, have very specific systems set up to sort of evaluate athletes for admission. So that process, you know, involves basically allowing each team to have a certain number of tips.

Could that change? It's possible. I mean, I think probably what a lot of colleges are looking at is what might be coming down the road with a drop-off in the overall enrollment population, the fact that that's supposed to crater in the next few years, and especially for white students. And so I think that creates a really interesting opportunity for schools to diversify. I think some colleges are... When we were talking before you brought up the example of Amherst and the story in the Times about how they've been trying to make their athletic program as diverse as the rest of the student body.

I will say that there are a lot of... There's a very diverse population, let's just say that, coming out of the state of Georgia, so I would recommend people come, you know, give a second look to some of the student athletes that are at high schools around here.

But I think it does offer us a chance to take a step back and say, okay, what is the value of athletics? What does participating in sports for two or three or four years mean for a student athlete? How can we evaluate the quality of experience for an athlete at Agnes Scott College in Atlanta versus one from, say, Denison University in Ohio, or so on and so forth. How can we think about making those opportunities as good as they can possibly be?

And for some schools that may mean having to cut back on rosters or having to cut back on sports when they can't offer that same quality of opportunity, where you can learn the things that sport really does teach, you know, team work and perseverance, and leadership, and being willing to sacrifice yourself, and being working as part of the team. You know, those are really important life lessons, I think all coaches and most athletes would tell you that that's a big part of participating in sports. It's an incredible educational experience, but we don't ever evaluate that or talk about how to quantify or qualify those experiences so we can evaluate them, one versus another. And I think that's the great opportunity for schools as we head into every more uncertainty.

PAUL FAIN: All really good points, and I feel like the pandemic is obviously something that nobody wanted to live through, but it does give us a chance to take a step back. It does seem to expose the true nature of everything in a lot of ways that we haven't actually had access to. So it will be interesting to see if college athletics does have that reflection on its true purpose.

Let's go back to the big money sports for a minute. Obviously, as you pointed out earlier, it is show time for college football. Things are going to have to start happening really soon one way or another. How long before you think we have some sense of what the fall will bring in terms of watching football on Saturdays?

WELCH SUGGS: I think there's going to have to be some sort of main decision made by July 1, just in order to have people on campus be able to practice to get ready to play, just from a safety standpoint as much as anything.

As you know, Paul, college sports, whatever sport you're doing, it's a year-round thing. I have volleyball players in my classes this spring who are already doing their workouts and having to schedule classes around workouts, even though it's a fall sport. So I think that we're going to have to know something about that and probably shortly thereafter know something about how stadiums are going to be set up.

And then still, I think there are a lot of outstanding questions. Are colleges going to be willing to bring in teams, you know, the cannon fodder games as they're sometimes called, the nonconference games where you pay a much smaller college a lot of money to come play in your big stadium so you can make this money. Are you going to be willing to bring someone, say, from University of Texas El Paso or the University of Massachusetts, or someplace out of your region to come to your stadium when you don't know what their propensity for bringing fans or bringing the virus might be? That's one thing I've heard out the PAC-12 is they may come with a rule saying that Olympic sports can't travel more than 400 miles from their home campus, so basically it's limited to bus trips and things like that. So I think all those things are going to need to be decided so that schedules can be confirmed pretty quickly.

And then, of course, from a fan standpoint, A, what is the regular season and the playoff going to look like? And B, what are stadiums going to look like.

PAUL FAIN: You know, it's just a logistical nightmare. As you describe this, I can't even... It's like every point you make opens up 20 new questions, and so I don't envy anyone trying to figure out what to do with college athletics right now.

You know, I was reading about the NBA looking at playing in one area, having 22 teams, really, just a radically different half-season. Is it possible that we might see something really radically different at this point, where conferences just might play each other? Or, you know... You mentioned the variables of teams traveling, teams that have different protocols. It seems like we might have to go to something where it would be a more controlled situation. I know I promised I wouldn't ask to speculate. Are radical solutions a possibility at this point?

WELCH SUGGS: So yes, they're certainly a possibility. I don't have enough inside information about what's actually being talked about, but the couple of things that I have heard kicked around are, yes, basically eliminating nonconference games, even with football in some cases. There is some contingency planning going on for a game that would involve, I think, UCLA and Texas A&M, and what that might look like if that got called off in some way, shape, or form.

The other thing I've heard kicked around for non-revenue sports is having that kind of bubble exactly like you described, like the NBA is talking about doing, you know, in Orlando, where you might bring, all the, say, volleyball teams in a conference together in round-robin tournaments over a couple of

weekends or something like that. So I think you could see things happen like that.

I think we definitely can assume that the fall season is going to be very, very weird, and, then, of course, all bets are off because so many colleges have been talking about ending semesters at Thanksgiving or something like that. Is that going to start interfering with winter sports, college changes to the basketball schedule, knowing that the end of basketball was wiped out last year because of this anyways.

PAUL FAIN: You know, I think the prediction of a very weird fall is a prediction we can all get behind. Well, thanks so much for sharing your expertise on this, on such difficult questions in a difficult time. I really appreciate it.

WELCH SUGGS: Absolutely. It's great to be with you, Paul.

PAUL FAIN: And for our listeners, it's good to speak to a former colleague. Welch and I worked at the Chronicle of Higher Education back in the day as well.

WELCH SUGGS: Back in the day...

PAUL FAIN: Well, good to see you. Thanks again.

WELCH SUGGS: All right, thank you.

PAUL FAIN: That's it for another episode of The Key. Thanks for listening. I'll be back next week. Right now, I'm coming at you from my tool shed in my backyard. It's hard to say where I'll be next week, but I will have an episode and I hope you'll join me. Thanks again.

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