



Sports

UConn Fencing competes at Vassar's NEIFC Championships

by Sam Zelin
CAMPUS CORRESPONDENT
sam.zelin@uconn.edu

The UConn Fencing Club went into Saturday's New England Fencing Championships with high hopes, and the day was filled with many ups and downs. While many of the schools came in more prepared, UConn managed to fight hard and pulled off some improbable upsets.

"A lot of people think of UConn as a nothing team because we're a club, but now I think we're establishing ourselves as one of the better schools in New England," men's foilist Dalton Hawie said after the tournament.

Starting off with men's foil, UConn beat URI, UNH, UMass Amherst, Tufts and BU overall, and against the varsity teams, managed to take a few bout wins. Gabe Lozada-Rodriguez defeated Vassar's Adlai Brandt-Ogman 5-4, and Sammy Soumakis and Dalton Hawie both scored three touches against Sacred Heart.

In men's epee, UConn beat Tufts, UMass, UNH and URI. Other highlights included Nick Tatro's defeat of Sacred Heart's Nicolo Cerminara, Edward Russell's three touches scored against Vassar's Nishay Bhatnagar and Sam Zelin pushing Sacred Heart's Troy Kapitzke to 4-4 before losing at the end.

Men's sabre started out on an unfortunate note, with Mike McClellan unable to attend, but Jack Dineen and Thomas George still put up a fight. As they had to take an automatic loss in the best-of-three against every school, they were unable to win any meets overall, but highlights included Dineen's 5-3 victory over URI's Kevin Kwan and George's 5-1 defeat of Sacred Heart's Quinlan Sullivan.

Women's foil claimed victory over BU, Mount Holyoke, Sacred Heart, Smith, Stony Brook, UNH and URI, and had the only fencer from UConn, Kathryn Atkinson, to qualify for the individual tournament. For highlights, Sarah Pasqualetti scored a 5-0 victory



Kathryn Atkinson, seen above, qualified for the Individual Open Tournament. PHOTO COURTESY OF AUTHOR

against UNH's Olivia Deblois-Hill, Meghan Plourde defeated Sacred Heart's Chenchen Cui 5-1 and Kathryn Atkinson beat Sacred Heart's Allyson Stejakoski 4-3 in a close bout that went the distance.

Women's epee beat Mount Holyoke, Sacred Heart and Stony Brook, with Grace Mcfadden beating Sacred Heart's Julie Rocklien 5-1, Alexandra Hessberger battling Vassar, Sacred Heart and Brandeis' top fencers all to close

4-5 defeats, and Amanda Hernandez taking down Brandeis, MIT and Sacred Heart 5-4, 5-3 and 5-4 respectively.

Women's sabre faced the same predicament as the men's squad, as being down a member meant a sweep was the only way to victory, but Alexandria Boutin and Ella Byrne still shined despite this. Even though they were unable to capture a squad victory, the two pulled off mul-

multiple decisive Varsity upsets, as Byrne defeated Sacred Heart's Emaly Pereira 5-0 and Boutin beat Vassar's Rose Parker 5-2.

In conclusion, UConn had a solid day. While there were clear areas for improvement, there were many moments to be proud of as well, and the squad now has a little over a month to prepare for the National Club Fencing Championships in Springfield, MA.

Column: My predictions for this week's Champions League

by David Sandoval
CAMPUS CORRESPONDENT
david.sandoval@uconn.edu

Ah yes, the UEFA Champions League is back again for the remaining four matches of the Round of 16. There's just something about that angelic "the chaaampionnss!" that makes you love the sport that is soccer (or football).

There are some good matches for the remainder of the first leg, so in today's column, I will predict who will win in this week's Champions League.

Chelsea vs Bayern München

The last time Chelsea played Bayern was in the 2012 Champions League final, in which they tied 1-1 and Chelsea won on penalties and time has definitely changed in both squads.

Bayern has been in incredible form this Champions

League season, and it surely hasn't died down yet. With in their past 10 games in the Bundesliga, for example, they won eight games and lost and drew a match. Additionally, their flawless run in the Group Stage has made them one of the favorites to win this year, and rightfully so.

As for Chelsea, I feel like I shouldn't say they don't have a chance, but so far their Champions League run is questionable, barely surpassing Ajax to advance from the Group Stage.

They will be hosting the Bavarians on Tuesday, and if their good defense at Stamford Bridge against Tottenham says anything, they will be ready to take Lewandowski or Kingsley Coman if Lampard plays the right cards.

