

College Working Group Competition and Eligibility Recommendations in Response to the Continuing COVID-19 Pandemic

Introduction

Issue: With the COVID-19 pandemic continuing, making a safe return to a traditional college season difficult in 2021, how should USA Ultimate respond and adjust the season to better accommodate college ultimate players?

On March 27, 2020, USA Ultimate officially postponed / cancelled its 2020 college season. At the time of postponement, USA Ultimate (“USAU”) anticipated that a return to play would be possible for a full 2021 college season, and [extended eligibility to academically eligible fifth-year players](#). The pandemic has worsened, and the ability to run a full 2021 spring season has now been cast into doubt. USA Ultimate and the College Working Group (“CWG”) have been monitoring developments with colleges and universities around the country, and have surveyed all college teams with respect to their current desire to participate in competition and restrictions at their school. In addition, USAU, in all of its return to play decisions, has been monitoring the progress of testing and vaccines and consulting with its Medical Advisory Working Group.

School Policies

Throughout the summer and fall semester, schools around the country began implementing competition and travel bans on their student body. Currently, many schools have travel restrictions through much of the spring semester, some of which are in effect until the end of May, after when the college season would normally come to an end. A sampling of these restrictions are linked below:

- [California State Universities](#)
- [Ivy Leagues](#)
- [MIT](#)
- [Texas](#)

While what’s listed above is only a small fraction of the types of policies currently in place, it is clear a majority of schools that participate in USAU programs will have some kind of school restriction on travel.

Survey results

On October 28, USA Ultimate and the CWG sent a [survey](#) to the leadership of 2020 college teams. The survey received 484 total responses, and all regions and divisions were represented. Approximately 33% of responses came from the women’s division and 67% of responses came from the men’s division. Some responses came from the same school or from participants not currently associated with a college team, however, the CWG still gained a lot of valuable information. Below are some of the highlights:

- -70% of respondents to the survey indicated they are practicing in some capacity.
 - 3% of responding teams were practicing without restrictions.
 - 61% of teams were practicing with masks and / or some form of strict social distancing requirements.
 - 27% of teams were practicing virtually or not at all.
- 88.5% of teams had fall travel restrictions of some kind imposed on students.
- 80% of teams would have some level of reservation in participating in a traditional spring season.
- In discussing potential alternative formats, 7v7 match play with no overnight travel received the most interest and support, with more than 50% of respondents indicating they would play without concern or without reservations.

Vaccines

The recent news on vaccines has been promising and brings a lot of hope for a return to competitive ultimate in 2021. However, the distribution of the vaccine, in the most conservative of estimates, will not be widely available until May or June, after the conclusion of the spring term for most colleges and universities. Further, younger age groups - the majority of our college division participants - are expected to be at the end of the line on a COVID-19 vaccine priority list.

With all of this said, the CWG prioritizes - first and foremost - playing ultimate safely in whichever context is applicable for each team and its members. This group acknowledges there are inequities among schools and teams related to access to resources, support and staffing from their respective institutions, and this disparity supported the recommendations for the spring 2021 college season detailed below .

Recommendations

1. Competition

The 2021 College Series

The college series is not scheduled to begin until April, and it is conceivable that vaccines and testing are at a level that travel competition is possible for many schools. However, there is too much doubt and uncertainty to move forward with the college series as regularly scheduled.

Although it is possible that conditions for robust travel competition exist in April or May, only the most optimistic of predictions as a result of perfect conditions would anticipate a return at this time. It is more likely that widespread national competition structures will not be viable until at least the summer of 2021. Further, with the college division being dictated by university policies, as noted above, many schools and university systems have already implemented travel bans that would extend through the entire college series.

Planning for the college series is usually well underway by the previous December. Coordinators dedicate time and energy into finding event hosts and organizing event formats. Significant financial commitments, sometimes months in advance, need to be made by events hosts. College teams also need time to prepare physically and strategically, yet many teams will have a significant portion of their rosters living and studying remotely. Like most club sports on college campuses, ultimate teams and event organizers will face difficult resource constraints associated with meeting stringent health and safety regulations that might allow for even limited play over the next several months.

The CWG cannot reasonably anticipate that teams or organizers will be prepared in time to participate in or host a safe, successful, competitively balanced, college postseason on a traditional schedule. **As a result, the CWG recommends that 2021 spring college series be postponed to the fall of 2021, with specifics on how such a fall series will be scheduled to follow.**

The CWG specifically recommends making and communicating this decision immediately, and not waiting until the spring to arrive, in order to provide certainty to the USAU student athletes and allow them to make their educational decisions with this knowledge in hand.

2020 Regular Season

The college regular season is scheduled for January through the end of March 2021. It is unreasonable to expect significant changes in the current pandemic environment, including widespread distribution of a vaccine, during any portion of this period. Several college regular season tournaments have already been cancelled, and the same travel restrictions described above are still in place. **The regular season, as it is traditionally composed, is not possible for this year.**

The college regular season provides a robust playing opportunity for all teams, many of whom do not participate in the postseason. The regular season, however, primarily serves to create rankings and determine a bid structure feeding into the postseason.

