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The NBA's Anti-Vaxxers Are Trying to Push Around the League — And It's Working

Conspiracy theories in the locker room. Mask police in the arena. Superstars trying to avoid the shot. After bringing back the culture from Covid, basketball confronts its own civil war

By **MATT SULLIVAN** 



Photo Illustration by @photoeditorjoe

UPDATE, Monday, September 27th: Kyrie Irving was not present for the Brooklyn Nets pre-season media day at Barclays Center, where city law requires athletes to have at least one dose of Covid vaccination to participate in team activities.

Appearing from his house for a brief press conference with reporters, Irving declined to answer directly four separate questions regarding his vaccination and



questions about what's going on in the world of Kyrie," he said, "and I would love to just keep that private and handle that the right way with my team and go forward with a plan."

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Irving's teammates dodged questions on Monday about what such a plan might be. San Francisco city officials removed religious and medical exemptions from their policy on Friday, emboldening the **NBA's** decision to deny an application from the Golden State Warriors forward Andrew Wiggins. A league source said any comment on further applications for exemptions in New York would make too clear who had applied; the New York Knicks have said their team is 100-percent vaccinated, but the Nets, this season's prohibitive championship favorite, have at least one elusive holdout.

One by one, the basketball players — non-vaccinated star here, fully-inoculated veteran on mute down there, a full-on anti-vaxxer front-and-center — logged into the video conference. The annual summer meeting of the powerful NBA union had gone virtual again on August 7, and high on the agenda for the season ahead was a proposed mandate from the league office that 100 percent of players get vaccinated against **Covid-19**.

One response echoed from squares across the screen, according to players and an executive on the call: "Non-starter. *Non-starter*."

The NBA had relied on science above all to lead the sports world through the Covid nightmare, from the league's outbreak-driven shutdown to a pandemic-proof playoff



unvaccinated players were pushing back. They made their case to the union summit: There should be testing this year, of course, just not during off-days. They'd mask up on the court and on the road, if they must. But no way would they agree to a mandatory jab. The vaccine deniers had set the agenda; the players agreed to take their demands for personal freedom to the NBA's negotiating table.

This month, league officials caught a break: Two of America's most progressive cities, New York and San Francisco, would require pro athletes to show proof of one Covid-19 vaccination dose to play indoors, except with an approved medical or religious exemption. Which meant that one of the NBA's biggest stars — one known for being receptive to conspiratorial beliefs — would be under heavy pressure to get a shot. And if Brooklyn Nets superstar Kyrie Irving could be convinced to take the vaccine, then maybe, just maybe, the whole league could create a new kind of bubble together.

When asked directly about Irving's vaccination status — or his plans to change it — multiple people familiar with his thinking declined to answer directly. But one confidant and family member floated to *Rolling Stone* the idea of anti-vaxx players skipping home games to dodge the New York City ordinance... or at least threatening to protest them, until the NBA changes its ways.

"There are so many other players outside of him who are opting out, I would like to think they would make a way," says Kyrie's aunt, Tyki Irving, who runs the seven-time All-Star's family foundation and is one of the few people in his regular circle of advisors. "It could be like every third game. So it still gives you a full season of being interactive and being on the court, but with the limitations that they're, of course, oppressing upon you. There can be some sort of formula where the NBA and the players can come to some sort of agreement."

A spokeswoman for Irving declined to respond to a list of questions regarding his vaccination and playing status, and Irving did not immediately respond to a message from *Rolling Stone*. But as teams return to pre-season training camps next week, fifty to sixty NBA players have yet to receive a single vaccine dose, league sources tell *RS*.

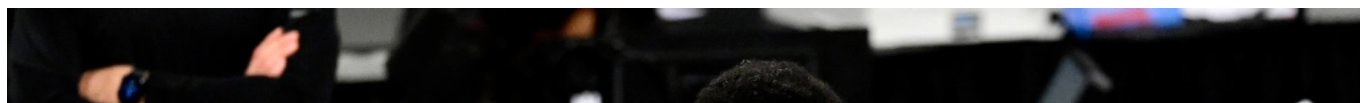


resistance to Covid protocols — and the truth.

Irving, who serves as a vice president on the executive committee of the players' union, recently started following and **liking** Instagram posts from a conspiracy theorist who **claims** that “secret societies” are implanting vaccines in a plot to connect Black people to a master computer for “a plan of Satan.” This Moderna microchip misinformation campaign has spread across multiple NBA locker rooms and group chats, according to several of the dozen-plus current players, Hall-of-Famers, league executives, arena workers and virologists interviewed for this story over the past week.

