

Perspective | Coaches strongly oppose a transfer waiver, so don't expect the NCAA to do the right thing

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The NCAA's announcement that it will draft and vote on legislation that would allow a college athlete to benefit financially from the use of their [name, image and likeness](#) received a good deal of attention last week, but its recommendation to table a far more important decision went mostly unnoticed.

On Thursday, the NCAA's Division I board of directors announced [it did not recommend](#) a one-time transfer waiver that would allow players in football, men's basketball, women's basketball, men's hockey and baseball to be eligible to play immediately after changing schools. The NCAA's Division I Council could vote on the recommendation from the transfer waiver working group later this month at the earliest; if approved, it would be a massive change to a long-standing rule that required a player in those sports to sit out for a year after changing schools unless he or she received a waiver from the NCAA.

Changing the rule is, without question, the fairest thing to do. As proponents of the change point out, it's unfair that coaches can change schools and coach immediately and that athletes in most non-revenue sports are allowed to do the same thing once — while those in the five sports that sell tickets are forced to sit out.

That would certainly be the way to go in a utopian world. Unfortunately, college athletics is about as far from a utopia as any place on Earth.

"I would be 100 percent for the rule if I was selfish and greedy," Tennessee men's basketball coach Rick Barnes said Saturday. "It won't change the number of kids I lose to transfer, but it *will* change how many kids transfer from mid-majors because power schools will poach their players nonstop. It already goes on because of graduate transfers and all the waivers that are allowed, but if you make every single transfer easy, it will happen all the time."

Michigan State's Tom Izzo took his objection a step further. "On the surface, it sounds like this is what's best for the kids, but it's really not," he said. "If I lose a good player, sure, it might hurt me for a little while, but long term, I'll be fine. The power school coaches in football and basketball will be fine. They'll go out and recruit someone else.

"But what happens to the kid? What happens when he finds out the grass isn't greener somewhere else? What happens when it turns out all those people telling him he was going to be an NBA player are wrong, and he wakes up one morning without a college degree and no idea what he's going to do with his life next? I'm not saying there aren't kids who should transfer; I'm saying they should think about it before they make that leap."

The graduate transfer rule has already changed the landscape considerably. It essentially allows a player who will graduate with eligibility remaining to be recruited while still finishing his

undergraduate work.

A recent example is Marcus Santos-Silva: The 6-foot-7 forward announced last week he was transferring from VCU — where he emerged as the Rams' best player this past season as a junior, averaging 12.8 points and 8.9 rebounds — to Texas Tech. When VCU Coach Mike Rhoades told Santos-Silva that, according to reports he had gotten back from 26 NBA teams, he wasn't going to be drafted, he decided to transfer to the [Red Raiders](#).

“The kid's making a mistake on several levels,” said Shaka Smart, the former VCU coach who is now at Texas. “He's going from being their go-to guy as a senior to being a role player. If anything, he's less likely to continue to develop at a place where he's just one of the guys — and for only one year. The VCU coaches have three years invested in making him the player he's become.”

There are examples like Santos-Silva every year, many involving players who want to “move up” to the bright lights of the bigger conferences. Transfers happen often in football, but they frequently involve players moving from one big-time program to another for more playing time. The past three Heisman Trophy winners — Baker Mayfield, Kyler Murray and Joe Burrow — were transfers. Football players often *want* to sit out a year to get bigger and stronger. Not so in basketball.

“There is no question if this rule passes, it's going to hurt the mid-majors more than anyone,” Maryland Baltimore County men's basketball coach Ryan Odom said. “Before, if a power school coach is looking at a mid-major kid as a transfer, he has to consider that he's committing a scholarship to someone who won't be able to help him the year he sits out. The player has to think about that sit-out year, too. If the rule changes, it'll be chaos — coaches from big-time schools recruiting mid-major kids nonstop, and mid-major coaches having to spend the spring and summer trying to make up for the players they've lost.”

Odom said the nine coaches of the America East Conference discussed the potential rule change on a videoconference call last week; they were unanimously against it. Izzo said he informally polled football and basketball coaches at the top levels and found no one in favor of it.

Most coaches believe the NCAA's board of directors recommended tabling the proposal because there are so many issues that need to be dealt with — and because so many coaches are vocally against it. “It's good that they didn't pass it now,” Izzo said. “But you watch: Just about every kid who applies for a waiver this summer will get it.

[In its memo](#), the board of directors said changes to the transfer rule “are not appropriate at this time” but the process should “be sensitive to student-athlete well-being, especially those impacted by COVID-19.” But it can be argued that every player seeking to transfer right now is affected by [the novel coronavirus pandemic](#).

Given that the committee that deals with the transfer rule recommended it be changed, it seems likely it will be at some point.

“I think we have to accept the fact that it's going to pass and prepare to deal with it as best we can,” Odom said. “I hope they're taking more time to figure out ways to keep some controls so kids aren't transferring the minute something goes wrong for them. There are benefits to sitting out a year — both in an academic and a basketball sense. A lot of times when kids transfer, they lose credits along the

way. They need the extra time to graduate. What's more, it can be helpful in a basketball sense to work on their games and their bodies and to be fifth-year players.”

There is also the possibility of football coaches telling players who they think can't help them that they should transfer to play right away. Players being run off is already an issue; a Football Bowl Subdivision school can have 85 players on scholarship but generally can sign up to 25 per year. Do the math.

Barnes is also bothered by the fact that so many rules — including this one — seem to be about players with NBA dreams.

“Most kids in Division I aren't going to play in the NBA,” he said. “And yet no one seems to value the scholarship. It's all about: ‘What's the quickest way to get them to the NBA? So let's make sure they play right away.’ Most kids are going to benefit from getting that degree — it's just that a lot of them and a lot of the people around them don't understand that.”

Perhaps common sense will prevail and the NCAA passes a rule that establishes guidelines that allow athletes to play at a new school right away. Among them: a coach leaving, a family issue and being in good standing academically.

But this is the NCAA, which tries to claim some kind of moral high ground when making most of its decisions. Don't hold your breath waiting for those in charge to do the right thing. History says it won't happen.

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