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NFLPA COVID-19 Media Call Transcript

- George Atallah: [00:01](#) Welcome everybody to the second NFLPA weekly briefing on not just COVID, but everything that's going on in and around our league.
- George Atallah: [00:11](#) DeMaurice Smith, JC Tretter, Dr. Thom Mayer and Sean Sansiveri join me from our leadership staff.
- George Atallah: [00:20](#) I think D we're going to start off like we did last week. If you want to give everybody the [crosstalk 00:00:25] data, that would be great and then we can jump right into questions.
- DeMaurice Smith: [00:28](#) Sure. Good afternoon, everybody. Thanks for joining us. Just wanted to run through a little bit of the highlights of where we are with COVID testing.
- DeMaurice Smith: [00:37](#) Overall this week, December 6th to December 12th, our overall positivity rate in the National Football League is 0.11%. That's pretty much no change from last week.
- DeMaurice Smith: [00:51](#) Our incidence rate this week is 0.65%. Again, very little change from last week.
- DeMaurice Smith: [01:00](#) Breaking it down to a little bit more granular data, our positivity rate for players this week is 0.09% and our incidence rate is 0.59%.
- DeMaurice Smith: [01:17](#) Both of those are decreases from the overall positivity and incidence levels from last week. As we said before, this is a week to week operation for all of us. We're blessed to have Dr. Thom Mayer here, our medical director, Sean Sansiveri on the line who, who have been grinding with us through all of this.
- DeMaurice Smith: [01:43](#) That's the general picture from an incidence standpoint and I'm happy to take questions.
- George Atallah: [01:51](#) Let's use the raise hand feature, which worked pretty well last week.





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- George Atallah: [01:55](#) Lindsay, it looks like you have the first-hand raise. So, Lindsay Jones, we will turn it to you and then I'll just go right down the queue.
- Lindsay Jones: [02:05](#) Sure. Can you hear me?
- Lindsay Jones: [02:07](#) All right. I actually wanted to address this one first to Dr. Mayer, if possible. Because there's been so much discussion about the vaccine and I know you guys, as well as the NFL have been very clear that there will be no attempts to cut the line. I just want it to look a little bit more long-term about the vaccine.
- Lindsay Jones: [02:29](#) What are you telling your players about when the vaccine might become available? What the side effects might be? What are the arguments for getting it?
- Lindsay Jones: [02:39](#) And then I guess for D and JC, where would you guys stand on mandating the vaccine if it's something that the NFL would require for the 2021 season?
- Dr. Thom Mayer: [02:54](#) Obviously, D and JC will weigh in but quickly. The vaccine, the numbers are extremely helpful in terms of raising sufficient antibody. 94, 95%. The distribution mechanisms are underway right now.
- Dr. Thom Mayer: [03:11](#) The answer to when it will be available for players? That's not known yet. That's TBD in terms of the general population. They would fall into the age group, the at risk categories that we have.
- Dr. Thom Mayer: [03:24](#) If you run the math out based on distribution, the likelihood that that our players would be in line prior to the first Sunday in February is pretty low. So, I don't think it's likely to be an issue this year for players, but it's something that we have continued to advise them and their families about in terms of risk-benefit ratios.
- Dr. Thom Mayer: [03:48](#) I think that the key issue is creation of bringing immunity, herd immunity, if you prefer that term, which is in the 75% range within a given population. We've let them know that the side effects are mild and for a



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vaccine, meaning arm pain, some flu-like symptoms for a couple of days.

- Dr. Thom Mayer: [04:08](#) Then the advice of protecting yourself and your family, not just through vaccinations, but also through continuation of following the guidelines, physical distancing, masking, PPE. All those issues that we already have.
- Dr. Thom Mayer: [04:24](#) It's my personal opinion that it's unlikely to be an issue during the course of this particular season, but it will be an issue we'll have to face.
- DeMaurice Smith: [04:34](#) The only thing I would add to the record is in the same way that we've addressed everything this season, when we were all together in April, May, talking about bending the business of football to COVID, we talked about the discussions within the union about making sure that we would never pull testing capability away from the general population, never pull away first responder sources. When it comes to the vaccine, we will never jump the line or do anything that would take away resources from those people who need it first and foremost. I know the league feels exactly the same way.
- DeMaurice Smith: [05:23](#) With respect to the vaccine and what happens with individual players, we always advise our guys about best practices and I'm sure we're going to have those discussions when the reality of the vaccine being more readily available for everybody else in the community. We're going to have those discussions and conversations then.
- George Atallah: [05:44](#) Lindsay, did that answer your question? If yes, we can move on to Jonathan Alexander.
- Lindsay Jones: [05:50](#) Yeah. All good. Thank you.
- George Atallah: [05:51](#) Thank you.
- Jonathan Alexan...: [05:53](#) Hey thanks for doing this. Jonathan Alexander with the Charlotte Observer. A couple questions and they may be for two different people.



