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NFLPA COVID-19 Media Call Transcript

- George Atallah: [16:30](#) Hey everybody. Welcome to another weekly edition to the NFLPA COVID briefing everybody jumping on. As we wind down the regular season, we are very excited that we've made it to this point so far. We're going to start as we always do with some facts and figures and some data. I'll turn it over to De, we'll try to get to everybody's questions. Same as we've done every week, try to use your raise hand feature on the Zoom call. So De, over to you.
- DeMaurice Smith: [17:05](#) Sure. Still happy holidays, happy new year everyone. Thanks for joining us as we head into the final week of the regular season. As George indicated, we'll start off with the stats, and then we'll turn it over to questions. Between December 20th and December 26th, a total of 41,047 tests were administered to a total of 6,700 players and team personnel. If you want to break that down, the players, 16,000 tests were administered to players. Nearly 25,000 tests were administered to approximately 4,400 personnel. Last week, there were 21 new confirmed positive tests players, and 37 new confirmed positive tests among personnel.
- DeMaurice Smith: [18:03](#) Going to positivity and incident rates. Overall, the positivity rate last week was 0.14%. That's up from 0.11% last week. The overall incidents rate was 0.85. That was an increase from 0.65 last week. Breaking it down to players, our positivity rate for players was 0.13%. That's an increase from 0.09% last week. The incidents rate among players this week was 0.89%, that was an increase from 0.59% last week. Staff positivity rate for this week was 0.15%, that was an increase from 0.12% last week, and the overall incidents rate for staff was 0.84% an increase from 0.68%.
- DeMaurice Smith: [19:07](#) The data doesn't lie, obviously we are seeing an increase that is tracking increases across the country. The good news, our overall incidents or positivity rate is still staying well below one percent, and that's again due to terrific work by those in the NFL and the NFL PA. And before we turn it over to questions, I'm never going





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to stop saying thank you to our medical director, Tom Mayer. And Sean [inaudible 00:19:38] on our side and our COVID team that has kept our players safe and productive during the season. So with that George, I'll turn it over to you.

- George Atallah: [19:51](#) Well, this might be the fastest briefing we've ever had, because nobody's got a hand raised for questions.
- DeMaurice Smith: [19:56](#) Say happy new year.
- George Atallah: [19:58](#) Oh, here we go, here we go as soon as I spoke up. Howard, why don't we go to you? Howard [Ballser 00:20:04]?
- Howard: [20:07](#) Yes. With the number of guys right now that are on the list, what happens with players on non-playoff teams when the season is over? The guys that are still, quote, in the protocols?
- DeMaurice Smith: [20:21](#) A good question. Well, the macro question, micro question. We are working with the league right now on protocols that will be applicable to players and teams that are no longer in the playoffs. And as we've done before, those conversations all hover around access to the club, what happens with texting. Prior to access to the club, how many people be in the facility? So we're continuing to work through those issues. For the players who aren't in the protocol? I'm sorry, players who are not in the playoffs? You're no longer going to be in the high-risk close contact category, because all of that depends on your presence at the facility. Does that answer your question?
- Howard: [21:22](#) Yeah. [inaudible 00:21:25] guys that have tested positive and still aren't, will they be monitored or maybe if they go to their home city?
- DeMaurice Smith: [21:39](#) Yeah, I lost it. George, I didn't hear the beginning.
- George Atallah: [21:46](#) Howard's got a little [crosstalk 00:21:47] on his mic. I think he was asking you about players who have already tested positive and are in the protocol as the season ends up. So you test positive heading into the last weekend of the regular season, season's over for you. What happens?