Prediction: Chelsea 2-4 Bayern München

See NAPOLI, p. 10



From left, Chelsea's, Mateo Kovacic and Olivier Giroud take part in a training session at Cobham Training Ground, in Cobham, England, Monday, Feb. 24, 2020. Chelsea will play Bayern Munich in a Round of 16 first leg Champions League soccer match on Tuesday. PHOTO BY ADAM DAVY/AP

IEM KATOWICE PREVIEW

by Ashton Stansel
CAMPUS CORRESPONDENT
ashton.stansel@uconn.edu

On Monday, one of the biggest Counter-Strike: Global Offensive tournaments of the year, IEM Katowice, began. The tournament is known as one of the largest and most prestigious non-majors of the year and includes Astralis, Team Liquid, Natus Vincere and Vitality — some of the best teams in the world. In fact, the top 10 teams from the HLTV Rankings are all attending, making Katowice the biggest tournament of the 2020 season so far.

The tournament, which takes place from Feb. 24 to March 1, boasts a \$500,000 prize pot. The winning team will take home half of that, or \$250,000, while teams that place thirteenth to sixteenth will win just \$2,500. The entire tournament, except for the grand final which is a best-of-five, will be best-of-threes, much to the delight of fans. In prior years, the first match for each team was a best-of-one, but many believe that that makes it much easier for underdog teams to pull off a victory and knock better teams into the lower bracket early, which can help lead to a less interesting playoff bracket.

Astralis enters the tournament, as they do every tournament, as favorites. After nearly two years of dominant performances from the Danish roster, they're looking to make this their second IEM Katowice win in a row. But Mousesports, which is ranked as the second-best team in the world, has claimed several titles recently including a win at ICE Challenge earlier this month. They also won the ESL Pro League finals back at the end of December in a shocking run that included a victory over Astralis in the semifinals.

"Astralis enters the tournament, as they do every tournament, as favorites"

While the favorites coming into Katowice are powerful, there are also a number of underdog teams. Cloud9 brought a revamped roster of young talent to Poland, and Mad Lions, who bought out the Tricked lineup late last year, had a surprisingly solid performance at the ICE challenge leading into this tournament, where they claimed third place.

The tournament is in the group stage until Friday when the quarter-finals begin. This is an intense schedule, as it means teams who play on Friday will not have a day off before the playoffs as they would get in many tournaments. These players will have to hope that the preparation done before the tournament and around their games will adequately prepare them for the playoff matches, where they'll fight to be the best team in one of the most legendary Counter-Strike tournaments in the world.

THIS WEEKEND IN UCONN SPORTS

Men's Basketball



Wednesday
7 p.m.
XL Center



Women's Basketball
Wednesday, 7 p.m.
Cincinnati, OH



Men's Hockey
Friday, 7:05 p.m.
XL Center

INSTAGRAM OF THE DAY



@uconnmbb
The new @american_conf men's 3-point all-time leader #ThisIsUConn

TWEETS OF THE DAY



Joey Burrow
@Joe_Burrow10
Considering retirement after I was informed the football will be slipping out of my tiny hands. Please keep me in your thoughts.

Frankie Borrelli
@FrankieBorrelli
Pageau's first game being Isles-Rangers at the coliseum? Welcome to New York holy moly

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NHL Column: From Zamboni driver to NHL goalie

by Dylan Barrett
CAMPUS CORRESPONDENT
dylan.barrett@uconn.edu

On Saturday night, David Ayres was watching the game between the Toronto Maple Leafs and Carolina Hurricanes like any fan would. He was a measly spectator in the crowd amidst thousands. Ayres, the emergency backup goaltender for the Maple Leafs, spent many games like this, ready to go if needed.

Then, the Hurricanes starting goalie, James Reimer, was injured in a collision, forcing their reserve, Petr Mrazek, to enter the game. That was Ayres' cue to head downstairs and put on his goaltending gear in case he was called upon on an emergency basis.

One of the marvelous intricacies of hockey is that on any given night, somewhere in each NHL arena there is someone who has some low level goalie experience available in case a team's two netminders both get injured. They are usually players who played in college, junior or amateur leagues but never even scraped the surface of professional hockey. For them, it is a small hope at the opportunity of a lifetime, and a fantasy that can only be achieved in hockey.