The league's virus-hunters denied a religious-exemption request from a vaccine-denying player in San Francisco this weekend, lighting a powder keg on a combustible mix of race, religion, class and clubbing in a time of Covid, aimed at some of the most influential role models in America. General managers remain confident they can get superstars vaxxed by opening night. And in a concession to the Delta variant, all courtside players and personnel will be required to wear masks on arena benches and around practice facilities for the foreseeable future, *Rolling Stone* can reveal. According to near-final medical guidance outlined to *RS* on Saturday, however, unvaccinated players have forced the league to cave on nearly every other demand.

“The NBA should insist that all players and staff are vaccinated or remove them from the team,” NBA legend Kareem Abdul-Jabbar tells *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. What I find especially disingenuous about the vaccine deniers is their arrogance at disbelieving immunology and other medical experts. Yet, if their child was sick or they themselves needed emergency medical treatment, how quickly would they do exactly what those same experts told them to do?”





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Steven Ryan /Getty Images

Jonathan Isaac is known less by the average basketball fan for his play than for being that guy who stood up with his jersey on during the national anthem in the NBA bubble, while every other player on the court took a knee in a t-shirt declaring BLACK LIVES MATTER, amid a global reckoning on race and police killings. “I’m not going to sit here and point my fingers at one group of people,” Isaac, who is Black, tells *RS*. “I would do it again.”

The Orlando Magic’s 23-year-old starting forward is deeply religious — and proudly unvaccinated. When NBA players started lining up for shots in March, Isaac started studying Black history and watching Donald Trump’s press conferences. He learned about antibody resistance and came to distrust Dr. Anthony Fauci. He looked out for people who might die from the vaccine, and he put faith in God.

“At the end of the day, it’s people,” Isaac says of the scientists developing vaccines, “and you can’t always put your trust completely in people.”

Isaac considers un-vaxxed players to be vilified and bullied, and he thinks “it’s an injustice” to automatically make heroes out of vaccinated celebrities. He rejects the NBA’s proposal for a vaccine mandate and social distancing for players like him



being on the bus, we have to be in different *parts* of the bus? To me, it doesn't seem logically consistent.

"If you *are* vaccinated, in other places you still have to wear the mask regardless. It's like, 'OK, then what is the mask necessarily for?'" Isaac continues. "And if Kyrie says that from his position of his executive power in the NBPA, then kudos to him."

Enes Kanter — the veteran center, devout Muslim and outspoken liberal — senses a creep of the religious right upon his workplace, which just happens to involve players like Isaac sweating all over him and yelling in his face: "If a guy's not getting vaccinated because of his religion, I feel like we are in a time where the religion and science has to go to together," he tells *RS*. "I've talked to a lot of religious guys — I'm like: 'It saves people's lives, so what is more important than that?'"

Kanter's current franchise, the Boston Celtics, had multiple players unvaccinated as of Thursday, he and a teammate say. The NBA claims that 90 percent of its more than 450 players — star veterans and players trying to make rosters alike — have received at least one shot, a rate lower than the conservative NFL. League officials provide weekly data and studies to teams with un-vaxxed players, many of whom they hope will be inoculated before the regular season begins on October 19. Inside practice facilities next week, vaccinated players expect to spend time convincing skeptical players to avoid a competitive disadvantage. "If you're a player and you're not vaccinated and you miss a week or two weeks," Kanter says, "it could literally change the whole season — and we're trying to win a championship!"





“If a guy’s not getting vaccinated because of his religion, I feel like we are in a time where the religion and science has to go to together,” says Enes Kanter, currently of the Boston Celtics.

Will Newton/Getty Images

Celtics forward Grant Williams comes from a family of scientists, and he got two shots in the spring. As the 22-year-old prepared to join the board of the players’ union in August, he found himself lobbying with the group to allow unvaccinated colleagues to scream from the bench without a mask on, for better team “communication.” That vaccine-denying teammates would be “encouraged” to sit away from him at team dinners — or on the other side of the locker room all year — was suddenly viewed as a concession to league management.

“Walking around them might be a hassle,” Williams says. “But no matter someone’s vaccination status, that won’t determine relationships. You’re not going to agree with someone on the same political issue, the same financial issue. Just like in life, you learn to adapt, you learn to talk to those around you. It might be a stricter stance from the league, and I understand where they’re coming from, but as a players’ association it’s our duty to fight for the players and their best interests, so we’ll do our best to counteract that.”