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- DeMaurice Smith: [22:07](#) Yeah, I'll defer to Sean. But if you've tested positive, you're still isolated in a way from other teammates and after the season's over. But for the required things that a player has to do with the team, end of the year team physicals, things like that? There's going to be no other requirement for you to be in the facility.
- George Atallah: [22:28](#) Okay. Howard, we can get you more on that. And like I said, I think the updated, off season protocols, we're still working through those with the league. Ben, you're up.
- Ben: [22:45](#) There you go. Thanks as always for doing this. De, it seems like from my vantage point that this year has been very good for veteran players. Seeing lots of guys getting opportunities on practice squads, maybe that they wouldn't have gotten in the past. Do you agree with that statement, and do you think any of these temporary rules that have created more roster flexibility could continue in the future?
- DeMaurice Smith: [23:16](#) Yeah. We talked about this a little bit last week, and JC can weigh in from the perspective of the veteran players. I look at all of this as an opportunity for NFL football to evolve. It is sometimes extremely hard to effectuate change in the league, and we've seen things over the last two or three years, including this year, a short-term IR, bringing players back. A recent modification that we made on practice squad players coming up and down to an active roster. I think anything that we do that results in us working and playing-
- DeMaurice Smith: [24:03](#) ... and us working and playing smarter is something that we should continue to evaluate. And if it makes sense for the league and for the players, that we institute it. You've been around this business for a long time, it is just hard every now and then to get positive change moving unless we have a big fight. I think you've seen a lot of things happen this year, and we're just smarter. And I think a lot of them benefited veteran players, but frankly, a lot of it benefited the entire roster. So we are always looking to do things smarter, to make things better, safer for our membership, and I think that we



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are going to have good conversations in the off season about which ones remain in effect. But with respect to veteran players, there isn't any more of a veteran player than JC?

JC Tretter: [24:57](#)

I think you said it absolutely right. There are a bunch of things this year, through all the struggles in the tough times of getting it going and keeping it going, it did provide an opportunity to get new data points on the chart, to figure out what we can do differently and better in many cases, and they were kind of solutions for this year. But after seeing how well they worked and how much better it was for both the players and the teams, I think there are a bunch of things that make sense to continue to do in the future and make permanent, and that's something we're continuing to look at and will continue to look at after the season as we pour over all the data. But I think there's going to be a lot of things that both sides should want to continue, because it's for the best interest of both the players and the teams, and we'll continue to look at that.

George Atallah: [25:54](#)

Kate [Maskey 00:01:54], you are up next.

Kate Maskey: [25:57](#)

With this season, where our teams have been... After contact tracing, some teams have been in an extreme competitive advantage, the Broncos last month, the Lions and Browns just the last weekend. And the league's approach has [inaudible 00:26:12] with scheduling decisions are made for medical considerations only, not competitive issues. In your conversations with them, do you expect [inaudible 00:26:21] during the post-season, and if so, what are your thoughts about that approach?

DeMaurice Smith: [26:30](#)

I don't think any decision should ever be made with respect to COVID and competitive balance. I think that we've tried to make the smartest decisions with respect to the health and safety of our players and our staff. I think it is a very slippery slope to either read into or to start making decisions motivated by competitive balance. So I think once you start making those decisions, it becomes very difficult to manage, and also very difficult in order to determine when to stop.

DeMaurice Smith: [27:17](#)

So I think what you've seen this year is... At the beginning of the year, we talked about a perfect storm. A contact virus and a contact pandemic, and managing



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that with a contact sport. And I think what you've seen over 16 weeks is the League and the Union work hard to make tough decisions, but right decisions about player health and safety. And I think the way we keep ourselves honest and right, is to keep the focus on health, safety and the protection of everybody involved in the game.

JC Tretter: [27:57](#)

Yeah. And like you said, we dealt with it this week as the Browns, and we saw the Lions deal with it, missing a bunch of coaches for their game. And it seems there's still a little confusion publicly on how this all works and how these decisions are made. So while we have the time, we might as well just run through it one more time. The focus is always on preventing an outbreak. So if there are positive tests, multiple positive tests, and there's continued spread within the building? The focus moves to containing the virus, and that's where you've seen instances that games have been postponed. Because it doesn't make sense from a health and safety aspect to bring that team, let alone two teams together when you're not sure who has the virus and where it's spread to. That's when you've seen games be postponed to make sure we have a firm grasp over where this virus is and where the virus is going.

