

A Letter to the Transformation Committee: Moving the College Baseball Season Back Makes Sense Financially, Academically, and Medically



Photo source: Visit Omaha, *College World Series*, VISIT OMAHA (last visited Oct. 11, 2022), <https://www.visitomaha.com/listings/ncaa-mens-college-world-series/57089/>

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Baseball is often called a “Rite of Spring,” but for college baseball teams, opening day is more synonymous with snow showers than sunshine.¹ For fans, mid-February and March evokes images of college basketball, not a trip to the baseball field.² Indeed, if college baseball is to achieve its stated goals of more scholarships and greater popularity among fans, it must make reforms.³ Moving the start of the season from mid-February to late March not only makes sense financially, but it also benefits the student-athletes both academically and medically.⁴

Although numerous proposals have been raised in the past, the NCAA’s Transformation Committee should seriously consider a college baseball schedule change—push the season back

¹ See generally Gary Putnik, *Virginia Tech’s Carson Demartini Steals Home in a Snowy Game*, NCAA (April 9, 2022), <https://www.ncaa.com/news/baseball/article/2022-04-09/virginia-tech-baseballs-carson-demartini-steals-home-in-snowy-game> (noting the game between NC State and Virginia Tech featured a snow delay).

² See Jeff Hartsell, *Citadel Coach: New College Baseball Model Could Lead to Split Among Division I Schools*, POST AND COURIER (Sept. 14, 2020), https://www.postandcourier.com/sports/citadel-coach-new-college-baseball-model-could-lead-to-split-among-ncaa-division-i-schools/article_2ff73d48-a503-11ea-8cdf-eba63fd6d05c.html (describing how the start of college baseball season usually coincides with the “fever pitch” of the college basketball season).

³ See Teddy Cahill, *Prominent Coaches Debut Plan for a ‘New Model’ For College Baseball*, BASEBALL AMERICA (March 21, 2020), <https://www.baseballamerica.com/stories/prominent-coaches-debut-plan-for-a-new-model-for-college-baseball/> (discussing the proposal of former Michigan head coach Erik Bakich, who is one of the top coaches in college baseball).

⁴ See *id.* (noting that this proposal has widespread support from many of college baseball’s top coaches).

a month.⁵ As the NCAA explores a “New Division I Model,” it’s time they realize that college baseball in February and early March imposes an unsustainable financial burden on athletic departments, pulls players away from class, and increases the likelihood of injury in light of a short preseason and often playing games in winter-like conditions.⁶

Under the current schedule, college baseball has a “poor financial model” that “only a handful of schools can actually operate.”⁷ The season begins in mid-February and lasts until the College World Series in late June; for many northern schools, this mid-February start date means teams will spend the first month of the season (at least) flying to southern and western regions to play games.⁸ The University of Michigan, for example, spends roughly \$230,000 on travel alone during the first month of the season.⁹ By contrast, the school spends roughly \$88,000 during the last month of the season, when they are able to play more home games or travel to regional opponents.¹⁰

However, starting the season a month later would reduce the number of weekends northern schools would have to travel—helping athletes stay on top of their schoolwork while also saving programs money.¹¹ If nothing is done, these issues will continue to fester.¹² Not only is the NCAA undergoing a metamorphosis, but conferences are, too.¹³ The financial and academic burdens will only increase as athletes will travel coast-to-coast for a weekend series; athletic departments will shell out more travel costs and athletes will miss more class than ever

⁵ See *id.* (discussing how Bakich developed the plan as a way to make the sport more financially feasible).

⁶ See Hartsell, *supra* note 2 (arguing that college baseball should modernize its approach given that it is currently at its highest level ever, in terms of players and facilities).

⁷ See David Woelkers, *In Transformation Committee Reforms, Bakich Sees Potential for Growth of the Game*, MICHIGAN DAILY (May 25, 2022), <https://www.michigandaily.com/sports/baseball/in-transformation-committee-reforms-bakich-sees-potential-for-growth-of-the-game/> (touting the benefit that NIL has brought to college baseball).

⁸ See Cahill, *supra* note 3 (discussing how travel costs and missed class time pile up very quickly).

⁹ See *id.* (according to the coaches’ proposal, Michigan spent roughly \$233,728 on travel during the first four weeks of the 2019 college baseball season, compared to \$88,864 during the last four weeks of the season).

¹⁰ See *id.* (noting that while this number isn’t perfect, it does provide some context for overall cost).

¹¹ See *id.* (“This proposal grants the opportunity for collegiate baseball programs to reach new heights on the field and allows the athletes to maximize all the resources of their university off the field.”).

¹² See *id.* (“Implementing modernized business models has never been more important than today.”).