Ayres, who is 42 years old, was formerly employed by the Maple Leafs organization as the Zamboni driver for their AHL affiliate, the Toronto Marlies. He never played hockey beyond the junior level, as a kidney failure that almost cost him his life 15 years earlier also put a stop to his career.

And yet there he was on the cusp of stepping into the crease for a live NHL game in the middle of a playoff race. Ayres had been in this situation three times prior, one injury away from entering the game. But it was not until this night in Toronto that he finally got the chance to live out his dream.



In this Saturday, Feb. 22, 2020 photo, members of the Carolina Hurricanes congratulate emergency goaltender David Ayres after they beat the Toronto Maple Leafs 6-3 in an NHL hockey game in Toronto, Saturday, Feb. 22, 2020. PHOTO BY FRANK GUNN, THE CANADIAN PRESS VIA AP

Mrazek endured a nasty collision that forced him to exit the game, leaving the Hurricanes without a goalie for the rest of the night. With that, Ayres was called upon to take the ice. He emerged from the locker room wearing a fresh white Hurricanes jersey, and Maple Leafs blue shorts and mask. His teammates for the night welcomed him with stick taps and words of encouragement as he took to the crease.

Ayres thought the moment would not faze him, as he practiced with the Maple Leafs many

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times before to stay in playing shape. But he admitted that on Saturday when he was suddenly propelled into the fire, he was overcome with jitters. Ayres never played in front of any crowd larger than a few hundred people before, and now he was playing in front of nearly 20,000 on the national stage.

Under the bright lights, Ayres also said that nothing could truly prepare him for how fast the skaters were going. The speed of practice, of course, was nothing compared to that of an actual game.

Ayres allowed two goals initially, but then proceeded to make eight saves in helping Carolina. This was plenty for the Hurricanes, as they played hard for their new netminder and won the game 6-3.

It was the first ever NHL win for an emergency backup goalie. With the sound of the final horn, Ayres made one final save with his glove hand, and was then mobbed by the Hurricanes congratulating him on the feat.

Even the Toronto faithful, who just watched their team fall in unbelievable fashion, rose to salute the hero of the game. It was a memory that not only Ayres, but the entire Hurricanes team would have for the rest of their lives. For the Zamboni driver-turned NHL goalie, the night got even sweeter when he was selected as the game's first star. He was once again received by the Toronto crowd with responding cheers and applause.

He then joined Carolina in their locker room where he was mobbed once more, as if the team had just won a playoff series. For Ayres it was a dream come true, and for hockey fans it was an unforgettable moment. In all of sports, the play of the emergency back-up goalie is the only time when someone can go from your average fan and transform into an immediate star in a matter of a couple hours.

Now, Ayres, who may have never even been to North Carolina before, is a beloved figure there. Already, the Hurricanes have begun producing Ayres t-shirts, and the team plans to fly him in for their next game.

It is remarkable to think how earlier that Saturday evening Ayres was just an ordinary guy, and by the end of the night his name was recognized by sports fans across North America. Just one opportunity, one circumstance or one moment can completely alter someone's life.

DB's Weekly Take: Why the DH should be universal

by Danny Barletta
STAFF WRITER
daniel.barletta@uconn.edu

It was widely reported last month that the designated hitter could be coming to the National League as early as 2021. My reaction was, "It's about time."

As you may or may not know, the designated hitter was introduced in 1973 in the American League, but for some reason, the NL never caught on and continues to have the pitchers hit to this day. It still doesn't make sense to me because the DH is beneficial to basically everyone. The teams get to put another solid hitter in the lineup, veterans who can no longer play the field at an elite level can still have a role and pitchers can focus on what they're getting paid to do.

The bottom line is pitchers can't hit. They're not getting paid to hit, and they shouldn't have to hit. Sure, there's guys like Madison Bumgarner and Zack Greinke who are adequate hitters, but for the most part, pitchers can't hit major league pitching for their lives. We know this is true because the most valuable thing a pitcher can do at the plate is lay down a sacrifice bunt. Basically, they're a guaranteed out anyways, so at least if they can make their somewhat productive, it's better than nothing.

But it doesn't have to be that way. There's this terrific invention called the designated hitter that allows you to put a respectable hitter in place of your pitcher that never hits the ball out of the in-



In this Oct. 23, 2019, file photo, Hank Aaron is flanked by Alex Rodriguez, right, and David Ortiz as they take a selfie before Game 2 of the baseball World Series between the Houston Astros and the Washington Nationals in Houston. PHOTO BY DAVID J. PHILLIP, AP

field. Pitchers as a group hit .128 with a .322 OPS in almost 5,200 plate appearances last season. That's such a waste of time. You could have a guy like J.D. Martinez or Nelson Cruz in that spot — or even somebody who is league average — and your offense becomes much more dynamic.