Kareem Abdul-Jabbar has been out here. The 74-year-old got his first Moderna shot on camera with Arnold Schwarzenegger. He appeared in an early public-service announcement for the vaccine on behalf of the NBA. And he’s been calling out anti-vax celebrities like Nicki Minaj from Twitter to **his new Substack**. But the league continues to have difficulty convincing current superstars to advocate for vaccines: An NBA source says league officials could still ask LeBron James and Giannis Antetokounmpo to appear in a PSA, but would never press the faces of its business to go there. As Black Americans continue to get vaccinated at a slower rate



“They are failing to live up to the responsibilities that come with celebrity. Athletes are under no obligation to be spokespersons for the government, but this is a matter of public health,” the Hall-of-Famer writes *Rolling Stone* in an e-mail. Abdul-Jabbar is especially disappointed in athletes of color: “By not encouraging their people to get the vaccine, they’re contributing to these deaths. I’m also concerned about how this perpetuates the stereotype of dumb jocks who are unable to look at verified scientific evidence and reach a rational conclusion.”



Kareem Abdul-Jabbar believes the NBA should require all players and staff to be vaccinated. “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,” he says.

John McCoy/Getty Images

The renowned virologist Dr. David Ho, who has personally advised NBA commissioner Adam Silver on the virus since January 2020, credits the league office for providing a scientific Covid roadmap to businesses — even by contributing its testing and monitoring data to forthcoming academic papers. “Of course, a new season is coming, and new challenges remain,” Dr. Ho tells *RS*. “It’s disappointing



league is trying — but the players, they're supposed to do their part. There are a lot of good role models, but there are some that are holding this up.”

And yet medical memos for the 2021-2022 NBA season, sent to teams by the league office over the course of this month and obtained by *Rolling Stone*, indicate little ramp-up to monitor unvaccinated players. No player will be forced to undergo off-day testing, league sources confirmed, despite the NBA suggesting it in earlier guidance. Socially-distanced travel is now “suggested.” Players who aren’t fully vaxxed and seek outside labs for regular testing must get league approval, but their tests will otherwise be supervised by their teams — the kind of states-rights amalgam of governance preferred by players. A league source says NBA regulators are prepared to guard against forged vaccine cards by sweeping state databases for proof, but only if elevated to their attention.

“It requires extra vigilance in that we have a separate set of protocols for non-vaccinated players, so they’re already treated differently in terms of what’s allowed,” says David Weiss, the NBA executive who oversees player health. “The difference this year is that unvaccinated people are at even greater risk because of the Delta variant.”

After consultation with Dr. Ho, its infectious disease panel and the NFL amidst rising Delta breakthrough cases, the NBA has reversed course to mandate masks for courtside players and staff, vaxxed or not. But only personnel whose job requires them to be within 15 feet of players — security guards and bus drivers, team masseuses and stadium janitors — will be required to provide two shots’ worth of evidence.

“We will not know individuals who are not vaxxed,” admits veteran NBA referee Brian Forte. His fellow official Marc Davis, though, insists that refs feel protected between their mandated masks, vaccines, rigorous testing and a little halftime hand-washing: “It’s safer to be on the court than it is in a bus station.” One of last season’s highest-profile Covid scares involved Kyrie Irving’s teammate, the Nets superstar Kevin Durant. He was pulled out of a game — twice — when a close contact tested positive, and would end up spending six days off the court as a result. It was a bizarre



“We have to be the mask police,” says one courtside employee at Barclays Center in Brooklyn, “but we’re pretty strict with the fans. And the players, they’re young, they’re healthy — not the coaches or some refs — but no shade to Kyrie. It’s his choice. I just pray that if something happens, he’ll survive it.”

NBA Covid protocols for this season include an especially lengthy warning of how much money is at stake from “exposure and corresponding interruptions” as a result of behavior off the court. The league medical office goes out of its way to point out that fully vaccinated teams can hit the club all they desire; one vaccinated player said he was frustrated with teammates coming back to next week’s training camps who “are scared to get vaxxed but you see them go out in the summertime to all the clubs and all the bars, and there’s virus everywhere.” Indeed, the final sticking points for collective bargaining revolved around player appearances at indoor sponsor and community events and “prohibitions on accessing indoor bars, clubs and lounges.”

