

A Content Analysis on Lightning Safety Policies at Power 5 Schools

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Abstract

“The high occurrence of lightning strikes in the United States has posed severe risks and threats to the general population over the years. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (2022), lightning strikes occur about 40 million times a year and have killed 444 people from 2006 through 2021, with hundreds more being injured during the same time. Moreover, lightning activity follows natural patterns and can be expected to increase from late spring to early fall, from 10:00 am to 7:00 pm, commonly referred to as the lightning season (Jensenius Jr., 2020; Scarneo-Miller et al., 2021; Spengler et al., 2002; Walsh et al., 2013). Nevertheless, lightning remains a latent topic of discussion and development in the realm of intercollegiate athletics because it is the most significant severe weather threat that affects its events and all participating stakeholders (e.g., student athletes, coaches, officials, fans, etc.) (NCAA, 2014). The NCAA (2014) has published lightning safety guidelines in their Sports Medicine Handbook to serve as an educational resource for affiliated institutions and help the athletic departments plan and prepare for lightning safety situations that may arise in the future. However, the question is whether affiliated institutions follow the proposed lightning safety guidelines developed by the NCAA on their lightning safety policies. To exemplify the impact of lightning on intercollegiate athletic contests, Holle and Flanagan (2018) analyzed and categorized a total of 126 college football games from 2010 through 2017, investigating the types of impact posed by this severe weather threat. Categories indicated the following impacts on the games: never started (n=6), started late (n=30), suspended and not restarted (n=17), halftime delays (n=12), and in-game delays (n=61). Moreover, some recent cases of delayed, postponed, or even canceled events due to lightning include Texas vs. Miami and Tennessee vs. Southern Miss during the NCAA baseball playoffs in 2023, and the Texas A&M vs. Miami and Wake Forest vs. Vanderbilt football games in September 2023, for example. To conduct this exploratory qualitative content analysis, researchers will access athletic department websites and/or the main university’s website that mentions athletics for the current 69 Power 5 schools. This refers to the current total number of Power 5 schools before the imminent conference realignment, which is projected to begin in the fall of 2024 (Bender, 2023; Parks, 2024). Researchers will retrieve the lightning safety protocols, policies, and procedures from the aforementioned online sources. The documents analyzed will mostly commensurate text-based publicly available documents found on the previously cited sources. After collecting lightning safety documents, researchers will analyze whether a lightning safety policy is in place at the university, later categorizing the content presented by the university, if any. The content will be categorized and based on recommendations from the NCAA Sports Medicine Handbook and national weather organizations (e.g., National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), National Weather Service, etc.), including trigger points, evacuation procedures, criteria for suspension, cancelation, and resumption of activity, and so forth. Therefore, the purpose of this content analysis study is to investigate the current lightning safety policies within the athletic departments of Power 5 schools to determine whether the nature of these policies is in accordance with NCAA guidelines and national weather organizations’

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