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- Jonathan Alexan...: [06:00](#) I'm wondering whether there are any updates on the Carolina Panthers situation? What happened there. Also, whether you all expected any fines as it regarded to their situation?
- DeMaurice Smith: [06:14](#) I'll let Sean step in here. One thing we always want to try to make as clearly as possible when we're doing these briefings, we have a process of obviously daily testing. If we identify someone who's tested positive, that's the first step. And as we talked about last week, the next step is identifying all of the high risk close contacts who come out of the people who test positive.
- DeMaurice Smith: [06:44](#) I think sometimes that's misinterpreted in the media because then what happens is all of those folks who've been identified as high risk close contacts, as well as the people who have tested positive, get lumped together as these are the eight, nine, 10, 11, 12 people who may not be available to play this Sunday. Sometimes I think people draw the conclusion that 10 people have tested positive when it's a combination of people who've tested positive and the high risk close contacts. That's the first thing we're going to try to make sure we do a better job, frankly, of explaining in the National Football League. I think that one's on us. We've been on the fly trying to make things as clear as possible and sometimes I think the way we communicate has led to miscommunication or talking past each other.
- DeMaurice Smith: [07:46](#) With respect to individual teams, we never talk about what the remedial or steps we are going to take if we find that there's been a problem. I think what you've seen over the season is if we've identified a problem, if we believe that corrective action needs to be taken, that has happened in the league sometimes. Especially with some coaches at the beginning. That that happened to the tune of several thousands of dollars.
- DeMaurice Smith: [08:22](#) We're going to continue to look at what happened there. The goal there is just to do everything to ensure compliance with our protocols that we know work and have led us to a state where we've been able to safely conduct the business of football. As soon as and if we



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believe that something is going to happen there to ensure compliance, you guys will be the first to know.

- George Atallah: [08:59](#) Jonathan, whether it's Tennessee or Baltimore or like we've had in Carolina, every single one is reviewed exactly the same way. We do a very, very thorough review that Sean and Dr. Mayer lead to not just come to the bottom of what happened, but look into any adjustments to the protocols that need to be made. Which we've also done. We'll get back to you. That one's still evolving.
- George Atallah: [09:29](#) With respect to Baltimore, which I know is still an open item. Just to jump people's questions on that. I wanted Dr. Mayer to talk a little bit about the impact of the virus on different people, because we saw it spread through that locker room. We saw what happened, obviously with Dez on the field.
- George Atallah: [09:51](#) Doc, I'd love for you to clarify some of the things that have come out about that situation in the last week, specifically to superspreaders, version of the virus, and how it impacts people differently. Let's reiterate that, please.
- Dr. Thom Mayer: [10:07](#) Sure. It's virology 101 and happy to do that as succinctly as I can. That is the process by which patients acquire a virus, process that virus, and then express that virus both in terms of the amount of virus that they're shedding, but also how the virus affects them in terms of their symptoms is essentially the same. What is different is we have no evidence that a particular genomic sequence of a virus causes a person to be a super spreader, but we do have evidence that people who acquire the virus have sort of a classic bell-shaped curve. And on the left-hand side, you've got people who have no symptoms, none whatsoever, had no idea, no fever, not even a loss of sense or smell. Then you've got the peak, which is the majority of people who have mild symptoms. And on the right-hand side, you've got people who have more severe symptoms, need to be hospitalized, need to go in the ICU and may or may not have more sequelae because of that.
- Dr. Thom Mayer: [11:16](#) We've had players that have had no symptoms whatsoever, even once they know that they've got the



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virus. It's just a normal distribution that you'd expect. There's nothing surprising about the fact that our player patients have mimicked that, including players in the recent outbreaks, who've been completely asymptomatic. Biochemically, virologically, that's normal. There's no evidence that there's anything like a super strain.