The argument

ways been the strategy that comes with late-game decisions regarding the pitcher. Not having a DH requires the team to have a deeper bench and the manager to make difficult decisions about when to pull his pitcher for a pinch hitter and when to leave him in.

However, I feel like that argument does not hold up against all the benefits of the DH. Nobody really watches baseball because they want to see whether Dave Martinez lets his closer Sean Doolittle, who probably hasn't gotten a hit since high school, bat so

he can use him the next inning to pitch. I'm sorry, but nobody cares.

People watch baseball because they love the action of the game, and more offense equals more action. Without the designated hitter, so much of baseball history would be altered. Players like Edgar Martinez and David Ortiz put together Hall of Fame careers by almost strictly being a DH. Other Hall of Famers like Paul Molitor, Frank Thomas and Jim Thome were able to have much longer careers as productive DHs than they would have been able to have if that position wasn't an option.

However, I believe the best argument for the DH is actually that it favors the pitchers.

Every time a pitcher steps up to the plate, he is exposing himself to injury. If (miraculously) he is able to reach base, that opens up even more opportunities for injury. If a pitcher gets hurt while pitching, oh well. That's his job. But when a pitcher gets hurt doing something that isn't bringing any value to the team, it's upsetting to me. Pitchers should not be put in that situation. They have no business hitting, and I don't think a single pitcher would object to a DH in the NL.

Plus, it's just stupid that there are two sets of rules in the same league of the same sport. It makes absolutely no sense. As my colleague Jorge Eckardt put it, it's like if in the NBA, the Western Conference never added the 3-point line when the Eastern Conference did. It's like playing two separate games of the same sport. If the DH was never added at all, it would be better than the discrepancy there is now.

It's like if in the NBA, the Western Conference never added the 3-point line and the Eastern Conference did. It's like playing two separate games of the same sport.

The DH has so many benefits for all areas of baseball, and it can only be argued against by whines of "But the strategy ..." Since Commissioner Rob Manfred already put in the three-batter minimum rule (which is awful, but that's another argument) he's shown he's not afraid to shake things up. It would make sense for him to make the DH universal next season, something that should have been done long ago.

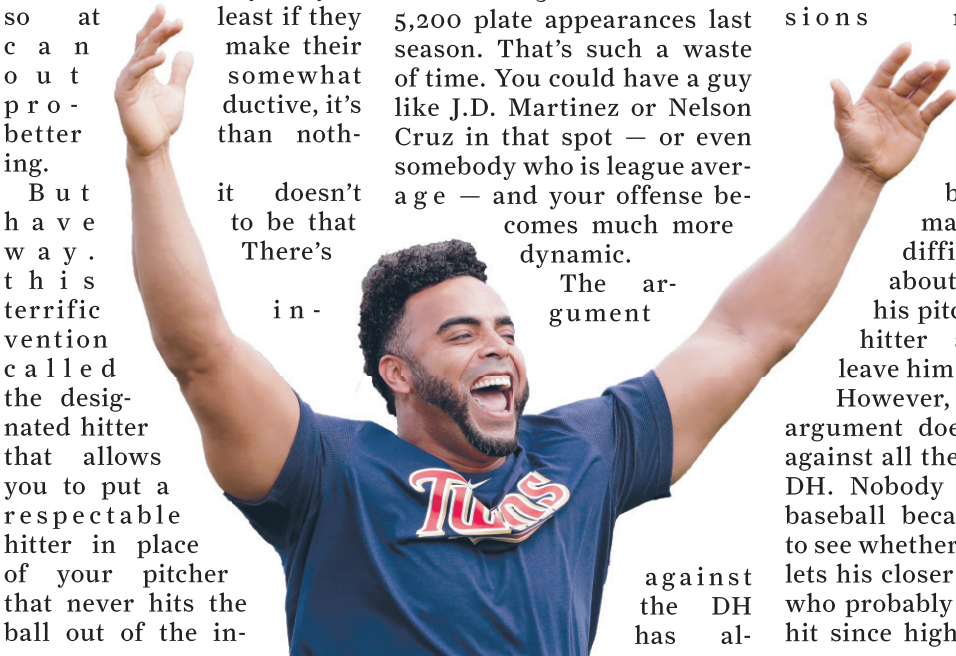


Photo of the Day | Nice kicks!



