

The New York Times

When the Quarterback Earns a Degree and Switches Colleges

About a dozen Power Five teams, including powers like Oklahoma and Louisiana State, are rolling with graduate transfers at quarterback. It might be the new normal for college football.



By Alan Blinder

Published Sept. 5, 2019 Updated Sept. 7, 2019, 10:02 a.m. ET

NORMAN, Okla. — All of it — the 5,626 passing yards at Alabama, the halftime benching in a national title game, the depth-chart demotion and last December’s come-and-save the Crimson Tide crisis — dissolved into the evening shadows as Jalen Hurts trotted out to start another college football season.

Alabama had already played its season opener, and won. Hurts, the quarterback who was 26-2 as a starter there, was now, for a single season, an Oklahoma Sooner.

So it is across the country: Graduate transfers are lining up at new universities to take more snaps, and coaches are taking them up on it, seizing talents they know they will have for only a season or two. Three Big 12 teams opened the year by starting a quarterback who had finished his degree at one university and moved on to another. Five Southeastern Conference teams did the same, as did three in the Big Ten.

“This is not going to be an unusual topic, even next year or the year after,” said Chad Morris, the head coach at Arkansas, which played two graduate transfers at quarterback on Saturday. “This is fixing to be the norm.”

In 2013, according to the N.C.A.A., there were 58 graduate transfers at all positions in Division I football. In 2018, that figure climbed to 166. But nowhere are transfers more visible — and, for some teams, more vital — than at quarterback.

The consequences for the sport could be far-reaching, in part because coaches, especially those facing immense pressure to produce immediate results, may be tempted to favor more experienced signal callers, cutting playing time for younger quarterbacks and hindering their development.

“I think it will be akin to the one-and-done in basketball where the true freshman is sought after,” Gary Danielson, a CBS commentator and former Purdue quarterback, said.

“For these top layer football teams, the cream of the crop in the Power Five conferences, you have 80,000 people buying tickets, you’ve got coaches making over \$1 million,” he added. “If you don’t have a quarterback, you’re in trouble.”

And quarterbacks are often willing, eager even, to move when they are frustrated by a lack of playing time in a position that is not as accommodating of multiple players as, say, wide receiver or along the defensive line.

The N.C.A.A. allows a student to move to a new university and play immediately if he has completed his undergraduate degree. Although there are exceptions, many students who transfer without degrees are allowed to play only after sitting out a year.

For this season, No. 4 Oklahoma, home of the last two Heisman Trophy winners, brought in Hurts, who spent three years at Alabama. No. 6 Louisiana State has Joe Burrow, and Mississippi State, Texas Christian and Maryland are among the teams that have entrusted their offenses to graduate transfers. When West Virginia goes to Missouri on Saturday, each team’s first string is expected to include a degree-bearing quarterback: Kelly Bryant, formerly of Clemson, for Missouri; and Austin Kendall, who played at Oklahoma, for the Mountaineers.

“You have to be invested in the program you’re going to because these guys are taking a chance on you,” Kendall, who predicted that the trend of graduate transfers would continue, said in an interview on Tuesday.

The season’s first weekend showed mixed performances for graduate transfer quarterbacks. Bryant’s 423 passing yards accounted for close to 80 percent of Missouri’s offense in a humiliating loss at Wyoming. Kendall was responsible for an even greater share of West Virginia’s yards when it beat James Madison.

Tommy Stevens, who moved to Mississippi State from Penn State, used his first career start to throw for 236 yards and two touchdowns. Arkansas’s graduate transfers, Ben Hicks and Nick Starkel, mustered just 191 passing yards against Portland State, and Riley Neal of Vanderbilt did not even make it to triple-digit yardage.

But Hurts — and there is perhaps no current player whose highs and lows have been more public — used Sunday night’s game against Houston to open a viable Heisman campaign. He passed for 332 yards and rushed for 176, assembling a personal record for total offense. His first possession as a Sooner lasted all of three plays, ending with a touchdown throw.

“Playing at a school like Alabama and playing at a school like Oklahoma, there ain’t many people in the world who can say they’ve done that,” Hurts, seemingly averse to the spotlight, said softly after the game. “It’s just all unprecedented, but I’m focused on the now. We’re focused on the now.”

Hurts, who is seeking a master’s degree in human relations, will eventually face stouter defenses, with a schedule that includes Texas and Iowa State. Lincoln Riley, Oklahoma’s coach, said Hurts was “patiently eager” with a willingness to embrace a new system just months after he played few snaps

against the Sooners in the Orange Bowl (as Alabama's backup to Tua Tagovailoa).

"Here, he's worked his tail off, he's learned our stuff, but more importantly, he's gotten more and more committed to our stuff," Riley said. "It's one thing learning it and being able to write it on a grease board, and another being able to go execute it and trust it in front of a lot of people."



Jalen Hurts after defeating Georgia in the 2018 SEC Championship Game as Alabama's quarterback. Kevin C. Cox/Getty Images

Riley, in his third year as Oklahoma's head coach after two seasons as the offensive coordinator in Norman, is a passing maven who learned his craft, as a player and a coach, under Mike Leach, the champion of the Air Raid offense. Riley's first Heisman winner, Baker Mayfield, passed for roughly 95 percent of his yards in 2017. But during his years at Alabama, more than a quarter of Hurts's yards came from runs.

Coaches suggested the benefits of a graduate transfer can outweigh, or at least counterbalance, any style differences of an athlete accustomed to another playbook.

"You understand that their maturity level is a lot higher than a freshman," Morris, the Arkansas coach, said in an interview. "You just look for him to be the same guy every day in how he prepares, how he relates to the team, that maturity level in being a professional."

Kendall said he had an approach at West Virginia similar to when he was a player at Oklahoma.

"You're the same person; you don't change anything up," he said. "You have to earn everything that comes your way."

Although coaches like Morris voiced support for graduate transfers, arguing that students should be free to play anywhere once they have fulfilled their original obligation, others around college sports worry that coaches and players alike are hijacking a rule in pursuit only of athletic glory, not a graduate degree. N.C.A.A. statistics show that less than a third of graduate transfer football players completed their new degree programs within two years.

In April, an arm of the N.C.A.A. rejected a proposal that would have changed how graduate transfers were counted in scholarship totals for football and basketball, an idea that could have discouraged coaches from accepting the students.

“While the number of basketball and football graduate transfers has grown, the current rules have not adequately held programs accountable for the academic outcomes of this cohort of student-athletes,” members of an N.C.A.A. working group that developed the recommendation wrote. The plan, they said, would “encourage more thoughtful decision making by institutions who recruit basketball and football student-athletes for graduate school.”

But the proposal — backed by a group that included athletic directors, conference executives and students — was defeated, and the players with degrees remained unencumbered.

“What we found is that when you look at the graduate transfer opportunity, that’s been spectacular for us,” said Derek Mason, the football coach at Vanderbilt. “And that’s really what I’m looking for at different times, just to fortify a roster with guys who have played ballgames.”

And players like Hurts see the option as a chance to extend their time in the college game, a chance to leave a mark someplace else.

“The story isn’t over,” he said on Sunday night.

As his coach — the new one — put it: “It will probably be a pretty good movie one day.”

More on the Career of Jalen Hurts

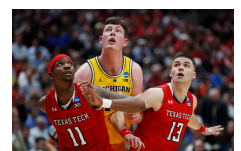
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9/7/2019

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A version of this article appears in print on Sept. 7, 2019, Section B, Page 8 of the New York edition with the headline: Need a Passer? No Problem. Some Just Graduated From Other Programs.