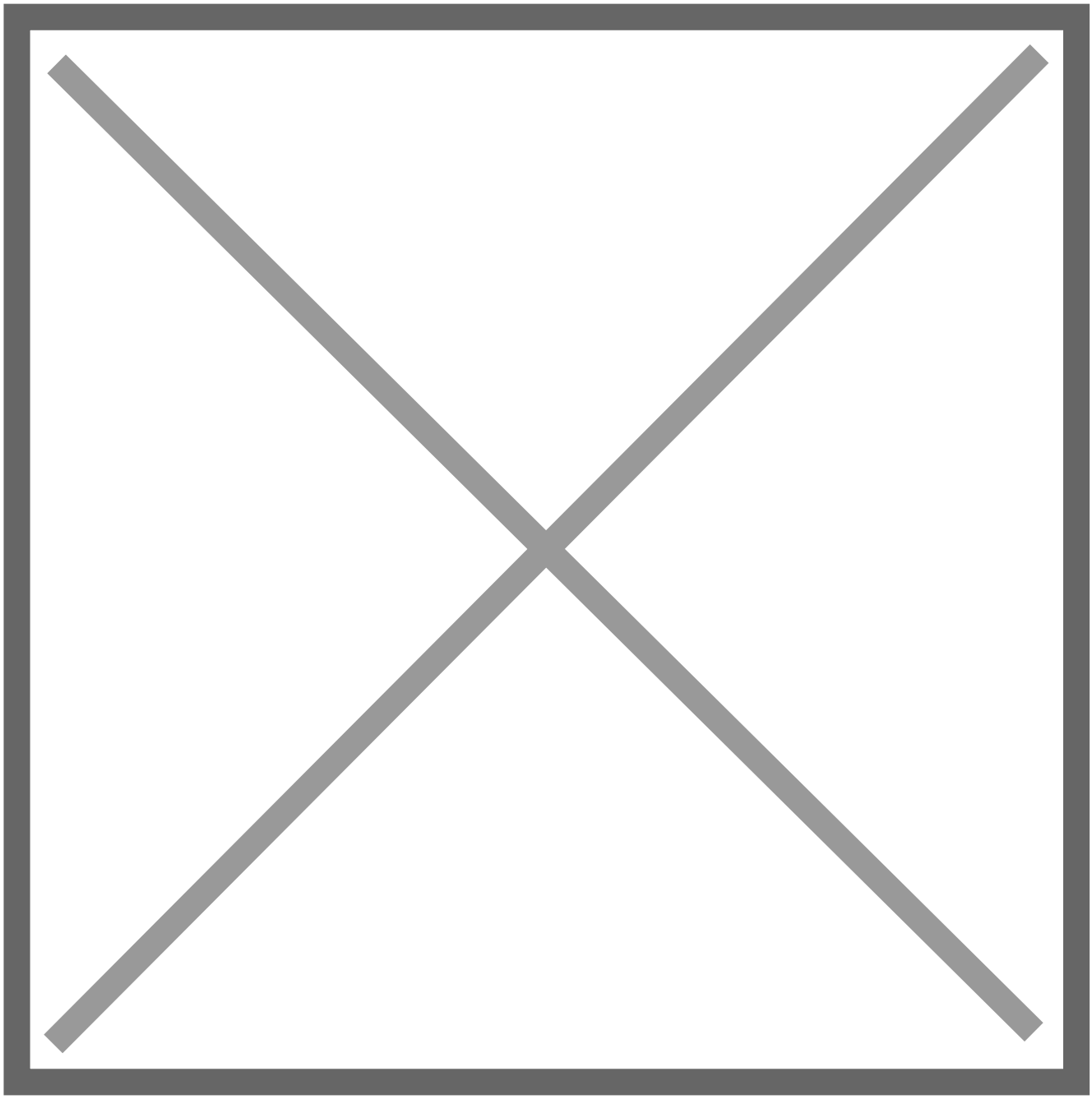
News
Opinion



University of Notre Dame football players are seen during the Fiesta Bowl in Glendale, Arizona, in this 2016 file photo. (CNS/Mark J. Rebilas, Action Images via USA Today Sports and Reuters)



by Mike Jordan Laskey

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Lots of people write and podcast about University of Notre Dame football, my biggest sports obsession, but my favorite person to follow is my friend and former Notre Dame classmate Chris Wilson. He writes a newsletter and hosts a podcast called the Rakes Report, a nod to a traditional Irish jig played at Notre Dame games. Chris is a passionate yet levelheaded college football fan, and his takes on controversial issues within the sport are always insightful and well-reasoned. So as I've been thinking about the college football season that might not even happen this fall, I wrote to Chris and asked him to help me process everything.