Crystal Dangerfield wore a pair of Kyrie 5 “Keep Sue Fresh” basketball shoes in Saturday’s 66-55 win over the UCF Knights. The shoes are inspired by former UConn basketball star Sue Bird, according to the Nike website. PHOTO BY CHARLOTTE LAO, PHOTO EDITOR/THE DAILY CAMPUS

Around the American: Bearcats reclaim first place

by Sebastian Garay-Ortega
CAMPUS CORRESPONDENT
sebastian.garay-ortega@uconn.edu

The American continued its trend of providing competitive end-to-end basketball with another week of close matches that left fans at the edge of their seats.

No. 25 Houston trashed Tulsa on Wednesday 76-43 behind the efforts of guard Caleb Mills, who was able to come off the bench and put up 27 points, the highest of any Cougar player. Guard Nate Hinton led the starting five in points with 15. Despite forward Martins Igbanu’s bench play being a staple of the Golden Hurricane’s season, it did not prove to be enough. His 15 points fell in vain as Houston was able to overwhelm Tulsa offensively and defensively. Tulsa fell to 18-9 overall and 10-4 in the conference, sitting third behind Cincinnati.

Wednesday also saw a double-overtime thriller in which UCF triumphed over Cincinnati 89-87. The Knights were led towards victory through guards Brandon Mahon and Tony Johnson Jr. coming off the bench and putting up 20 and 21 points respectively. Forward Collin Smith led the starting five in points with 17, alongside six rebounds and five assists. Forward Tre Scott was still able to put up a double-double for the Bearcats despite the loss, finishing the game with 22 points and 21 rebounds. With the loss, Cincinnati stands second behind No. 25 Houston at 18-9 overall and 11-4 in the conference. UCF improved to 14-12 and 5-9 in conference play, holding on to the ninth spot in the conference.

The last two contests that took place Wednesday saw Memphis defeat East Carolina 77-73 and Tulane upset SMU 80-72. Forward Precious Achiuwa secured a double-double to lead the Tigers to victory, putting up 24 points and 12 rebounds. Guard Boogie Ellis also contributed in the points department for Memphis with 17. The Mustangs were halted by the Green Wave of Tulane through guard Teshaun Hightower’s 26 points and nine rebounds. Guards K.J. Lawson, Christian Thompson and Jordan Walker all had double digits in the points department as well, finishing with 14, 19 and 11, respectively. SMU now falls to 18-8 overall and 8-6 in The American, while Tulane sits last at 12-15 overall and 4-11 in conference play.

Thursday saw Wichita State continue its winning ways against USF, beating the Bulls 65-55. Center Jaime Echenique put up 20 points and nine rebounds and also had a large presence on defense with four blocks. Guards Tyson Etienne and Jamarius Burton put up a respective 12 and 10 points, with Etienne’s coming off the bench. The Shockers would end up losing to Cincinnati on Sunday, falling to the Bearcats 67-64. Guard Jarron Cumberland put up an impressive 24 points, five rebounds and four assists. With the loss, Wichita State fell to 20-7 overall and 8-6 in the conference, placing



Cincinnati forward Mamoudou Diarra (20) celebrates after hitting a 3-point basket in the second half of an NCAA college basketball game against Wichita State, Sunday, Feb. 23, 2020, in Cincinnati. PHOTO BY ALBERT CESARE, THE CINCINNATI ENQUIRER/AP

them at fourth, with the Bulls now standing second to last at 11-16 overall and 4-10 in the conference.

Saturday had a slew of marquee matchups, with the most considerable one involving No. 22 Houston and Memphis that ultimately ended with the Tigers slaying the Cougars 60-59. Precious Achiuwa put up 10 points and six rebounds, carrying less of a load thanks to guard Lester Quinones’s 10 points and three rebounds, along with help from center Malcolm Dandridge and guard Tyler Harris, coming off the bench and putting up a respective 12 and 10 points. Houston’s leading point scorer came off the bench in the form of guard Caleb Mills, finishing the game with 21 points. Guard Marcus Sasser also had a positive impact both offensively and defensively, finishing with 18 points, six rebounds and six steals. Memphis improved to 19-8 overall and 8-6 in The American. Despite the loss, Houston still sits first at 21-7 overall and 11-4 in conference play.