¹³ See Andrea Adelson, *Inside the Stunning USC-UCLA Move to the Big Ten—and the Chaos That Followed*, ESPN (July 11, 2022), https://www.espn.com/college-football/story/_/id/34217498/inside-stunning-usc-ucla-move-big-ten-chaos-followed (noting how the stunning move had been kept relatively secret prior to it being announced).

before.¹⁴ Pushing the season back a month, however, mitigates these problems.¹⁵ If the college baseball is to finally offer more than 11.7 scholarships per team, it's necessary to make the sport more profitable; additional games in May and June will entice fans to the ballpark, boosting the sport's overall popularity and the program's bottom line.¹⁶ Additionally, with more games after the academic semester has ended, conferences like the Big Ten will have the flexibility to schedule a potential Rutgers-USC or Maryland-UCLA series for the end of May or early June, after academic commitments have wrapped up for the year.¹⁷

Then there's the medical side: renowned orthopedic surgeon, Dr. James Andrews, said the proposal is a "no brainer" insofar as it would give teams a longer preseason.¹⁸ Arm injuries, especially for pitchers, tend to spike early in the season, which suggests that players need a longer ramp up time and an extended preseason.¹⁹ Pushing the season back a month would give players and coaches seven weeks to prepare their bodies for the rigors of the season, significantly longer than the three weeks they currently have.²⁰

Of course, this "New Model" presents some hurdles, too. First, a delayed start means teams will remain on campus long after the academic semester wraps up; keeping teams on campus 7-8 weeks after graduation means housing and feeding players, a cost many mid-major programs say they simply cannot afford.²¹ Second, pushing the season back a month may hamper summer internship opportunities for players who are not destined for professional

¹⁴ See Doug Robinson, *Will NCAA Transformation Committee Be Able to Cure What Ails College Sports*, DESERET NEWS (Aug. 4, 2022), <https://www.deseret.com/2022/8/4/23287115/can-ncaa-transformation-committee-have-impact-on-college-football-basketball-nil-transfer-portal> (questioning the necessity of the NCAA).

¹⁵ See Cahill, *supra* note 3 ("This proposal grants the opportunity for collegiate baseball programs to reach new heights on the field and allows the athletes to maximize all the resources of their university off the field.").

¹⁶ See *id.* (noting that even for schools who *can* play at home during February, the weather is still not optimal for fans to want to watch a game).

¹⁷ See Brian Fonseca, *Bombshell: USC, UCLA Plan to Join Big Ten, leave Pac-12. What it Means for Rutgers*, STAR-LEDGER (June 30, 2022), <https://www.nj.com/sports/2022/06/bombshell-usc-ucla-plan-to-join-big-ten-leave-pac-12-what-it-means-for-rutgers.html> ("Rutgers could be taking annual cross-country trips to sunny Los Angeles, California, in the not-so-distant future.").

¹⁸ See Teddy Cahill, *Q&A With Michigan's Erik Bakich on the New College Baseball Model*, BASEBALL AMERICA (May 26, 2020), <https://www.baseballamerica.com/stories/qa-with-michigans-erik-bakich-on-the-new-college-baseball-model/> (describing Dr. Andrews as the "foremost authority on throwing arm injuries").

¹⁹ See Birmingham Medical News, *College Baseball Arm Injury Rates Higher Than Expected*, BIRMINGHAM MEDICAL NEWS (Sept. 16, 2020), <https://www.birminghammedicalnews.com/article/8065/college-baseball-arm-injury-rates-higher-than-expected> (noting that injuries also tend to spike later in the season due to overuse).

²⁰ See Cahill, *supra* note 18 (regarding the current preseason time, Bakich said "counterintuitive isn't even the word.").

²¹ See Hartsell, *supra* note 2 (noting these costs hover around \$80,000 for the entire team).

baseball.²² Currently, players on teams that advance deep in the NCAA Tournament may not be able to begin a summer job/internship until the middle of June.²³ This new system would make it even harder. Finally, a later start would negatively affect collegiate summer wood bat leagues, like the Cape Cod League.²⁴ But there is an alternative: summer leagues could delay their seasons until the end of June, which would give them enough time to recruit players.²⁵

College baseball has had a financial problem for a long time.²⁶ While coaches try to grow the game through more scholarships and more paid assistant coaches, they are forced to reckon with the fact that the sport just isn't profitable.²⁷ The NCAA Transformation Committee can take steps to alleviate that financial burden—and benefit student-athlete quality of life—by making college baseball a true spring sport.²⁸

²² See Cahill, *supra* note 3 (noting the vast majority of college baseball players will not play professional baseball).

²³ See *id.* (noting that even under the current schedule, it can be a challenge for players who advance deep into the postseason to attain a summer internship).

²⁴ See *id.* (“What will happen to summer leagues is also a question that is always raised during any debate about pushing the season back.”).

²⁵ See *id.* (arguing the demise of summer leagues may simply be a necessary tradeoff for a new college baseball schedule).

²⁶ See Cahill, *supra* note 18 (“We do know that we need to be more financially responsible and improve our bottom lines.”).

²⁷ See Cahill, *supra* note 3 (noting that it is not a good combination to have higher education in a financial crisis and a sport that operates at a significant financial net loss).

²⁸ See *id.* (“We need to do what is best for the long-term health and growth of college baseball.”).