Fortunately, there will be spring activities in the new, restructured environment, as described below. In theory, it is possible for these restructured spring competitions - available for teams that can participate - to be considered as part of a regular season, and for the results to inform the rescheduled fall series. The CWG, however, strongly recommends any spring ultimate activities be considered stand-alone and separate from any future series events. The CWG does not want any team to be incentivized to play in an environment they may be uncomfortable with, would violate school rules or would otherwise present safety concerns. Further, without a spring college series, USAU will not be collecting registrar verified rosters during the spring seasons, so any roster for spring events will be considered unofficial.

Spring 2021

For all of the foregoing reasons, USAU recognizes that spring ultimate will be difficult for many teams to participate in. However, there are some schools that are allowing competitive activities on a local level, and for those schools, USAU hopes to provide safe playing opportunities.

In the survey of college team leadership, ~72% of respondents indicated that they would be interested in local match play with no overnight travel in some capacity. Only 4% of respondents indicated that they would not want to participate at all. **USAU should create alternative match play formats, with details to follow, for those schools that are allowed to participate and for which such a competition is considered safe and allowed by local regulations.**

Given the forgoing goals, the Spring 2021 structure, to be announced at a future date, will be built to balance the following priorities and concerns:

- **Player Safety:** Regardless of the structure, firm safety protocols will be required. The CWG will work with the Medical Advisory Committee to recommend structures for play.
 - Local-based match play, with a possibility of larger state-based or regional competition, will be considered as long as it is allowed under state guidelines.
 - The CWG anticipates this competition structure will be implemented from mid-March through May, and may be available earlier to teams in locations that are allowing such activities.
 - Spring 2021 playing opportunities will be disassociated from all other college division competition and will not impact an athlete's eligibility.
- **Acknowledge Inequities in the College Division:** The CWG acknowledges that a team's ability to participate in this structure will likely be permitted by the individual institution, and local and state guidelines.
 - These inequities - geographic, resource-based, divisional - will be considered as the group discusses potential plans.
 - While the structure itself may not be able to address socio-economic and racial inequities that exist and that have been heightened as a result of COVID-19, the CWG recognizes these inequities and will consider them throughout its competition structure process.
- **Encourage Safe Play:** The CWG supports its teams and players playing ultimate in the context that each school allows.
 - The long-term health of the college division and teams is the top priority. The CWG does not want to create or condone opportunities that jeopardize future viability for its teams and players.
 - The CWG is aware that some teams will not be permitted by their school or club sports department to participate in the structure that is ultimately created.
- **Encourage Relationship-Building between Teams and School Administrators:** The CWG encourages teams and players to use this time productively to connect with school administrators:
 - Connect with your club sports/student activities coordinator and establish a positive relationship between administration and your team.
 - This is an opportunity for teams to set themselves up for future, long-term viability and establish a legacy for future ultimate players at their schools.

- **Support Infrastructure for Streamlined Logistics and Communication:** The CWG will consider how to make scheduling and organizing activity as easy as possible.
- **Encourage Participation in Ongoing USA Ultimate-related Activities:** If teams are unable to participate in the competition structure, then the CWG encourages its teams and players to engage with the activities that were established in 2020 and are continuing into 2021 like the Skills Challenge and Ultimate Disc Golf.

2. Eligibility

In April 2020, the CWG elected to extend the eligibility for academically-eligible fifth-year players. In [making this decision](#), the CWG weighed the benefits to individual players and teams with the potential drawbacks on the division as a whole. The decision was made with the best available information at the time to specifically address the concerns for the 2020 college season.

As these conditions continue to impact the 2021 college season, the CWG has concluded that there is a further need to expand eligibility. While all of the potential drawbacks discussed in April that would favor a more limited expansion of eligibility still exist, the equities for individual players and potential existential crises facing teams weigh in favor of a more robust expansion of eligibility.

This proposal will not rehash the advantages and disadvantages discussed in the [previous proposal](#), as for the most part those discussions are still applicable. However, below are the additional benefits that make this change necessary for the CWG:

- With 1.5 years of no ultimate activity, there are many schools who may face a deficit of athletes to fill out rosters. Expanded eligibility can alleviate some of that concern.
 - Many schools were remote and had limited capabilities to recruit athletes, especially athletes who never played ultimate prior to college.
 - Some athletes may have decided to pursue other hobbies or activities.
- Since no high-level competitive ultimate has been played, any competitive advantage potentially gained from playing in 2020 and the first half of 2021 is minimal.
- This eligibility extension is now an opportunity for teams to engage their more-experienced players to help build back up their programs.

The College Working Group recommends a one-year extension of eligibility for all players who are participation-clock eligible for the 2021 season. This expansion specifically includes those fifth-year athletes who already received an extension of eligibility following the 2020 college season. Further, this only refers to participation-clock; there is no academic eligibility requirement in 2021* in order to take advantage of this eligibility extension.

**In 2022 and beyond, all athletes will need to comply with all academic eligibility rules as normal.*