Tulane pulled off another im-

pressive win on Saturday, beating UCF by a slim margin of 75-74. They were once again led by the efforts of Lawson, Thompson and Hightower, putting up 21, 15 and 18 points, respectively. The Knights had positive performances from the likes of guards Johnson and Green Jr., alongside Smith, putting up a combined 46 points. In the end, however, it was not enough to overcome the Green Wave.

Tulsa was able to bounce back while the misery ensued for the Mustangs of SMU, with the Golden Hurricane triumphing 79-57. Not surprisingly, Igbanu once again led the team in the points department off the bench with 23 alongside nine rebounds. Guards Lawson Korita and Darien Jackson had 14 and 12 points respectively to pull off the upset. Jolly led SMU in points with 18.

Sunday wrapped up AAC action, with Cincinnati defeating Wichita State 67-64 and East Carolina edging out Temple 67-63. Echenique had a solid performance for the Shockers, putting up a double-double with 10 points and 12 rebounds. Guards Jamarius Burton and Erik Stevenson put up 11 and 13 points as well. These performances would be overshadowed by guard Jarron Cumberland’s 24 point, five rebound and four assist performance, leading the Bearcats to victory. On the other hand, the Owls were not able to bring the momentum garnered from their victory over the Huskies to Carolina, overcome by the performance of forward Jayden Gardener’s double-double, finishing with 29 points and 12 rebounds. The Pirates now sit 10th at 11-16 overall and 4-10 in the conference, with Temple now standing at 14-13 overall and 6-8 in the conference.

The American is set to return Tuesday, with Memphis taking on SMU and Tulane battling Tulsa. The rest of the week will see East Carolina take on USF and UConn host UCF on Wednesday, with Temple facing Wichita State on Thursday.

CHAMPIONS LEAGUE PREDICTIONS

NAPOLI, cont. from p. 12

Napoli vs F.C. Barcelona

I feel like it’s a no-brainer, and totally not out of straight bias, but Barcelona will prove to be dominant.

Napoli is in sixth place in Serie A while Barcelona is in first in La Liga. In all honesty, Napoli doesn’t look too promising to put up a fight against the likes of Arthur, Frenkie de Jong and, of course, Lionel Messi. They only won half of their group stage games and drew the other half; and with the likes of Koulibaly and Llorente injured, the Gli Azzuri could see themselves exposed to the Blaugrana’s attack.

But we shouldn’t rule out Barcelona not winning the match, whether it be them equalizing or even losing to Napoli, because of their Champions League runs last year and the year before as well as their run in their domestic league this season.

Prediction: Napoli 1-4 Barcelona

Lyon vs Juventus

So I’m just going to be completely honest, I don’t really know much about either team besides the fact that Lyon has Moussa Dembélé and Bertrand Traoré and Juventus has Paulo Dybala, Adrien Rabiot and Cristiano Ronaldo. What I do know however is that Juve will miss the likes of Sami Khedira, Pjanic and Higuain who have proven helpful to the squad. But if key player Memphis Depay is out with an injury for Lyon, they could have trouble finding the back of the net.

Prediction: Lyon 0-3 Juventus

Manchester City vs Real Madrid

Ah, yes. Two teams I’m not a fan of; one being a rival to Barcelona and another I just simply don’t like (sorry Pep).

It would be dumb of me to say neither team has good talent. For the Citizens, they have Kevin de Bruyne, Raheem Sterling, Mahrez and Agüero while Real Madrid has Sergio Ramos, Rodrygo, Isco and Vinicius Junior. I will say this is probably be a game most should keep an eye on. With Man City now banned from all UEFA competitions for two seasons and the Premier League title out of their grasp, it makes perfect sense for Pep Guardiola to solely focus on the Champions League and getting past the quarterfinals and lift the trophy with his English side.

Prediction: Man City 2-2 Real Madrid

Column: The expanded playoffs isn't even the worst part of the proposed new NFL CBA

by **Jorge Eckardt**
STAFF WRITER
jorge.eckardt@uconn.edu@uconn.edu

In November, I wrote a column on how the NBA should make their playoffs smaller. A few weeks ago, I wrote a column about how the rumored MLB playoffs expansion was a terrible idea for the sport. Now, with the NFL in the voting process for a new collective bargaining agreement that would include an expanded playoff, I bet you can guess where I stand.

I firmly believe that across all sports, larger playoffs will do far more harm than good. We see it in the NBA right now where, at the time of writing, the Memphis Grizzlies are the No. 8 seed in the West at 28-28 and are not being seriously challenged by anyone.