JC Tretter: [28:51](#)

When it comes to the high risk close contacts, That is one of the major tools in preventing an outbreak preventing spread throughout the team. And at this point, we're confident that the protocols work when followed. Everybody should know if you go into the facility to wear a mask. You socially distance, you wear your connexion. You're both most likely going to be able to avoid contracting the virus, as well as landing on the high-risk close contact list. And that's been a clear delineation, as we've seen games postponed in order to prevent the spread of the virus, but we're not seeing games postponed because of high risk close contacts and the competitive disadvantages that come with that.

Speaker 2: [29:43](#)

And I would just add to this, that... First of all De, thanks for the shout out, I appreciate that, Sean and I both. But you've never been anything other than gracious about that, but we'll never stop thanking you for thanking us for doing our job. It's just doing our job. The distinction between testing, and testing of course is identification. There's a baseline risk, and testing tells you where there's an amplification of that risk because someone



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has tested positive. They may test positive and confirm positive or not, whereas contact tracing? It sounds like a passive activity, but it's actually a very active activity, and that is isolation and reduction of risk. Risk mitigation, by taking those people who have been identified as possibly more at risk and putting them in an isolated environment. So they're highly related, but the idea of contact tracing being an afterthought or a passive activity? It's a very active and very critical activity as JC said.

George Atallah: [30:49](#)

Okay. Rob, you're up next.

Rob: [30:54](#)

Hi guys. De, you just touched on this a little bit. But the League has maintained all along its desire to play all 256 games within 17 weeks, and we're almost there, you got one week to go. When you look back, just how daunting of a task was it? It seemed improbable at some points that you'd be able to pull this off. And what does that say about the collaborative effort between both the Union, the League and everyone involved?

DeMaurice Smith: [31:25](#)

I'm going to turn this one over to JC. Because we got a CBA done in March, we elected a new president shortly thereafter. And a guy whose full-time job is playing football was now charged with, "How do we or can we lead a group of players, and reach an agreement with the League to try and attempt to engage in NFL football in the middle of a pandemic?" And that's literally the stage that was set for JC, so I'll let him take the daunting task from there.

JC Tretter: [32:16](#)

Yeah, no, it's something. First off, I give a ton of credit for everybody involved in the talks to get us to that point, because this is something that... There wasn't anything to look back on, anything to look to and use an example of how to go forward. This was a novel emerging virus, and we were tasked with figuring out a way to play a contact sport while a contact virus is out there. And that is something that was difficult to wrestle with, difficult to figure out the best way to handle it. But we reached out to a ton of experts on both sides, we had a ton of help from inside our staff to try to move forward. And the first focus was on the health and safety of our players, and figuring out what is the way that we keep all of our players as safe as possible, as well as giving them options to make the best decision for themselves?



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JC Tretter:

[33:15](#)

And it was a tough task, it took a lot of time to figure out the best way to provide people an option to, if they didn't feel safe, opt out and still have financial help. As well as for the guys who wanted to continue to play and wanted to play this year, provide them the safest work environment possible. They felt confident being able to go home to their families after work, and feel like they weren't endangering them as well. So it was a huge task, I give credit to everybody involved in helping us get to this point. And we still have another week of the regular season, and then we finish the job that we set out for.

JC Tretter:

[33:55](#)

And we said from the beginning, "It wasn't about getting started." We felt confident we could get to the point of getting started. It was about staying started, and continuing the season and finishing at the Super Bowl. And we are closing in on that goal, it's going to need everybody to continue to comply with protocols and do the right thing, and have a hundred percent compliance. But every person that walks in that building, I give a ton of credit this year. Because it was a year that caused everybody to do things differently, everybody to change their habits of how they've always practiced and how they've always prepared and how they've always worked. So everybody who's walked into those buildings, staff, coaches, players, executives? I give a ton of credit for getting us to this point, and the work will continue and we'll finish it.

