

Texas Sports and the COVID-19 Pandemic

[1229 words]

The COVID-19 pandemic, caused by the SARS-CoV-2 coronavirus, had a major impact on sports in Texas in 2020 and 2021. However, Texas, under the leadership of Republican Governor Greg Abbott, maintained looser pandemic-related restrictions on sports, schools, and other public gatherings—and it lifted those restrictions sooner—compared with most other states.

Many public health experts disagreed with Governor Abbott’s policies of generally loose restrictions, maintaining that those policies would contribute to the worsening of the pandemic. [1] Abbott defended his efforts to “reopen Texas,” citing the importance of school activities to the social and emotional health of students, as well as the economic and social importance of sports and other businesses. He also argued that the state maintained sufficient safety protocols to keep the spread of the virus under control. [2]

Pandemic-Related Closings

As the pandemic spread in early 2020, most professional, amateur, and school sports throughout the United States (and in many other countries) were shut down, closed to in-person spectators, or otherwise altered to comply with restrictions designed to slow the spread of the virus. In Texas, as in other states, most school sports were shut down with the schools themselves in early 2020. [3] If school games were played, no fans were allowed. [4] For the first time ever, the start of the high school football season was delayed during the fall of 2020. [5] Many professional sports, including baseball and football, played shortened preseasons and seasons in 2020 throughout the nation, including in Texas, with few or no fans allowed. [6]

Reopenings Begin

Texas sports were restarted and reopened to fans ahead of sports in most other states. Some fans began to be allowed into sporting events, from high school through professional, in the summer of 2020. [7]

By late 2020 to early 2021, most high school sports, even those played indoors, were being played in Texas. [3] To mitigate risks, students wore face masks while sitting on the bench or not participating in the game, they used hand sanitizer, and the playing ball was frequently sanitized. [3, 8] Student athletes were tested multiple times each week for the virus. [9] Spectators, if allowed to attend the game, were required to wear masks. [3] As high school football was being played throughout Texas in January 2021 (when still not played in many other states), Brandon Smith, coach of the Prosper High School team, reflected the famous Texas love of the game when he said, “It’s Friday night in Texas. It’s what we do.” [8]

Fan attendance at sporting events generally remained limited from late 2020 to early 2021. The state initially limited attendance at university games for football, basketball, and other sports in 2020 to 25% capacity, which was later raised to 50%. [4, 9] Despite the 50% maximum capacity, most universities chose to keep the 25% limit through early 2021. [4, 10]

Moves to Texas

In late 2020, some university teams from other states played their home games in Texas to escape their own states' restrictions that continued to ban all "nonessential businesses." [9] Such teams included the University of New Mexico men's and women's basketball teams.

In February 2021, the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) announced that all games of the current season's women's Division I national tournament would be held in Texas—in San Antonio, Austin, and San Marcos. [11] The games had originally been scheduled for San Antonio; Austin; Albany, New York; Cincinnati, Ohio; and Spokane, Washington. The latter three cities maintained tougher restrictions on sports than those in Texas. The consolidation of the tournament in the San Antonio area made it easy to manage the event in terms of hotel accommodations and other considerations related to safety. In the 2020 season, the NCAA had cancelled both the women's and the men's tournaments because of the pandemic. All of the 2021 men's games were scheduled for Indiana, which also had looser restrictions than most other states.

The USA Olympic wrestling team announced in February 2021 that it would relocate its team trials to Texas. The usual location was in Pennsylvania, where pandemic restrictions prevented the trials. [12]

"Reopen Texas 100%"

In March 2021, Governor Abbott issued a number of executive orders to reopen businesses and other activities back to normal levels in Texas. [2, 4, 13] He said "it's time to reopen Texas 100%," [4] added that this move was possible because of "advancements of vaccines and antibody therapeutic drugs." [13] Abbott announced that businesses in the state could operate at full capacity with "no COVID-19-related operating limits." [2, 7] His orders ended the mask-wearing mandate and the crowd capacity limits at sporting events. [14]

Despite Abbott's orders, individual leagues and teams could each set their own policies. For example, Mark Cuban, owner of the Dallas Mavericks National Basketball Association franchise, said that the team's mask mandate and other COVID-related safety protocols would remain in place. [4]

On April 5, 2021, the season home opener for the Texas Rangers Major League Baseball team had a full-capacity crowd at the new 40,518-seat Globe Life Field in Arlington, Texas. It was the largest crowd at any sporting event in the United States since the start of the pandemic. [7, 14] The stadium had opened in 2020, but no fans had been allowed at the regular-season games. [7] The 2020 National League Championship Series and the World Series had both been played there, but at only 28% capacity. [7] For the 2021 opening day, fans were encouraged to wear masks at their seats and to practice social distancing at concession stands and on concourses. Among the fans in attendance was former President George W. Bush, who had once been an owner of the Rangers. [14]

Allowing the sell-out crowd at the Rangers game was criticized by some public health authorities and Democrat politicians, including President Joe Biden, who said that it was “not responsible.” [15] Texas officials responded by pointing out that the number of COVID-19 infections was declining in Texas, while numbers were still increasing in much of rest of the country. [14] They argued that these figures showed that the pandemic policies in Texas were working.

Evaluation of Impact

As of June 2021, about 40% of Texans had been fully vaccinated against the coronavirus that causes COVID-19. [16] The vaccines allowed the public to advance further to normal conditions regarding sports and other public events. As 2021 progressed, an increasing number of universities allowed full-capacity crowds at sporting events. [10]

While Texas sports returned to normal in 2021, many teams evaluated the financial impact of the pandemic. In May 2021, Ross Bjork, athletic director at Texas A&M University, announced that the university’s athletics programs had lost \$48 million as a result of the pandemic-related restrictions. [17, 18] He added, however, that the university and its Aggies were helped by financial contributions from the 12th Man Foundation, the athletic department’s fundraising organization. [18]

Officials at the University of Texas had previously announced that revenue from its athletics programs had declined more than \$23 million in the 2019-2020 fiscal year, compared with 2018-2019. [19] The school’s Longhorns still made a profit, but not as much as they do in normal years. The university expected to have a much more profitable 2021 for its athletics department, especially with the unveiling of a stadium expansion and renovation that included additional premium seating and amenities. [19]

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