It's even worse in the East, where after the top six teams the drop-off is drastic, with the 26-29 Brooklyn Nets having the No. 7 seed and the 24-32 Orlando Magic having the No. 8 seed. The fact that a team is eight games under .500 and currently in playoff positioning is absurd.

In the MLB, when the rumored playoffs expansion hit the public, people immediately revealed that if that system was in effect, .500 and below .500 teams would have made the playoffs in recent years more often than not.

Essentially, I believe not all good teams have to make the playoffs if that means some average or even flat out bad teams will as well. If the NBA cut their playoffs down to six teams in each conference, it would (if the playoffs ended today) exclude the Nets and Magic in the east – two teams that are under .500 – and the Grizzlies and the Mavericks in the West.

Sure, the Mavs would be missing the playoffs despite being 11 games over .500, but frankly, oh well, because they still had a worse season than six of the 14 other teams in their conference. You shouldn't just have to be good, you should have to be one of the best, and you certainly shouldn't have to just be average.

The regular season should matter, and that goes for the NFL as well. If the playoff expansion was in place last season, it would have put the 9-7 Los Angeles Rams and the 8-8 Pittsburgh Steelers in the playoffs.

The Rams had a season filled with mediocre quarterback play from a top-paid signal-caller and a defense that after being one of the top units in 2018 regressed to be nothing more than average – like their quarterback. As for the Steelers, they burned through three quarterbacks and finished the season on a three-game losing skid that included losses to the New York Jets and second-string Baltimore Ravens. But go ahead, keep trying



Pittsburgh Steelers owner Arthur Rooney II leaves after NFL owners meet to discuss a proposed labor agreement, Thursday Feb. 20, 2020, in New York. PHOTO BY BEBETO MATTHEWS/AP

to tell me both of those teams are playoff-worthy.

But that's not even the tip of the iceberg when it comes to this proposed CBA.

There's the issue of the 17-game season. With all the talk about player safety, how does adding an extra game to the season do anything to protect them? The only thing it does is line the owners' pockets by exploiting the players for another game.

NFL stars have already taken to Twitter to express their opinions on the proposal, with Houston Texans star and former Walter Payton Man of the Year award winner J.J. Watt tweeting "Hard no on that proposed CBA," and San Francisco 49ers veteran cornerback Richard Sherman quoting Watt, tweeting "Leadership! I am with you! Please communicate with your team rep."

Current and former stars like Tyler Lockett, David Bakhtiari, Eric Weddle, Michael Thomas and others also spoke out on Twitter against it. The most adamant though was nine-year NFL veteran and current Los Angeles Chargers offensive lineman Russell Okung.

Like Sherman, Okung is a representative of the NFLPA executive committee, and he hasn't held back with his opinions on the proposal.

"While the @NFL is laughably trying to sell 17 games for a profit, how about we discuss how 16 and less games played out for generations of players?"

Okung tweeted to start a thread referencing the large issue of concussions and their everlasting effects on players long after they've retired.

"We're talking about the NFL ignoring, downplaying and gaslighting families about the risks of brain trauma, even with clear scientific evidence, up until '09," Okung tweeted. "Context: In 1937, the AFCA already asked players to be removed from games post-concussion!"

He attached a link to an article detailing the history of the NFL's history in dealing with concussions and head injuries and followed it up with one last tweet to conclude the 10-tweet thread.

"We are talking about justice that has been delayed for a long time. And we are still waiting ... now let's parade about 17 games," Okung posted.

Now, in case you're thinking that the players will at least get compensated by the form of an increased salary, well you're right! Sort of. I'll let former NFL offensive lineman Rich Ohrnberger explain:

"NFL promotes 'player safety' ... but players should risk brain & body for a max of \$250K for a 17th game?" Ohrnberger tweeted. "Ok ... sure ... owners should only make \$250K as well, the rest of the profits should go toward lifetime health care for the players and the of funding post career benefits."

That's right, a max of \$250,000 for the extra game.

Why would anyone making more than that amount per game agree to that? Oh, and if you make fewer than \$250,000 per game, you'll get that for game No. 17 as well, not the full total.

Why should they have to risk their health and safety at a minimal benefit to them and significant benefit to the owners?

I can already read the emails now.

"\$250,000 is a lot of money!" "What's one more game going to do?"