George Atallah:

[34:39](#)

Okay, Nate?

DeMaurice Smith:

[34:40](#)

Yeah, the only thing I would probably add George is, we only get anywhere in our union with really good leadership. And I'm proud of our players, I'm proud of the decisions they made early on. Proud of our staff and how we approach the whole season. And like JC said, we always thought that we could start, the challenge was how do we finish? And now that we're on the heels of that or the cusp of that, I'm really proud of everybody involved.

George Atallah:

[35:12](#)

Okay, Nate, I'm going to unmute you now.



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- Nate: [35:25](#) Hey guys, thanks for doing this. Hey, JC, to circle back to what you said a minute ago about the decision with the Browns. What was it like for you? As NFL PA president, you know on one hand why a decision's made? But I'm sure you'd want your guys in an important game as a player. And then I know you said there's confusion among the public, but was there confusion among players too? Did you have teammates coming to you and asking you, "Why isn't this game being postponed?" Things like that?
- JC Tretter: [35:58](#) I didn't have any players asked me. I think-
- JC Tretter: [36:03](#) I didn't have any players ask me ... I think by now we've seen, there's been plenty of examples this year, starting with San Francisco earlier in the year. You had the Bronco scenario not too long ago. And then this week you had both Detroit and Cleveland, with kind of examples of multiple players/staff being out and having to miss a game because they're close contacts. And I think first of all, I was explaining how you become a close contact and understanding that the reason you get pulled out is because once you are deemed a high risk close contact, you were then in position that increases your likelihood of contracting the virus. And once that happens, it's not safe for you to then be put back into the population to potentially spread that virus to other people. And it's tough. It's disappointing.
- JC Tretter: [36:49](#) It's difficult to miss players or coaches on game day. But that's kind of the year we're at. So I think the players understand. It's definitely frustrating. Guys want to be out there, and that was one of the tougher things this year. Guys, our competitors' guys, play through injury, through illness, and this is a year that that's not possible. You can't play through COVID. It's not safe for the guys around you. And there's the choices or the choice is taken away from the player of, can you do it? It's a hard, "No." And it's a hard "no" if you're a close contact. And that's why following the protocols is so important. Wearing your mask, wearing your connects-on, and physically distancing at the facility. If you do those three things, odds are not going to contract the virus and you will not end up on the high-risk close



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Speaker 3:

[37:44](#)

contact list. So following the protocols and having a hundred percent compliance takes care of it all.

Thank you.

George Atallah:

[37:45](#)

Okay. Pranav, you got a couple of questions gone. You're up. Okay.

Speaker 4:

[37:51](#)

Hey guys. Thanks for doing this. First off, Adam Silver, when the pandemic started, did a playoff bubble for the NBA. Is there any possibility of that happening for the NFL?

DeMaurice Smith:

[38:05](#)

No, I don't think that there's a need for it. We are staying well below 1% on our overall incidence rate and positivity rate. I think JC addressed it last week. When you think of a bubble, the biggest, the fact that it has an NFL team is where they're sleeping. So as long as our rates remain low, our medical staff on both sides, NFLPA and the NFL, have recommended that we not move to a bubble. And I certainly agree with them.

George Atallah:

[38:50](#)

Okay. Howard, we're going to swing back to you and perhaps wrap it up after that.

Howard:

[38:57](#)

Going back to the beginning and the whole start and hoping to finish was the most crucial decision, when originally, the testing was supposed to be only daily for two weeks in training camp, and then that changed to keep it daily throughout. You guys think that was the most crucial decision that was made for this. Can anyone imagine what would have happened if there was gaps in days of testing?

