NFL to boost COVID-19 testing, but no bubble plans

By Rob Maaddi AP Pro Football Writer

The NFL has no plans to move into a bubble as it takes several new steps to combat the spread of the corona-

The league will begin PCR testing for COVID-19 on game days starting this week, use of masks in walk-throughs are now mandatory and only play-callers will be permitted to wear face shields in lieu of masks or gaiters on the sideline.

"We cannot grow complacent, not the players, not the coaches, not the rest of our personnel," NFL Commissioner Roger Goodell said Tuesday following virtual meetings with team owners. "Ninety percent is not good enough in this environment. We have to be incredibly diligent and disciplined."

The updated protocols sent to teams Monday night also require anyone identified as a "high risk" close contact to be isolated and not permitted to return to the team's facility for at least five days.

"We expected positive COVID cases as long as the pandemic is prevalent in our society," Goodell said, citing rising numbers in communities. "Our protocols are designed to identify through testing, isolate and then prevent the spread of the virus in our team environments, and our medical experts are encouraged by the fact that with few exceptions, we have not

seen transmission of the virus."
Goodell spoke a few hours before
the Tennessee Titans were scheduled
to host Buffalo in their first game
since an outbreak shut down team
facilities and forced the schedule to be

rearranged.

The Titans had eight people test positive Sept. 29 and the total reached 24 players and personnel. It doesn't appear the league will discipline the Titans for any violation of protocols following a review of the team's actions

"We are really working closely and identifying and speaking to clubs and players in open dialogue," Goodell said. "This is not about discipline. This is about making sure we're keeping

our personnel safe. And that's been our entire focus today."

Goodell said the league will maintain flexibility in order to complete the season with the Super Bowl. However, it doesn't appear one of those options will be moving the playoffs into a bubble like Major League Baseball did. The NBA and NHL finished their regular season and postseason in bubbles.

Troy Vincent, the NFL's executive vice president of football operations, said the league is "proceeding as is" and deferred to Dr. Allen Sills, the league's chief medical officer.

Sills said all options are on the table but warned there are several risks to moving into a bubble. He

pointed out that other individuals such as service workers still have to go in and out of the bubble. He emphasized the infection can spread more rapidly if it gets inside. And, he stressed the human element, saying that being sequestered can cause an "emotional" and "behavioral health toll" that becomes a "really significant stress point," especially around the holidays.

"So for all of those reasons, right now, today, we don't feel like that is the safest course of action for us," Sills said. "We've consistently said that we'll reevaluate all of these decisions along the way and make what we think is the safest decision and all options remain on the table."

LeBron the best ever? Not just yet

As the final buzzer sounded and the confetti shot into the air, NBA fans had a chance to virtually watch the Los Angeles Lakers defeat the Miami Heat in the NBA Finals and the conclusion of the NBA Disney Bubble in Florida. As members of the Lakers organization gathered with their families on the podium in celebration, NBA Commissioner Adam Silver handed the NBA Finals MVP trophy to a familiar face.

That was LeBron James.
Asked about the emotions going through his mind, the one common thread in his words was this: respect.
Though he reached the top of the mountain in his profession for the fourth time of his career, it is still a common discussion topic among basketball fans. Is LeBron James the best ever to play basketball?

I find this question very difficult due to how much the game has evolved. The game was different for the Magic Johnson/Larry Bird rivalry in the 1980s, Michael Jordan taking on all comers in the '90s and the late Kobe Bryant impressing everyone with his

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"Mamba Mentality," during the 2000s. Though it's easy to place Bryant and Jordan in this discussion as their careers have long been done, James still somehow remains in his prime.

Let me make this clear: I know people have different opinions on who is the best, and I admit that there will never be a consensus. But after this season, James' case is stronger than ever.

After the completion of his 17th season, James finds himself on the top of almost every stat sheet. He is currently ranked third in career total points (34,241), fourth in points per game (27.1), and recently leads in most games played during the playoffs (260). Not only that, but he has four NBA MVPs, 16 All-Star nods, and has never played fewer than 50 games in a single season.

Those stats alone cement James as a first ballot Hall of Famer. What is hard to wrap



Wally Skalij / Los Angeles Times-TNS LeBron James celebrates after being named the NBA Finals MVP.

any basketball fans mind is this.

He is not done yet, he is far from done.

When he joined NBATV's show GameTime after securing his fourth title, and the Lakers' 17th, which ties the Boston Celtics for most titles in NBA history by an organization, he addressed his ideas on retirement.

"I know I got a lot of years left, and what that looks like, how many years that will look like, I'm not sure. I know I can play the game for quite a while."

As the past 17 seasons have proven, barring injuries James can continue to be one of the top stars in the games as he nears 40 (he turns 36 on Dec. 30). He will continue to move higher on the stats sheet, as he will continue to lead the Los Angeles Lakers as a perennial playoff threat.

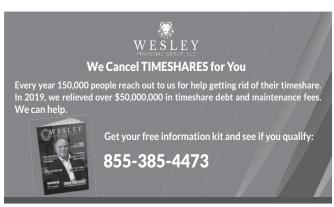
He just made his case a lot stronger for best to ever play as the NBA has entered the offseason, but this argument will be a whole lot more clear when James calls it quits here in the future. He still trails both Bryant (5) and Jordan (6) for total championships. I know a lot of people use that as a bar of expectation. It is something that I personally consider a huge component, so I don't think the case can be closed so easily.

Although James' case is a lot stronger than it was maybe a week ago, I find it hard to call him the best to have ever played.

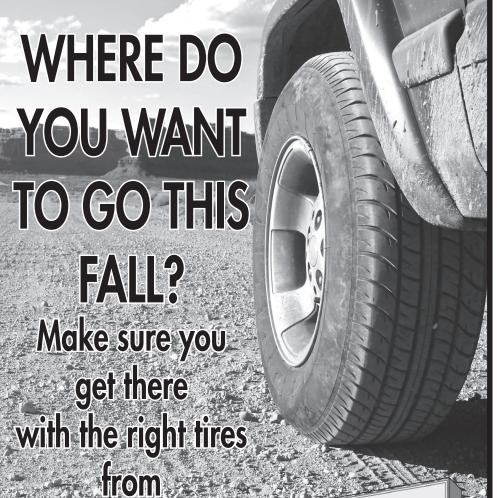
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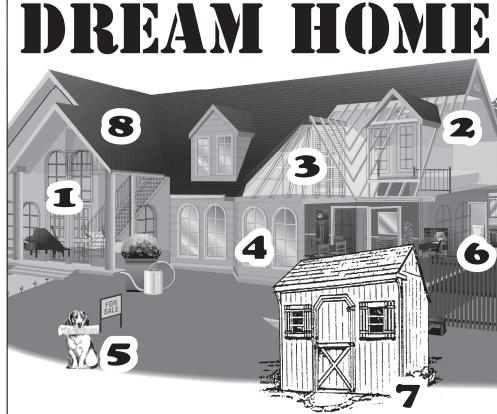
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