

# Episode 21: The Gophers' gains and losses

In this week's episode of "The Weekly Rundown," our staff discusses the return of Big Ten football and the athletics department's decision to eliminate three men's sports.

## Sports Staff

Into music

NOLAN O'HARA: Hello, and welcome back to the "Weekly Rundown," presented by the Minnesota Daily. It's been a bit of a hiatus, but we're back for our first podcast of the 2020-21 school year. I'm your host Nolan O'Hara, and today I'm joined by two of our reporters AJ Condon and Brendan O'Brien. AJ, Brendan, how's it going?

AJ CONDON: It's going great. I'm excited to be here. Get sports back in Minnesota. So should be a fun time.

BRENDAN O'BRIEN: Yeah, I'm doing pretty well to Nolan. Glad to be here with you guys.

O'HARA: Good to hear. It's been a big news week for both the Gophers and college athletics. The Gophers athletics department announced program cuts on Sep. 10. The department will be discontinuing three men's sports: indoor and outdoor track and field, gymnastics and tennis. There's more to come on that, but let's start with Wednesday's announcement. Big Ten football is back after pressure from student-athletes, fans and politicians. The conference announced Wednesday that it will begin an eight game schedule, beginning the weekend of Oct. 23-24. AJ broke the news for us here, tell us a little bit more about that and what it means for the Gophers.

CONDON: Yeah. I mean, hearing that news is awesome. I was really looking forward to having football this fall and was a little worried when we saw a lot of Power Five conferences get their seasons going. And the Gophers in the rest of the Big Ten remained undetermined and uncertain when that season would be going, and Wednesday came, after a month. We finally got word of the season starting, which was awesome. I remember on I think it was Tuesday night when Nebraska's [athletics director] was caught a little on the hot mic and broke the news a little early. So, I think a lot of people are getting excited on what the news would finally come and it came on Wednesday. So that was huge.

I believe looking at for fans in the stands, it's not looking too good. I think they extended it to families of the players. This offseason, we saw Rashad Bateman declare for the 2021 Draft, so he will not be returning to the Gulf this season. Obviously tough on the offense not having him return as well as Tyler Johnson. Are we're gonna see Demetrius Douglas, and blanking on the other wide receivers name, help me out here.



O'HARA: Autman-Bell.

CONDON: Thank you, Chris Autman-Bell. Yeah, so we're gonna see those who jump into a bigger role on the team. Tanner Morgan, we saw him have a great season last year as a top five p rated coming into the season as a quarterback, that's gonna be huge. Mohammed Ibrahim can be a big part of the team this year. So, I'm really excited to see that offense. But a bigger question going into the years looking at the defense. We saw a lot of the pieces there either leave due to graduation or even go into the NFL. You're gonna see a new look there. And I'm really excited to see what PJ can do with this new talent on defense. So, I'm really excited for the season to get going. and hopefully the Gophers can get that ninth game and the Big Ten Championship.

O'Hara: What led to this reversal by the Big Ten?

CONDON: Yeah, I mean, I think a lot of it was the pushback they got. I think when you see these other conference's getting their schedules going, you see that what they were able to do with the COVID restrictions, they were able to find enough ways to get players tested and following up protocols. And see the Big Ten, especially at Ohio State, you're seeing Justin Fields getting petitions going, you're seeing these players, parents and even politicians that are really pushing for the Big Ten to get the season going. I also think that the financial issue, I just don't think they could have taken that deficit and not cut more sports. So, I think for all the reasons and obviously probably a few more they were probably able to, they were able to finally realize that they had enough protocols in place and felt safe enough where they were able to have a season with everything going on in the sports world.

O'HARA: Big Ten football is officially back so Gopher fans be sure to mark the weekend of Oct. 23-24 on your calendars. And the return of should football should help the athletics department with an otherwise bleak financial picture. That's what led to the department cutting men's indoor and outdoor track and field, men's gymnastics and men's tennis, also citing Title IX compliance. Under this proposal, those teams will be allowed to finish their seasons, but will be discontinued after this year. The department will still honor student athlete scholarships. But the decision is pending Board of Regents approval and the Board is expected to vote on this proposal in their next meeting in October. But, it has also prompted a lot of blowback from student athletes, coaches and fans, including a 'Save Gopher Sports' protest that took place Wednesday at Athletes Village. Supporters marched from there to Morill Hall where President Gabel's office is. Brendan, I know you spoke to some tennis players who are affected by this decision. What did they have to say?

O'BRIEN: Yeah, so after talking to three men's tennis players, there kind of appeared to be a common theme amongst how they all felt. The basic timeline was Wednesday, the first week of school they had a compliance meeting that they annually have. All student athletes at Minnesota have, and Mark Coyle, athletic director here at the University, jumped on the call for a few minutes and just told the tennis players he was excited for their season and couldn't wait for them to get back out on the court. And then Thursday, players get a quick short email from their coach telling them to jump on a Zoom call and that Zoom call ends up breaking the news to them. That 2020-2021 would be their last season. Most of them, obviously were disappointed, was the biggest feeling amongst them. I think what they were also disappointed in as well was, how it transpired.