Laskey: **As I'm typing this on Aug. 20, we still have no idea if any college football is going to be played this fall, even though the season is slated to start in just a few weeks. The Big Ten and Pacific-12 conferences have already postponed their seasons until at least the springtime, and a number of small conferences have joined them.**

On the other hand, the Southeastern Conference, Atlantic Coast Conference and Big 12 Conference are still planning to play. As is our alma mater, Notre Dame, which is joining up as more or less a full ACC member for the season. But the Irish have canceled practice for a couple of days as a COVID-19 spike has hit campus, forcing all classes to shift to online-only for at least two weeks. There's a lot of questions to sort through, and this

paragraph might be obsolete by the time I finish writing this sentence. What's going through your mind when you consider the prospect of college football in a pandemic?

Wilson: I'm weary, mostly. It's cruel, in a way, as college football is maybe my favorite thing of all things and thinking about it now just mostly bums me out. It is the connective tissue that has helped build a community that includes everyone from my family and best friends from college (present company included) to random strangers I have met on the internet, who now seem just as close as some in the previous group. In a non-pandemic world, I'd be texting with you about the latest practice reports and getting ready to fly to Dublin for the season opener.

Now I split my time between being the normal level of excited to see the Fighting Irish take the field and just dreading what horrors might come as they try to play a season out. The players have worked so hard and have tried to be so safe, and my heart breaks for them at the idea of a season being canceled, but this is all just such a mess.

Part of the joy of college football is really overinvesting in it as a life-and-death enterprise where every autumn Saturday is sacred and every game is The Most Important Game. That is going to be more difficult to stomach when hundreds if not thousands of Americans are dying every day from a viral pandemic and college campuses and their surrounding communities are wrecked by outbreaks. As we've seen with baseball, if they try to move forward with a season, there are almost certainly going to be postponements and entire teams knocked into quarantine along the way. (Consider baseball can't keep everybody healthy and those are professionals who don't live in college dorms and are on rosters one-third the size.)

So just like for the last couple months we've been waiting for them to announce no season, every single waking minute of the college football season will be spent waiting for the announcement that a game is canceled, or the starting quarterback is having heart problems or God forbid somebody died.

One thing with loving college football is that you have to accept the whole thing is pretty gross. If you go deep on college football, you start to become overly invested in the college decisions of teenage boys, a completely normal activity. You have to make peace with the fact that head coaches (predominantly white) are making millions of dollars because crowds (also usually quite white in most cases) can pay

to cheer on players who are majority black and can't even do a sponsored Instagram post without earning the wrath of the NCAA.

Heck, the term "student-athlete" was created in 1955 by NCAA lawyers who didn't want to pay workman's compensation when a football player died from injuries sustained in a game. From all of that, it's only one more step to say, "Well, the players know the risk and want to play during a pandemic so I might as well watch," but the whole thing feels kind of icky.



(Unsplash/Ben Hershey)

Ah yes, the cognitive dissonance of college football fandom. We talk about this all the time. It's such a source of fun and joy, which I didn't understand as an East Coast kid until I got to Notre Dame in 2004. I remember looking up at the 80,000 fans in the stadium in the middle of northern Indiana at my first home game as a freshman marching band kid, thinking, "Where did all these people *come* from?" I love the community and joy it brings, and it's just such a wonderful game of strategy and

speed and strength.

But I was also nodding along with your litany of bad things about the sport — and you didn't even mention the awful impact football has on so many players' brains! I just did a search in my inbox and you've used the phrase "stupid sport" five separate times in your newsletter over the past four years. Plus "dumbest sport" once. I still haven't been able to quit it.

This is my mental backdrop in an otherwise normal year. Throw a world historical pandemic in the mix and I really can't stomach the thought of these "amateurs" playing this fall without compensation and without any guarantee of care into the future if they develop long-lasting complications from this wretched disease. If you're the national czar of college football (a position that doesn't exist, as even the head of the NCAA isn't able to tell conferences what to do), are you allowing competitive games this fall?

