

Soccer Athletic Trainers' Society
Position Statement on the Division 1 NCAA Men's Soccer Academic Year Model

In light of the significant schedule shift proposed by the 21st Century Model for Division I Men's Soccer, the Soccer Athletic Trainers' Society formed an Ad-hoc committee to analyze the model and create a consensus statement for our larger membership. Twelve Athletic Trainers from various Division 1 Conferences met to discuss the model's impact on college soccer athletic training, including student athlete well-being, Athletic Trainer work load, and other various topics. After the committee generated a list of support, concerns, and questions, we met with two of the model's sponsors to gain more insight from primary sources closely acquainted with the project. After more discussions, the Ad-hoc committee surmised the following consensus statement, drafted on March 15, 2020.

When evaluating the 21st Century Model through the lens of student-athlete health and well-being, we agree that the proposed model, if followed, is better than our current one.

In the same way that anatomical structure dictates function (e.g. orthotics correcting excessive pronation and knee valgus, etc.) this proposed scheduling structure may positively impact our function as providers of athletic health care. Specifically, these structural changes include balancing the total games between the Fall and Spring seasons, and providing a longer pre-season. In our opinion, these structural changes may benefit our student-athletes in several ways.

First, eliminating a congested fall season by balancing the games across both academic semesters, may yield lower injury rates and risk for our student-athletes. Every member of our committee has felt the challenge of managing our athletes' injuries and the stress of maximizing recovery through two weekly Fall matches. One theoretical basis to explain this is rooted in athletes' training loads (e.g. Gabbett, 2004). In professional soccer, athletes' injury rates sky-rocketed from 4.1 injuries per 1000 hours of exposure to 25.6 when playing two games per week instead of one (Dupont et al, 2010). Although there is no published research directly related to Division I Men's Soccer athletes, we suspect the injury rates would be lower when playing one game per week, instead of two. Considering the available evidence and our collective experience, the less congested game schedule of the proposed 21st Century Model may significantly reduce our athletes' injury rates.

Second, and related to the previously discussed concept of load, a longer preseason allows a more gradual progression of physical stress, allowing student athletes more time to adapt and accommodate necessary training loads. This may also lower injury rates, since the majority of practice injuries occur in the preseason. Ultimately, a longer preseason and avoiding a congested Fall schedule may give our student-athletes a better structure to promote better student-athlete health and well-being.

Third, this structure change may also help athletic trainers better manage athletes' injuries. As athletic trainers we consider several "data" points when designing our rehab progressions and return to play protocols, including injury history, clinical testing, performance testing, and the context of our athlete's situation. Contextually, we consider several items such as years left in school, timing in the season, starting status, their position, their playing style, their pain tolerance, and the timing of matches. Timing of matches is a "data" point because we know that being available for and playing in a game is the pinnacle of their student-athlete experience. We also know that at any point in time, a significant injury or other circumstances might end their competitive career, which makes every game count. We weigh these data points to determine an acceptable level of risk, as we make our return to play decisions. In the current Fall schedule, frequently playing two matches per week causes us to accept a greater level of risk in their rehab progressions, which might possibly cause setbacks and cause even more missed matches. The proposed 21st Century Model model, which significantly reduces the number of semiweekly games in the fall, essentially gives more time to evaluate a player's symptoms, their functional on-field movement, as well as their return to unrestricted, full-go practice prior to playing in matches. This allows a smoother transition and a more gradual approach to rebuilding athletes' fitness and restoring their sport skills, allowing for more sustainability on the field. Therefore, the proposed model will change the contexts that we consider in our decisions and will give a greater chance of lowering risk in our return to play progressions.

Fourth, our committee noted that the new model may benefit a more dedicated approach to strength and conditioning. This could allow ample time for athletes to recover from both competition, and strength and conditioning without compromising their ability to perform on field training sessions. The proposed schedule would also allow a continuity of training through both segments of the season, allowing for advancement in functional strength and power (e.g. not just maintenance), which creates a more sustainable, on field existence for each player.

Change is challenging. We fully recognize that this will affect many other areas in our departments, besides soccer; and that some schools may have more difficulty transitioning to the proposed model. In particular, we have discussed the potential impact on staffing and budget for schools with less resources, winter weather and indoor facility challenges for northern schools, and the athlete health consequences if select coaches ignore the models structure. Ultimately, we want to ensure that quality athletic injury care is provided and that the work-life balance of the athletic trainers are sustainable. However, if we focus our evaluation of this model on its benefits to athlete health care and wellness, then the structure of the proposed model is much more favorable than our current one. Fears will have to be overcome and creative strategies will need to be employed, but this challenge can be met. Change is inevitable, and any change will result in growing pains. There will always be issues with resources, but the benefits of this proposal, on our student soccer athletes' wellbeing, significantly outweigh any perceived risk.

Respectfully,

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