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COLLEGE FOOTBALL

The 1918 Pandemic Was Deadlier, but College Football Continued. Here's Why.

World War I was first used as a reason to halt the season—then to continue it

By [Rachel Bachman](#)

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On Sept. 28, 1918, Riley Shue played in his first college football game. Eleven days later, the Miami (Ohio) guard died of the flu.

A starter at Texas also died of influenza that fall. So did a player at West Virginia, and Ohio State's team captain from the year before. That's just a few we know about. It isn't clear how many college football players died of the flu in fall 1918.

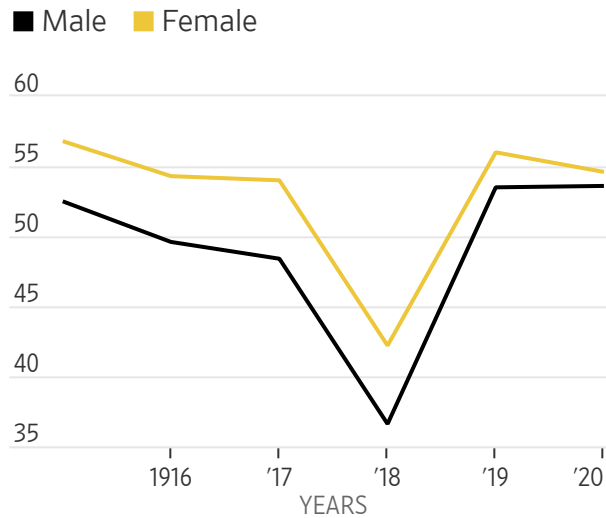
The 1918-19 flu scourge was more lethal than the current coronavirus pandemic, killing 675,000 in the U.S., and was especially fatal in 20- to 40-year-olds. Covid-19 infections have killed more than 180,000 this year, and the U.S. has more than three times the population it did a century ago.

Why would universities in 1918 forge ahead with football while a virus decimated the ranks of young, healthy men? The answer is something arguably even bigger than a global pandemic: a global war.

The 1918 Flu's Toll

With the flu pandemic raging, life expectancy in the U.S. plummeted in 1918.

U.S. life expectancy, 1915-1920



Source: National Center for Health Statistics

The lead-up to that 1918 college football season was similarly chaotic to this year's, which starts in earnest on Thursday with about half of the nation's major college teams opting out. But the overlay of World War I made 1918 unique, and gave grim weight to the metaphor of football as a battle.

The U.S. War Department warned in September 1918 that college football could be canceled because it would distract from military training. That left many young men "stuck on a military base with not a lot to do," said Jeremy Swick, historian and curator at the College Football Hall of Fame in Atlanta.

A couple of weeks later, the government pivoted like an All-American receiver. The game could help build the aggressiveness to fight and the grit to endure grinding days in the trenches of France, it reasoned. "It would be difficult to overestimate the value of football experience as a part of a soldier's training," President Woodrow Wilson later wrote.

It isn't clear what spurred the reversal. But military leadership at the time included giants like former Yale coach Walter Camp, who was advising the Navy on athletic activities. Wilson himself had coached football while teaching at Wesleyan University.

Military boot camps across the country had formed teams after the U.S. entered the war in April 1917, many made up of former college stars. In 1918, the mighty team at the Naval

Station Great Lakes in North Chicago boasted three players later enshrined in the Pro Football Hall of Fame: George Halas, Jimmy Conzelman and John “Paddy” Driscoll.



Football program from the Ohio State/Michigan game in 1918.

PHOTO: OHIO STATE UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES

On college campuses, football teams were depleted of students who'd left for the war, so many called upon freshmen to play. Teams also got help from the ranks of the Student Army Training Corps, on-campus boot camps set up nationwide. Some colleges played games against military teams.

The 1918 flu first surfaced in the U.S. among military personnel in spring 1918, but the resurgence caught campuses by surprise. Press censorship and wartime patriotism meant that media were inclined to “not fully report the ravages of the flu as the deadly second

wave took off in summer and fall 1918, which was a critical final stage of the war,” said Christopher McKnight Nichols, director of the Center for the Humanities at Oregon State.

To prioritize training, the War Department limited football practice time and restricted travel from university campuses in October to Saturday afternoons. Overnight road trips were out.

Some teams, like Alabama and LSU, were so depleted by the war effort that they’d already canceled their seasons. Others scrambled to remake their schedules, some booking games days or hours before kickoff.



The Mare Island Marines, pictured, beat the Camp Lewis Army in the 1918 Rose Bowl.

PHOTO: PASADENA TOURNAMENT OF ROSES

Meanwhile the virus spread, prompting regional health authorities to ban fans from games or prohibit large gatherings. At one point all games scheduled in Illinois and Iowa were called off.

By the third week in October Michigan’s team, packed with Army training corps members, was playing with masks. “Until further orders they will practice with the piece of gauze fastened about their mouths,” read a story in the Daily Pennsylvanian.

The war and the flu became intertwined. At the University of Pittsburgh, where every draft-eligible male had been conscripted into the Army training corps, a state order in early fall put the campus under quarantine, according to a 2003 story in Pitt Med magazine. “Students who were presumably healthy in September were now coughing, wheezing, doubling over in pain, shivering with fever, dropping where they stood—and dying,” the story said.

At one point, 673 members of Pitt's Army training corps contingent were hospitalized. Of those whose cases developed into pneumonia, 99 died, according to the story.

Yet on Nov. 9 the highly touted Panthers, led by coach Pop Warner, managed to start their season. They outscored their opponents 140-16 over five games, losing only to a Cleveland Naval Reserve team led by a rugged former Auburn standout named Moon Ducote. Pitt and 5-0 Michigan both claim national titles for that season, decades before a championship game existed.

Still, death hung over 1918. U.S. average life expectancy plummeted 12 years from the year before, mostly due to the flu. A December story in the Pittsburgh Press listed dozens of notable athletes who'd died that year: A former Dartmouth quarterback killed in a German raid. The 1917 Ohio State captain, Harold Courtney, dead of pneumonia—the cause often given for people who contracted the flu.



An action shot from Pitt's 1918 football season: 'Davies going through Georgia Tech.'

PHOTO: THE OWL/UNIVERSITY OF PITTSBURGH

The 1918 and 2020 college football seasons carry a few striking parallels.

The virus has wreaked havoc on team schedules. Without a vaccine, masks and social distancing remain two of the primary weapons to slow the pandemic. Today, billions of dollars in TV and ticket revenue are at stake in whether a season is played. Yet even in 1918, financial forces prodded college football: A late October 1918 story in the Pittsburgh Press expressed hope that West Virginia could mount a few games to raise money toward a \$170 million fund for the Red Cross and other war charities.

The Mountaineers couldn't. The flu's spread forced all students off campus until Nov. 5. While away, West Virginia tackle Joseph Fuccy became ill and died.

But it wasn't the flu that finally ended the team's season. It was time constraints placed on Army training corps players, according to a March 2020 story by WVU director of athletic content John Antonik.

West Virginia's season was canceled Nov. 9. Two days later the armistice was signed, to end the war.

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