

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar has no time for NBA's Covid vaccine selfishness

NBA games don't begin until Oct. 19, but an [unhealthy number of the league's players](#) are already refusing to get a Covid-19 vaccination. And their refusal could sabotage the 2021-22 season.

Surprisingly, a small minority of anti-vax players has convinced the players' union that a vaccine mandate during a pandemic [should be a “non-starter” for the league](#). The league cannot give in to this demand. It must instead insist that players be vaccinated, just as it has [with referees and other people who will be near the players](#), such as security guards, bus drivers and massage therapists.

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At least LeBron James, the sport's biggest star, is vaccinated. Unfortunately, the four-time NBA champion said he [won't urge other players to do the same](#).

“That's not my job,” the Los Angeles Lakers great said. “I think everyone has their own choice to do what they feel is right for themselves and their family.”

Media sessions this week highlighted just how embarrassing this debacle could get.

Bradley Beal, the Washington Wizards sharpshooting guard, is [guaranteed to make around \\$71 million](#) through 2023. He's not vaccinated. Asked why, Beal said only that his reason was “personal.”

Unvaccinated players like Beal don't seem to care that they could trigger a Covid outbreak. They also seem blissfully unaware that a pro sports team is a public entity, dependent on consumers buying a product that immediately loses value if players miss games because of Covid. Hence, a player's “personal” decision can quickly become a lot more public.

Kyrie Irving, the Brooklyn Nets superstar guard, did not attend his team's media day. New York City, home to the Nets and Knicks, [requires people ages 12 and older at any large indoor event to be vaccinated](#). That, of course, includes NBA games.

Irving refuses to say if he's vaccinated, but his absence Monday spoke volumes. If Irving is unvaccinated, he would miss 44 of Brooklyn's 82 regular-season games (43 in New York, one in San Francisco), even if he stays Covid-free.

And that would be the height of selfishness. Rather than take a vaccine, as a [reported 90 percent of the approximately 450 NBA players](#) have done, Irving would risk crushing the Nets' championship dreams because he is “a human being first” — just one of his many nonsensical non-explanations.

If unvaccinated, Irving and other unvaccinated players like the Golden State Warriors' Andrew Wiggins also would not be able to practice with their teams in their home cities. Developing the chemistry and cohesion that create winning teams would be virtually impossible.

Both Irving and Wiggins have superstar teammates. What must Kevin Durant and James Harden think of Irving? How must Stephen Curry, Klay Thompson and Draymond Green view Wiggins for refusing a vaccine proven over and over to be safe and effective?

Also, why should fans of those teams buy tickets if key players would rather sit out home games than get vaccinated?

Irving, a seven-time All-Star, spoke with reporters online Monday but refused to say whether he would get vaccinated.

“I would love to just keep that private and handle that the right way with my team and go forward with a plan,” he said, cryptically.

This is madness. And basketball legend Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, 74, rejected the anti-vax sentiment as if it were a weak attempted layup.

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“The NBA should insist that all players and staff are vaccinated or remove them from the team,” Abdul-Jabbar, the NBA’s all-time leading scorer with 38,387 points, [told Rolling Stone](#). “There is no room for players who are willing to risk the health and lives of their teammates, the staff and the fans simply because they are unable to grasp the seriousness of the situation or do the necessary research.”

Abdul-Jabbar can still deliver verbal slam dunks. But can he talk sense into the NBA’s unvaccinated 10 percent?

If they won’t listen to Abdul-Jabbar, perhaps they should pay heed to their female peers in the WNBA, a league with a 99 percent vaccination rate.

How did the WNBA do it? By creating a space for players to ask questions and have their answers heard and respected.

“If the league were to mandate it and we didn’t feel like we knew enough about it, I don’t think people would have gotten vaccinated,” Atlanta Dream forward [Elizabeth Williams told Sports Illustrated](#).

Williams, a leader among WNBA players, is a voice of reason. Irving, a vice president in the NBA players’ union, seems to crave attention. He [once contended the Earth was flat](#), and [Rolling Stone reported](#) he recently liked Instagram posts from a conspiracy theorist who said a secret society is using the vaccine to ensnare Black people in a Satanic plot.

It would be one thing if an athlete expressed vaccine hesitancy because of the infamous [Tuskegee experiment](#), which began in 1932 and allowed syphilis to go untreated in Black men for decades. That’s a concern that can be discussed, civilly and respectfully. But an NBA player amplifying talk of a Satanic plot is just plain nuts.

Perhaps peer pressure in the locker room will increase the number of vaccinated players. Durant, the Nets’ dynamic forward, gave a firm “no” when asked if he was worried about Irving missing dozens of games. Maybe Durant will persuade his enigmatic teammate.

And after Wiggins’ request for a religious exemption from the vaccine was denied, teammate Nemanja Bjelica [reportedly urged him to take the shot](#).

Whatever vaccinated NBA players can do to convince their anti-vax teammates should be done. It’s worth a shot.