And obviously with COVID most of these meetings are happening over Zoom. So, you can't have a lot of in person one-on-one interaction. So, it's a little bit different to feel a little bit more personal, from Coyle and from any other athletic administrators. I think what mostly disappointed them though, was the way the University officials talked about Title IX compliance and budgetary reasons because if you just look at the basic numbers, the University is expected to lose around \$75 million is what they projected and with cutting these along with making some other budgetary cuts, they're only saving \$2 million. So, I think they're kind of reading in between the lines and thinking that it wasn't really those reasons because the University has also been in compliance for Title IX for several, several years now. So, I think they were taking it as the University just wanted to cut some of these programs. And now, they thought that they had an opportune time to do so.

O'HARA: And AJ, you covered gymnastics last year and I know you've been reaching out to the team and spoke with Burns [men's gymnastics coach]. I talked to him a little bit on Wednesday at the protest as well. And he's not going down without a fight. What had he said to you?

CONDON: So, I talked to him the other week, and he's as disappointed as the gymnasts are. I mean, he was really excited looking forward to the season for the whole team. They were they were really looking forward to it. They had some pieces that were going together, all they lost was Timmy from last season, they had pretty much their whole team returning. He was really excited for Shane and his whole process getting to USA Gymnastics and trying to compete at the Olympics.

So, he was really excited for this team and hearing that news was just a letdown for him. Like you said, he's not giving up without a fight. He has been on Twitter. He's been trying to get people aware of the situation at hand. The NCAA gymnastics posted a petition and he quoted the tweet, he gave his own personal comments on and just trying to get people to know that gymnastics is not going down without a fight. Burns has been here for a while. And he wants this team to stay here. He wants them to compete this year and not just give up and throw in the towel. He wants him to go out even if it is their last season to have the best season that they can, and he will do whatever he can to keep them going for the future.

O'HARA: Yeah, Burns entering his 17th season as the coach of the gymnastics program. And he's been tweeting a lot of petitions. I saw one he's been asking supporters to reach out to the Board of Regents and voice their disapproval of this proposal. But for both of you, what stood out in particular when you've talked to student-athletes or coaches whose programs were cut?

CONDON: Yeah, so I haven't been able to talk to as many student-athletes yet, but I was able to follow Matt on Twitter when he was at the protest going on. And it seemed like a lot of people were even not the ones that were fully affected by this decision. But you saw other players from other sports that were showing their support. For other Gopher athletes, I think it's awesome to see that it's not just the teams that are being affected by this that are taking action, but just Gopher sports, Gopher athletics as a whole that are going after this together because they know that if they were in their shoes, the gymnastics team, the tennis team, they'd be right there helping them too. So, I think it's awesome to see Gopher sports come together as a whole. And I'm really excited to start talking to some athletes and see what they really think about this decision.

O'BRIEN: For me three quick things come to mind. The first, for men's tennis was that the head coach for the men's tennis team was expected to also get to coach his son for the next few years. His son was committed to Minnesota now, not only does he lose his job, he also loses that opportunity to coach his son in college. The second one is that what one of the tennis players I talked to brought up was he wasn't sure how this might affect other smaller programs within the University as far as recruiting would go. Just if other schools would say, you know, look at Minnesota. If you're a swimmer, or if you're a wrestler, you know, Minnesota did cut some sports. If you go there, you never know if you're gonna get cut. Whereas if you come, you know, to a different Big Ten school, you might have more security in that regard. And then just the third thing is that one of the other tennis players just brought up how most of the tennis players are underclassmen. Yeah, there is a 2020-21 season, hopefully for these athletes in the future. But with this news coming now, it's kind of right in the middle of when they should be training. And now, they're not sure whether or not they should start looking to transfer elsewhere.

CONDON: Exactly. We don't even know if these seasons for sure are going to be happening with the whole pandemic going on. But if it does, what does it mean for their future in the sport, they can't just give up their life's hard work because of one school, cutting the sport. So, we might be seeing a lot more people transferring out before the season even gets going because the news that happened.

O'HARA: Right, athletes, especially in these sports will be faced with the decision whether they want to stay where they currently are and fulfill, the University will fulfill their scholarship, but if they want to continue their career in athletics, they're gonna have to look at somewhere else. But we'll see what happens in the coming days and whether the pressure from student-athletes, coaches and supporters has any bearing on the Regent's decision. Brendan, AJ, thank you so much for joining us.

CONDON: Yeah. Thanks for having us.

O'BRIEN: Yeah, thanks. Really appreciate it Nolan.

Outro music

O'HARA: In other news, the NCAA announced a Nov. 25 start date for both men's and women's basketball. Richard Pitino and Lindsay Whalen now have a day on the calendar as they prep for their upcoming seasons. That's all for this week. We'll be back next week to give you the "Weekly Rundown" on all things Gopher sports. Remember to share, subscribe and review. We'll see everyone next week.