In February, when Irving was on a two-week **leave of absence precipitated by the Capitol riot** and extended by the NBA punishing him for attending a maskless indoor party, vaccine doses were readily available to celebrity entourages through whisper networks; his manager told me at the time that “we all have a choice,” indicating that some members of Irving’s circle were hesitant of the vaccine. Earlier this month, Irving was forced to clarify a tweet that went viral for mysteriously declaring that *My mask is off. Now take yours off. No fear.*



“Mask off” means

You stop being something you’re not and stop lying to yourself. It’s the moment you discover the real you and can walk around with NO FEAR in a society that shows a lot of the masks people wear to hide who they truly are.

*nothing COVID rule related!! Relax 🙌

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In the big business of basketball, it’s almost expected for the superstars to skirt the rules. This May, James partied maskless with Drake, forcing the NBA to release **an awkward statement** that neither confirmed nor denied the vaccination status of its preeminent megastar. But on Friday, the league **announced** that it had denied an application for a religious exemption by the unvaccinated Golden State Warriors forward Andrew Wiggins, and that he cannot yet play in their home games in San Francisco — which, like New York City, has a vaccination requirement for all people over 12 in venues such as basketball arenas. The league was not expected to rule immediately on any more such requests, but Irving could seek his own exemption, or get vaccinated — or simply refuse to play in Brooklyn.

“He is going to try to figure that out as it comes, because it’s not religious-based, it’s moral-based,” says Irving’s aunt Tyki. “You may have to sit on the sideline, you might not have to be in the arena during this. If it’s that freaking important to get a vaccine that, hell, it’s still not preventing the Covid” — which it is — “then I’d rather them working it out that way than to say, ‘Hey, if you don’t get the vaccine, then you can’t be a part of the franchise that you fuckin’ helped build.’”

League protocols state that teams must submit a list of players and staff who aren’t vaccinated to their league testing officer — or at least confirm that a franchise is “not



people missing,” were the odds-on title favorites forced to play at home right now. “We’ve had very candid conversations,” he said. “We don’t see whether it’s a city-wide mandate, or it’s the league mandate to follow, being any sort of hindrance to us being able to put out a team.” The team would not be forced to confront New York’s one-shot athlete vaccination law until it returns from training camp in San Diego for a pre-season home game on October 8.

The Nets declined multiple requests to make a team doctor available for this story. Representatives for Durant and his fellow Nets superstar teammate, James Harden, did not respond to inquiries about whether they had yet to receive any shots. Brooklyn’s “Big Three” are scheduled to speak on Monday morning at a league-mandated pre-season media day, which Irving skipped last year because, he wrote on Instagram, the media are “pawns.” Irving’s aunt expected him to discuss vaccine hesitancy in the Black community, as well as the tragic experiments on sharecroppers in Tuskegee, while “providing just as much knowledge and research base that you necessarily don’t have to take this vaccine — some of it is fake news, some of it is fake information, some of it is Doctor *False-y*, you don’t really know.”

Before he returned to his day job for the 2021-2022 season, Irving made a trip last month to South Dakota. His mother was born in Standing Rock, and he’d just finished enrolling for his tribal ID when he pulled up to a schoolyard at another Sioux reservation, unannounced, for signatures and selfies — the kind that force a fan to lean in tight and pull down her mandated facemask.

Inside the school, Irving met with two high-schoolers in a conference room for close talk about Covid and kicks, while twisting a cloth mask in his hands. He took photos in a basketball gym, where all student-athletes over 12 had been required to get vaccinated for the coronavirus to play sports, and where, on this Wednesday afternoon in late August, Irving was playing by his own rules.

“Pretty much everyone had a mask on,” says the mother of one student in attendance. “Everyone but Kyrie, everywhere he went.”



distanced as possible during his visit, but on the school's Facebook page, only rare news remained: An administrator had Photoshopped crude painstrokes over his nose and mouth, along with doctored masks on several bare-chinned students, because Irving had broken public-health protocol on government grounds.

“People seeing Kyrie on the rez,” the mother recalls, “even though we’re in a pandemic, I don’t think they stopped to be like, ‘Are you vaccinated?’ No, they’re like, ‘Damn, this is *Kyrie*!’ He’s one of our heroes.”

*Matt Sullivan is the author of **Can't Knock the Hustle: Inside the Season of Protest, Pandemic and Progress with the Brooklyn Nets' Superstars of Tomorrow**. He has been an editor at The New York Times, The Atlantic, The Guardian, Esquire and Bleacher Report.*

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