I go back and forth on this depending on the hour, but ultimately lean no. I understand but do not totally agree with the argument that players are going to be roughly as safe playing football as not playing football if they're on campus, but at this point considering what we've already seen in South Bend, Indiana, and Chapel Hill, I don't think any students should be on campuses, because the testing capacity just isn't where we need it to be.

Now add on players practicing (leaning and breathing on one another) and traveling, en masse, to other parts of the country where they could infect or be infected by other teams, and then spread that around their respective communities. Even before you broach the moral argument, just from a public safety perspective, it seems too dicey. This quote from Carlos del Rio, the executive associate dean at Emory University and a member of the NCAA's COVID-19 medical advisory panel, earlier this month has stuck with me: "I feel like the Titanic. We have hit the iceberg, and we're trying to make decisions of what time should we have the band play."

Would you let them play if you were commissioner of college football, which, again, is a position that somehow doesn't exist in reality?

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I would draw on my very relevant academic background in theology to make my decision. You laugh, but there are actually some Catholic social justice principles that might be helpful to bring into this discussion. Especially for, say, leadership at our own Catholic alma mater. Here are just three:

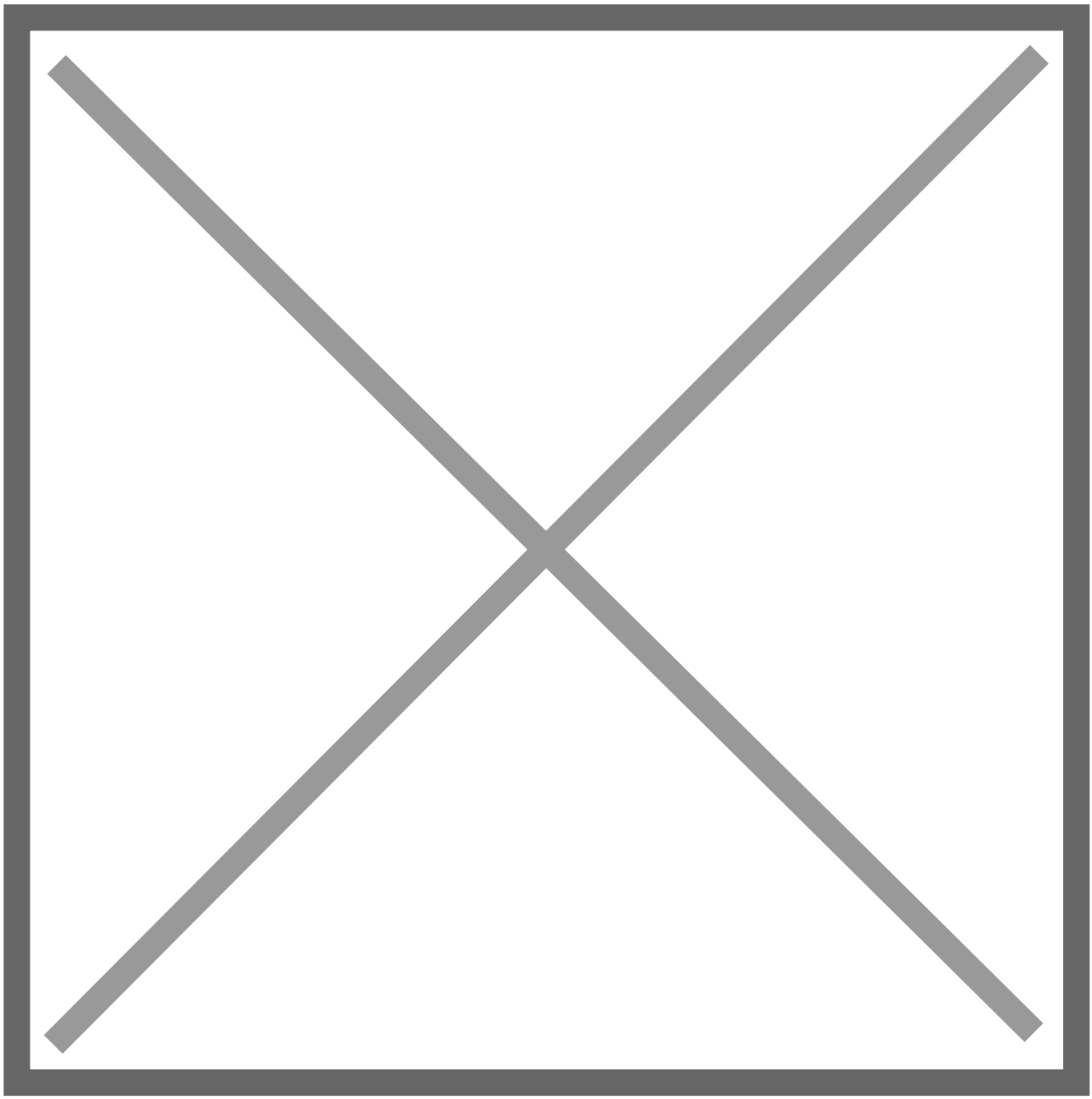
- **Life and dignity of the human person: This is the bedrock of all Catholic social justice teaching. Does holding a football season this fall honor the inherent, God-given dignity of each individual player, coach and support staff member? Or, is it an unjustifiable threat to their well-being in this crazy time? I just don't think playing a sport is worth this unique and dangerous risk.**
- **Common good: Through the lens of Catholic social thought, we can't just consider the individuals affected by this decision themselves, but the broader communities they're connected to: their university, their family and friends, their town or city. It seems like the only way to really protect broader communities from a large group of athletes unable to socially distance while playing is to isolate them away from everyone else, like the NBA is doing in Orlando. Doing something like that for more than 100 college football teams seems impossible. And it'd also acknowledge that college football players aren't like other students, and might actually be ... professional employees worthy of compensation!**
- **Dignity of work and rights of workers: I applied this principle to the question about paying college football players in a column last fall. Laborers hold a privileged place in Catholic social thought, as the workplace is a place where human dignity has so often been threatened. Universities don't want to treat athletes as employees, but it sure seems like they are! Players themselves have taken to social media to call for a college football players' association, or union. This has been fascinating to watch, especially after being blown away by players' activism in the wake of the police killing of George Floyd and Breonna Taylor.**