"The players CHOOSE to play football, if they get hurt, it's their fault!"

Well, sure, it is a lot of money. But some of these athletes are averaging millions of dollars per game, so for them it's not. Now, if you want to argue the economics of sports and that player's contracts are way too inflated go right ahead, but I disagree. Sports is a lucrative business, and the players deserve to be compensated proportionally to what they earn by playing.

\$250,000 is not a lot of money to a lot of professional athletes, and it's certainly not worth risking injury over when they get paid significantly more every other time they step on the field.

All it takes is one play, one hit or one blow, to change someone's life forever. One play ended the careers of stars like Bo Jackson, Joe Theismann, Gale Sayers and so many others. If the regular season expands, it's inevitable that multiple such

injuries occur in and because of game No. 17.

And yes, NFL players do choose to play the sport. But that doesn't mean we should treat them like gladiators for our own personal amusement.

From the fans' perspective, sure, it would be fun to have an extra game on the regular-season schedule and two extra ones on Wild Card weekend, but not if it comes at the price of the players' safety. Football is probably the most grueling and intense major sport in the world. We've seen superstars like Andrew Luck, Rob Gronkowski and Luke Kuechly retire in their prime because of the toll the game has taken on their bodies. The extra game is simply not worth it.

What are 17 games going to tell you about a team that 16 can't?

The NFL needs to be doing more to protect its players, not less. You could make a legitimate argument that they shouldn't be making the regular season longer, they should be making it shorter, and I honestly would be just fine with that.

The expanded playoffs part of the proposal is dumb, but the 17 game season is irresponsible. It shows a complete lack of care for the players that make the sport possible, proving that the people in charge only view them as money-making machines and not human beings.

To quote the oldest of the three Watt brothers, hard no on that proposed CBA.

Altuve booed, nicked by pitch in spring debut for Astros

LAKELAND, Fla. (AP) — José Altuve insisted he tuned out the hecklers. He couldn't avoid a pitch that grazed him.

"He was hit in the foot. That ain't nothing, you know what I mean?" Houston Astros manager Dusty Baker said Monday after an 11-1 win over Detroit at half-empty Joker Marchant Stadium. "It wasn't intentional."

Altuve was loudly booed when he was introduced for his spring training debut, cheered when he struck out and called a cheater by several fans. Quite a difference from past years, when the diminutive All-Star second baseman was among the most popular players in the majors.

But that was before Altuve and his Houston teammates were implicated in the sign-stealing scandal that's rocked baseball.

"We just heard a lot of noise, and that's it," Altuve said.

Altuve and fellow starters Alex Bregman, Carlos Correa and Yuli Gurriel all played for the first time in the exhibition season. After Houston



Houston Astros' Jose Altuve runs to first base after getting hit with a pitch during the fifth inning of a spring training baseball game against the Detroit Tigers, Monday, Feb. 24, 2020, in Lakeland, Fla. PHOTO BY FRANK FRANKLIN/AP

opened the Grapefruit League in the stadium it shares with the World Series champion Washington Nationals, this was the first time the Astros were away from their complex — providing a taste of the reaction they might receive on the road this year.

"We were focused on playing baseball. We know that we need to go on the field and get ready

and prepared for the coming season," Altuve said. "That's what we're thinking about right now."

Actually, the reception during the visit to Tigertown USA in Lakeland, Florida, was fairly tame compared to what it figures to be during the regular season.

Early arrivals in the an-

nounced crowd of 4,891 were discouraged by ushers from gathering near the Astros dugout unless they had box seats along the third base line.

Hecklers aired their voices after batting practice, booing during introduction of lineups and each time Altuve, Bregman, Correa and Gurriel stepped up to the plate. Altuve got

some cheers, too, when he was charged with an error for dropping a throw by Bregman from third base on a force play.

The quartet was treated to one more round of boos when they left the game and made the long walk up the first base line to the visiting clubhouse.

Altuve took a third called strike to a round of cheers in his first at-bat, then lined a crowd-quieting RBI double into the left-field corner his next time up.

Altuve showed no signs of being upset when he was grazed with a pitch by Tigers reliever Nick Ramirez after the batter before him, Myles Straw, homered in the fifth inning. The 2017 AL MVP was replaced by a pinch runner.

Baker planned to play Altuve, Bregman, Correa and Gurriel no more than five innings anyway in Houston's first true road exhibition since a Major League Baseball investigation found the Astros broke rules by illegally stealing signs during their championship season in 2017.