Dr. Thom Mayer: [11:41](#)

There are some superspreaders. A superspreader is a person, in our case, a player patient, who is shedding virus at log three, meaning a thousand to 10,000 times more than another person. But that has nothing to do with the viral strain as far as we know right now. There's no such thing as a superspreader virus. There is such a thing as a super spreader patient who has a virus.

George Atallah: [12:07](#)

Thanks, Doc. Next up Ben Fischer and then Ken Belson.

Ben Fischer: [12:15](#)

Hey, thanks for doing this guys. D, I know we're not done here. We've still got a few weeks left, but we're quite a ways through the season. Have you given much thought to lessons learned from this year so far and implications for the future on just the business of the union and where you go from here?

DeMaurice Smith: [12:36](#)

Yep. A lot. JC and I spend a lot of time thinking about that and as well as our staff on the union side. Here's where our current thinking is. Again, emphasizing we're not done. I think that as it relates to the business of football, what we did to protect the salary cap and the events and the business that goes into it, I think we've spent a lot of time thinking about ways in which we may want to do things differently based on the lessons that we learned.

DeMaurice Smith: [13:16](#)

JC and I also talked about, from a football operations side of things, things that we've done this year that we should probably think about. I'll bite off a little bit about the business side. I'll have JC talk about the football op side of things.

DeMaurice Smith: [13:34](#)

Look, we've changed our business a lot, bending to the virus. Everything from the way in which we've negotiated things with the National Football League, with respect to players opting in, opting out, what we've done with short-term IR, but you also saw things that the league did with respect to the draft last year in response to COVID and how we've handled everything



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from post-game interviews to even handling how our fans interact with the game. A lot of those things have been innovative changes, certainly because we had to deal with the virus, but frankly, a lot of the things that we've done, I think are things that we should continue going forward.

DeMaurice Smith: [14:30](#)

We are certainly not done yet. And I'm a little wary of even coming close to saying this is going to be the new world. But Ben, sometimes in the National Football League, we're slow to make changes. I think back, Doc, to what we did with ending two-a-days back in 2011 and other changes that we made to improve player safety. I think a lot of the things that we've done this year are things that we're going to take a hard look at and looking at trying to make them systemic and perpetual going forward. Does that answer your question?

Ben Fischer: [15:22](#)

Yes. That's very thorough. Thank you.

George Atallah: [15:25](#)

JC, you want to jump in and talk a little bit about what it's been like for players on the field and other non-COVID related concerns you've heard, too? Because it's worth mentioning.

JC Tretter: [15:36](#)

Yeah. I think D says it really well. For the most part, the game of football does things the way they've always been done and are slow to adapt and evolve. The one benefit that we see of COVID this year is it's forced change upon all of us and it's forced us to do things differently, to adapt and evolve, and we've seen it all through the season. Starting with the off season program and we were able to do an off season program virtually and still find success this year. I don't think there's been a drop off in performance. You even see it on the coaching and GM side with the virtual draft and how scouting was done and you heard a lot of stories come out, talking about how they enjoyed that time away from the facility with their families and they were able to get all their work done and had better work-life balance.

JC Tretter: [16:36](#)

You see these things that we were forced into because of the virus that only make it better. Then you go to training camp and we have an acclimation period. Talking to coaches around the league, they've told me that they really enjoyed the fact that they had time to



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teach this year and time during training camp to go over fundamental stuff they've never been able to do before in training camp because it's let's get the pads on and let's start playing and hitting and you lose that time for teaching.

JC Tretter: [17:05](#)

Another change that probably the public doesn't see but affects players is we weren't in the hotels this year. We were back with our families. We were able to go home and be with them when otherwise we would be in the hotel. I think that's something that we've done constantly just because we it's always been done that way. There's really no reason to do it. No other job do you constrict or limit your time with your family because it's an important time of year. You don't see accountants move into hotels during tax season because they need to pay attention more. It's something that doesn't have any real proof of benefiting it. Things like that, those changes, we will continue monitor the health and safety aspect of it and follow injuries and how to protect that. That data will come in and we'll review it. But that's our goal: evolving this game. Instead of doing things we've always done, we move to what are the best practices, what have we learned, what we can we do better and let's evolve faster than we have then when we can.

