

Rewriting the Rules (and Attitudes) for College Football Transfers

By **Marc Tracy**

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MORGANTOWN, W.Va. — As a high school quarterback, Will Grier “fell in love” with Will Muschamp, then the coach at Florida. “He was a player’s coach, is what some people called it,” Grier said recently.

Grier spurned other attractive offers — from Auburn, Arkansas and Tennessee — to commit to the Gators, and he enrolled early, in January 2014. He redshirted his first season. Then Muschamp was fired near the end of a 7-5 campaign.

Grier persisted, and the next season he beat out Treon Harris for the starting job after the first game of the season. But in October 2015, Florida announced that Grier had tested positive for a banned substance; Grier, who said it had been in an over-the-counter supplement, was suspended for a year.

The new Florida coach, Jim McElwain, told Grier that a change of scenery might benefit him. Grier agreed — particularly since the suggestion came from the new head coach.

Three years later, Grier seems to have found a happy ending on the banks of the Monongahela River. He transferred to West Virginia, where he is in his second season as starting quarterback. The No. 12 Mountaineers (6-1) are College Football Playoff contenders, with a crucial Big 12 matchup at No. 15 Texas (6-2) on Saturday. And Grier, in his final year of college eligibility, could well be a first-round N.F.L. draft pick next spring.

In college football’s highest tier, there are more and more transfers among quarterbacks, who — unlike offensive linemen, wide receivers or cornerbacks — have little opportunity to improve and virtually no hope of showing off their talents if they are not the starter.

“People found an element in the system where they can kind of restart their careers,” said Yogi Roth, a Pac-12 Networks analyst and a former quarterbacks coach at Southern California.

More than a dozen starting quarterbacks in the five power conferences have transferred. They include the Heisman Trophy contender Kyler Murray at Oklahoma and Joe Burrow, who will lead No. 4 Louisiana State (7-1) against No. 1 Alabama (8-0) on Saturday night. Four teams in the top 10 of the Associated Press poll, and seven of the top 25, are led by quarterbacks who transferred to those teams.

In recent years, transfer quarterbacks have won the Heisman (Cam Newton, Baker Mayfield) and the national championship (Jake Coker). They have been No. 1 overall draft picks (Newton and Mayfield) and gone on to win a Super Bowl (Russell Wilson).

Some have transferred as graduate students, exploiting a loophole that enables them to play immediately; others have sat out a year — N.C.A.A. rules require it for most football players who have not graduated — and still made productive use of their college careers.

Other trends, such as early enrollment and year-round classes, mean that a quarterback can redshirt his first year, graduate in three years and then transfer and play immediately with two more seasons of eligibility.

“It’s kind of like a free-agent market at this point,” said Ryan Willis, who transferred from Kansas to Virginia Tech, where he is now the starter.

These transferred signal-callers have poked even more holes in the pretense that, for top players, college football is more than just pre-professional training.

Grier, 23, is married, with a young daughter. He does not spend much time doing typical college-student activities or exploring Morgantown, he said. When he is not being a husband and father, he is working on football.

“I treat this like my job,” he said. “I think it’s preparing me for the next day.”



Coaches have largely embraced the trend — not that they have much choice.

“I think it’s good when I get the good player,” said L.S.U. Coach Ed Orgeron, whose quarterback came from Ohio State. “When I lose the good player, I don’t like it.”

Two rule changes in effect this season are likely to lead to more transfers, particularly at quarterback. Previously, transfers had to request a release from their team and were barred from direct contact with other coaches until they received it, creating a murky system of back-channel communication and uncertainty. Starting Oct. 15, they merely had to notify their team of their intention to transfer, after which their name would be put into a database and other coaches could reach out to them.

Another new rule permits players to compete in up to four games and still redshirt that season. Clemson’s Kelly Bryant announced that he would transfer after this season’s fourth game — and after Coach Dabo Swinney announced that the freshman Trevor Lawrence would be the starter. Bryant, a senior, will be able to count 2018 as his redshirt year, even though he played substantial numbers of snaps in the Tigers’ first four games, and to play all of 2019.

“This model of amateurism forces kids to take any means necessary to get noticed for the next level, because that’s the only way you can monetize that skill,” said Joel Klatt, a Fox Sports analyst and former college quarterback who outspokenly defended Bryant’s decision.

Take Shea Patterson. He was recruited to Mississippi before the 2016 season, but his coach, Hugh Freeze, resigned amid scandal the following year, and the N.C.A.A. imposed sanctions on the Rebels near the end of 2017. “Some things were promised that didn’t happen,” Patterson said. As a result of the sanctions, the N.C.A.A. allowed players to transfer without having to sit out a season. After a visit from Michigan’s Jim Harbaugh in Oxford, Patterson now starts for the No. 5 Wolverines (7-1).

Or take Grier. After Muschamp was fired, Grier seemed tied to McElwain, who had not recruited him and who generally uses run-first offenses. Instead, Grier was re-recruited by West Virginia Coach Dana Holgorsen, an offensive guru. Holgorsen and Jake Spavital, the offensive coordinator, have between them coached the future pro quarterbacks Case Keenum, Geno Smith and Johnny Manziel. They run a pass-happy Air Raid-style offense similar to those that produced the current N.F.L. starters Jared Goff, Patrick Mahomes and Mayfield.

“I wanted to play in an offense where I could throw the ball a little bit and highlight my skills,” said Grier, who is among the leaders in completion percentage, touchdowns and quarterback rating this season.



Bailey Hockman, left, participated in media day for Florida State in August. He's now playing for a community college and is expected to transfer to another major school.
Phil Sears/Associated Press

Transferring can be a touchy subject, because it appears to run counter to football's ingrained team-first mentality and college athletics' facade of sport mingled with, and subservient to, education.

But more than one quarterback transfer noted that head and assistant coaches move between programs constantly, willingly and unwillingly, and without having to sit out a year.

"The fact that coaches can come and go as they please and you get a whole new staff that you weren't expecting and is trying to go in a different direction — you should have the ability to transfer," Grier said.

McElwain, for instance, was fired before the end of last season, meaning that if Grier had stayed put, he would have had three head coaches at one university.

Bailey Hockman was recruited to play at Florida State under Jimbo Fisher, who had tutored Jameis Winston into winning a Heisman and being drafted with the No. 1 overall pick. But last off-season Fisher signed a \$75 million contract with Texas A&M, and Hockman elected to transfer to a junior college with reported plans to play at North Carolina State.

“Whether it’s college or the N.F.L., you have to make the right decision for yourself,” Patterson said. “Sometimes, you have to be selfish.”

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