Anyway, it seems like my application of some of these Catholic teachings lead me to a "don't play" decision, as tough as that is for me as a fan and as heartbreaking as that would be for the players and coaches.

I want to go back to player activism, though. That has been yet another story in the college football world this year, and a really surprising one: College players have often been discouraged from participating in anything too political. Not this time. Players have led protests, spoken up on social media, and challenged the often-conservative fanbases of their sport to think about systemic racism in the country. It's been awesome to see so many players getting involved in the fight for justice.

Imagine someone telling you a year ago that brand-new Mississippi State University coach Mike Leach and brand-new University of Mississippi coach Lane Kiffin, two unique guys with no prior ties to the state, would help push to remove the stars and bars from the state flag as a way to support their players? As we've said, this is a very dumb sport, but it's also the best sport. It's been great to see athletes stepping up across the country, but I do think the system as it currently stands — with entrenched Powers That Be vs. college athletes who might only be around for three years, which makes putting together a union more difficult — can absorb a lot of this energy, just as we're seeing with the broader national movement and minimal substantive changes in its wake thus far.

At the very least, if they want to avoid getting undercut by both federal and state legislation, the NCAA is going to have to allow athletes to benefit from name, image and likeness, which seems not only fair but a tidy way around Title IX concerns. It also seems like they're going to ease up on transfer restrictions, which is good. I'm just continually impressed by these players and some of the coaches who've stepped up, I just hope the changes are not temporary as media attention and power balance shifts back more toward what we were used to prior to the pandemic and George Floyd's death.



The University of Notre Dame in Indiana is seen in this 2019 file photo. The university announced Aug. 18, 2020, that in-person classes will be replaced by remote instruction because positive rates for the coronavirus continue to climb. (CNS/Matt Cashore, USA Today Network via Reuters)

Any final thoughts? For me, I'm just trying to balance the healthy escape and joy sports can provide in this dark time with the need to protect individuals and communities. I keep thinking about a quote Washington

Nationals pitcher Sean Doolittle shared in an interview: "Sports are like the reward for a functioning society." And we're not functioning well right now at all!

Only that this all sucks so much and I feel nothing but awful for the students who are having a healthy chunk of their college careers nuked. Also, I have already started looking at the 2021 schedule to plan trips in hopes that there will be football and there will be crowds. If the virus is under control by next November, I'll see you in Charlottesville for beers and potential sports heartbreak.

[Mike Jordan Laskey is senior communications manager for the Jesuit Conference in Washington, D.C. He is the author of *The Ministry of Peace and Justice* (Liturgical Press) and lives with his family in Maryland.]

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