Dr. Thom Mayer: [18:12](#)

If I could, George, the one thing that I think can never be overemphasized is the incredible discipline that these men have shown during the course of the season. The incredible resiliency in terms of how they behave within the ecosystem of the facility and on the road and away games but also the discipline of the families. It's staggering how well they've been able to control their ecosystem to make sure that the virus doesn't get transmitted. I'm in a total awe of the man and the women and the kids that are involved in this.

George Atallah: [18:49](#)

Thanks, Doc. Ken, you are up.

George Atallah: [18:51](#)

Ken, your audio doesn't seem to be working for some reason.

Ken Belson: [19:04](#)

Can you hear me now?

George Atallah: [19:05](#)

We got you now, buddy.



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- Ken Belson: [19:06](#) Okay. Thank you.
- Ken Belson: [19:07](#) Tomorrow, the owners are meeting and may decide to exercise their option for a 17th game next year. Assuming they approve that and there's the 17th game, what are the main pieces to be negotiated between you and the owners?
- DeMaurice Smith: [19:25](#) Yeah and thanks for the question. The main pieces would be we constantly are looking to ensure that we've got a firm focus on health and safety of our players. I don't think that anything next year is going to frankly happen without an eye towards what we've learned this year and changes that we may have to make with respect to our players and what's going to happen.
- DeMaurice Smith: [20:02](#) I'm just extremely nervous about saying that we've somehow arrived to where we are but with a few weeks left of football and trying to project what's going to happen with the off season, I think that it would be safe to say that we're going to be looking at anything and everything, whether there's a 17th game or not, but anything and everything that we've done and learned this time around knowing that in all likelihood March and April of 2021 is not going to look like March and of 2018 and 2019. Right?
- DeMaurice Smith: [20:52](#) All of those things will continue to be fluid things that we will address based on the information that we have.
- Ken Belson: [20:57](#) Does JC have anything he wants to add?
- JC Tretter: [21:05](#) No, I think D said it well. I think he covered everything.
- George Atallah: [21:14](#) Any other questions in the queue? If not, I want to reiterate something that one of you raised last week which I think we're going to touch on next week on mental and emotional health, which I think is one of the more underrated stress points in this entire pandemic.



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- George Atallah: [21:36](#) Three weeks to go in the regular season, teams are starting to wind down while some teams' playoff pictures are coming into focus. Cleveland.
- George Atallah: [21:46](#) Some other teams are starting to wane and making sure that we make it to the finish line.
- George Atallah: [21:53](#) JC, I really wants you to hit on the continuing mental health toll. Reminder to everybody: every single NFL club, as a result of an agreement that we struck with the NFL, I think in the summer of '18 or '19, has a mental health clinician on staff and the importance of everybody using that person as a resource.
- George Atallah: [22:21](#) So, JC, reiterate some of the things that you're hearing, please.
- JC Tretter: [22:25](#) Yeah. I think this isn't unique to football players. This is something that almost everybody is going through because of this pandemic and football players are no different.
- JC Tretter: [22:36](#) There is a isolation feeling. We are entering the holiday season. We just had Thanksgiving. We saw that toll on guys not being able to see their families, not having those moments that you look forward to during the grind of a long season where you want your family to be here, you want to be able to see everybody and catch up. That's something that's kind of a carrot throughout the year of let's get to Thanksgiving and have that moment to decompress with the family and that's not possible this year. As we approach Christmas, that's another one where guys look forward to that moment to be around their families.
- JC Tretter: [23:14](#) Again, this isn't different than what anybody with any job is dealing with, but it still is a toll on players as they get through this season, to continue to deal with this, continue to be diligent, continue to make the right decisions and sometimes those right decisions are very tough. Not being able to see people you always looked forward to seeing all year, that's just tough. That's tough on everybody. It's something we continue to deal



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with and continue to monitor and make sure our guys are taken care of from a mental health perspective.

- George Atallah: [23:49](#) Thank you. Any other questions from the floor? If not, we don't have to have this last any longer. We'll be back here next Tuesday at 2:00.
- George Atallah: [24:02](#) I sent a link in the chat that not just has resources and data on what's going on with the pandemic, but will also have the transcripts from these press availabilities up there 24 hours after. It should be up tomorrow morning, tomorrow afternoon, up there.
- George Atallah: [24:22](#) Any other questions?
- George Atallah: [24:25](#) Okay.
- DeMaurice Smith: [24:26](#) Awesome, folks. Appreciate it.
- George Atallah: [24:28](#) Thanks everybody.
- JC Tretter: [24:29](#) Thanks everyone.