

Big Ten Players Form Unity Group, Release Statement



Just days after football players from the Pac-12 conference released a letter on The Players Tribune announcing the formation of a unity group that would sit out of the upcoming season if safety, racial justice and compensation demands are not met by the conference, Big Ten players have followed suit. The group, titling itself “Big Ten United” released a similar letter on Wednesday through the Tribune.

While many of the goals of the two letters are similar, there are key differences between the initiative launched by the Pac-12 players and by that released today by their Big ten counterparts. Firstly, while the Pac-12 group was formed entirely by the players, and does not have an official organized backing, the Big Ten players went through College Athlete Unity (CAU) to release their statement. According to its website, CAU is “a member organization of intercollegiate athletes seeking to collectively address injustice and affect positive change using our privilege and considerable platforms.”

Another key difference is that unlike the Pac-12 players, there’s no threat of a mass opt-out in the Big Ten statement, though the players do express similar concerns regarding health and safety guidelines regarding the COVID-19 pandemic, with the Big Ten season set to kick off in less than a month.

“While we appreciate the Big Ten’s recently announced plan for the upcoming season, we believe that the conference’s proposal falls short in certain areas,” the letter reads. “Given that the players are the primary stakeholders in the business of college sports, we believe any course of action moving forward needs to include player input. We are deeply disappointed with the lack of leadership demonstrated by the NCAA with respect to player safety during the COVID-19 pandemic. We believe that the NCAA must — on its own and through collaboration with the conference — devise a comprehensive plan to ensure the safety and well-being of players leading up to and during the upcoming fall season.”

The list of demands is included in full below:

Oversight and Transparency

- Third-party, approved by players, to administer COVID testing and to enforce all COVID-19 health and safety standards
- Sufficient penalties for noncompliance
- Mandate for athletics personnel to report suspected violations

Prevention and Safety Protocols

- Ensure all athletes have up-to-date information about the risks that COVID-19 may pose to their personal health, the health of their families and the health of their communities
- Adherence to WHO and CDC guidance for sporting events and compliance with all federal, state, and local statutes and regulations
- Safety standards that are appropriate for each sport
- Social distancing requirements and mandatory mask-wearing in and around athletic facilities by coaches, staff, players, vendors, press, and visitors
- Minimum cleaning and sanitation protocols for all uniforms, equipment, and athletic facilities, including visitor locker rooms
- Temperature checks for anyone entering any athletic facility

Testing, Contact Tracing and Related Procedures

- Contact-tracing protocols for anyone who comes into contact with college athletes and team personnel who test positive
- Testing of everyone who comes into contact with college athletes, including coaches, trainers, medical staff, nutrition staff, referees, media, etc.
- In-season testing of all of the above three days per week
 - Testing twice per week with an FDA-approved test with less than 1% false negatives
 - Additionally, testing on the day of competition (or within 24 hours of competition for each team that can be quarantined) with an FDA-approved test with less than 5% false negatives, with results delivered at least two hours before competition
- Immediate quarantine of any person who tests positive or exhibits symptoms
- Quarantine rules for college athletes who test positive, and protocols for their return to practice and competition
- Objective criteria for shutting down seasons should the pandemic take a turn for the worse or if teams experience significant outbreaks

Player Assurances

- Whistleblower protections for athletics personnel and college athletes reporting a suspected violation
- Ban the use of COVID-19 liability waivers
- Automatic medical redshirt for any player who misses any competitions due to a positive test or a mandatory quarantine due to contact tracing
- Preserve athletic eligibility, scholarship, and roster spot for any player who opts out of athletic participation or is unable to play more than 40% of their scheduled season due to COVID-19 or season postponement/cancellation
- Complimentary access to the Big Ten Network for athletes' family members

Hazard-Related Economic Support

- Coverage for all out-of-pocket medical expenses related to COVID-19 (both short-term and long-term) incurred by active college athletes
- Scholarship protections (including room, board and stipend) in the event that the season is canceled due to COVID-19
- An adjustment to the cost-of-living stipend to account for the increase in personal expenses

related to limited access that players have to facilities

- Reimbursement for stipends that were reduced during the summer

Notably absent from the list of demands is mention of either racial injustice or player compensation, both of which played a significant role in the Pac-12 letter.

Big Ten commissioner Kevin Warren spoke briefly about it to ESPN.

“If you really unpack the letter, you’ll see that they have some very thoughtful recommendations and thoughtful insight into what’s important to them,” Warren said. “Many of those things, we’re already doing, but because I always embrace really healthy communication with people in the Big Ten, and especially our student-athletes, I’ll spend some time with the letter and I’m sure I’ll have some communication with them.”

Michigan cornerback Hunter Reynolds and Minnesota cornerback Benjamin St-Juste are listed on CAU’s masthead, though no other Big Ten players have officially attached their names to the letter. Ohio State quarterback Justin Fields spoke in support of the Pac-12 letter on Tuesday.

“I’m really glad to see different athletes around the country try to come together to have a voice for college athletes,” Fields said. “I’m glad to see that. A few of the guys have talked about getting our own thing together in the Big Ten so we can have a voice like they’re doing. I definitely agree with what they’re doing.”

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