DeMaurice Smith:

[39:27](#)

Howard, I think it was all of it. I think the most critical question was the first one that we were dealing with, JC, the executive committee and the NFLPA staff, was the moral and ethical question of, should we be playing NFL football in a pandemic? Because remember, back when this started, we didn't know a lot of the information that we currently have about how the virus was transmitted. And the critical question it seemed to me was that that initial Tabula rasa question of, should we be doing this in the first place? And because that first question is far more important about then how many tests does it take to get us through? We had



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critical questions about what do we know about the impact of this virus on a player's body.

- DeMaurice Smith: [40:34](#) Were are we going to be taking test away from people in the public marketplace? Would we be overtaxing our first responders who are there to protect us at the game? What are we going to do if we deal with jurisdictions that start to run out of hospital space? Should medical doctors who are now being tasked with keeping the country alive, be focused on primarily dealing with NFL players? Before we even got to the question of testing, there were those critical moral questions of should we be doing that? And frankly, until we got through a lot of those moral questions, ethical questions, that's when we got to operational questions.
- DeMaurice Smith: [41:27](#) So I think as we look back and I know your question was focused more on operations, daily testing was big, but so was not playing preseason games. Testing was big, but also not having a regular OTA off-season. So I think once we got our heads around the moral/ethical framework, then being able to comfortably move into an operational evaluation of how do we get through every day, became a lot easier. But I think that core month of having a lot of tough calls, and JC and I had a lot of tough calls about how did we think we could be doing this.
- DeMaurice Smith: [42:21](#) I think those were the toughest ones. If we would have ... Let's flip it around. If we would have come to a conclusion that NFL football would have been taking test away from the people who needed it, I think every person on our leadership would have come to a conclusion that we shouldn't be doing this. Right? That was a big question.
- George Atallah: [42:48](#) Okay. Hal, bring us home.
- Hal: [43:00](#) Can you hear me?
- George Atallah: [43:01](#) We got you.
- Hal: [43:02](#) Okay, good. For either JC or Dave, either or both of you, I know when you started out on this whole endeavor, everybody had to be hopeful that you get to 256, that



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- Speaker 5: [43:32](#) you'd get to a Superbowl. But if I could pin you down and ask you, what did you think the odds were at that point? What would you have said?
- Hey, let's throw that to the guy ... Who on the call has had a new baby? Let's see. Let's see. Let's pick him. Odds? I'll let JC go. I'm not sure, we would, had a lot of odds makers. I might not. I just think that it was daunting to think of all of the things we would have to do operationally after we came to this comfort level that we wouldn't be unreasonably jeopardizing the public health and safety. I don't have anything else for odds wise after that. JC?
- JC Tretter: [44:16](#) Yeah. Odds are tough because this has been such a long path forward where when these conversations started, we had just entered almost nationwide lockdowns. And when that starts, if those are going on, we knew we were going to be tied to our local jurisdictions and what they say. So, when we're having these conversations and our local communities are locked down, we knew, football wasn't going to take precedent over that. And we were going to have to follow those rules. So we have probably a different stance on what the odds of it working when things open up. And as we went, we knew we were going to have to continue to evolve the protocols to finish. And we've done a really good job of making changes as we've learned on how to finish this and how to keep our guys safe and keep the season going.
- JC Tretter: [45:13](#) So we knew we were going to have to have the ability to make those changes and adapt and evolve as we learn more about the virus. So it's tough to pin down what the odds were at each one of those twists and turns. And now we're at a point where I think we all feel very confident we will finish, as long as the protocols are complied to 100%. We're at a point now where we feel very confident in the protocols we design. And now it's for these last, week of the regular season and the weeks of the playoffs. As long as everybody involves staff, coaches, players follow the protocols, I think we feel comparably finished. But it's tough to pinpoint the odds at each one of those twists and turns.
- George Atallah: [46:00](#) Thank you JC. Thanks to everybody for joining.