

IS THERE LIFE AFTER FOOTBALL?

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LIFE AFTER
FOOTBALL?
SURVIVING THE NFL

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*Dedicated to
the players of the NFL,
past and present*

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Note to the Reader

George Koonce plays a unique role in this book: he is both an author and the subject of many sections of the text. To distinguish his subject and author voices, we have italicized all direct quotations from Koonce, as they have been elicited through interviews. Thus, his subject voice is always in italics. Many of the interviews for the book were conducted with promises of confidentiality. Pseudonyms for players and teams were used in these instances. Consequently, some of the names of players quoted in the book cannot be found in NFL records. Player interviews from public media are attributed to actual sources and the names in these are authentic.

INTRODUCTION

“IT’S ALL OVER!”

 “George, don’t you realize, that’s it!”

She said it with love and compassion, but Tunisia, my wife, was telling me that my NFL career was over. I didn’t want to hear it. I asked her, “Why the hell would you say some shit like that?”

“George, you’re done,” she repeated. “It’s all over!”

I didn’t talk to her for a couple of weeks. That’s when I started going to the beach and spending three or four days by myself. I would say, “Tunisia, I’m going to the beach on Thursday. I’ll be back on Monday,” and she would say, “Really? OK.” And the beach was about two hours away. I was pissed off, hurt, angry, depressed. I just wanted to get out of there. I didn’t really want to be around people who were asking me, “George have you talked to anybody, have any teams given you a call?” I didn’t have an answer. Well, I had the answer, but I didn’t want to tell people. I was basically a failure in my mind. I was totally numb. I was in a dark and lonely place. I was embarrassed to talk with friends in the league. I envied them. So I’d get in my Chevy Suburban and whatever happened that day was going to happen. I didn’t really care. . . .

It was on the drive back home one day that I took a turn at 75 miles per hour just to see what would happen. I flew off the road and the truck ended upside down in a ditch. Thank God, I didn’t hit anyone. But I survived. By the grace of God, I survived. Maybe in retrospect, it was a suicide attempt. At the time I just didn’t care.

But the paramedics weren’t going to cart me off. No chance. The football tough guy in me refused to get into that ambulance. Tunisia drove me to the house and saved my life with words, not medicine.

“George,” she said, “I don’t understand what you’re going through, but I sympathize. We cannot reinvent who you are, but we can redefine who you are.”

After we got home, Tunisia said to me, “Well, did you accomplish what you intended?”

I told her, “Yeah, and that part of me is dead now and I’m ready to move on.”

After nine years as a starting linebacker in the NFL, George Koonce’s football days had come to an end.¹ He was depressed. Perhaps suicidal. Emotionally estranged from his wife. Avoiding his friends. Why had such a rewarding career boiled down to this? Is this what retirement amounts to for NFL players? What can they expect from life after football?

George Koonce’s account of “the end” may not be typical, but it’s not unique. It expresses many common themes of how ex-NFL players get on with their lives. Like Koonce’s account, the stories are complex and often paradoxical. NFL careers are relatively short—3.5 years according to the National Football League Players Association (NFLPA)—yet their impact lasts far longer.² Recently, the spotlight has focused on tragedies, poignantly and publicly exemplified in the suicide of former NFL Pro linebacker Junior Seau. At age 43, Seau shot himself to death in May 2012. Seau had been out of the game for less than 18 months. He had actually first “retired” several years earlier, in 2006. At the time, Seau referred to the move as his “graduation” because he was simply not going to stop working. He was moving to the next phase of his life, which lasted only four days before he signed to play several more seasons for the New England Patriots. Retirement on both occasions proved difficult, and ultimately tragic. His heartbreaking story epitomizes the difficulties confronted by many former NFL players. Seau’s untimely struggles and ultimate demise literally prompt the question: Is there life after football?

Junior Seau’s death launched a firestorm of speculation and investigation into the relation between head injuries and post-career troubles for NFL players.³ Other incidents contributed to the headlines. Since 2011 at least seven NFL players or former players have committed suicide, including Seau, Ray Easterling, Dave Duerson, Kurt Crain, O.J. Murdock, Jovan Belcher, and Paul Oliver. Belcher also killed his girlfriend.⁴ These painful stories might shed new light on the frequently overlooked tragedies of older ex-players like Jim Tyrer, who was involved in a 1980 murder-suicide.⁵ The same

might hold for the emotionally wrenching cases of dementia tormenting Super Bowl quarterback Jim McMahon and former Charger, Dolphin, and Raider Dave Kocourek.⁶ Then it's just a short inferential leap to questioning the connection between playing in the NFL and the debilitating mental health problems, prescription drug addiction, and depression that plagued former players such as Milon Webster, Ray Lucas, and Lionel Aldridge.⁷

But the stories are not just about head injuries. The general physical condition of former NFL players and the aftermath of their injuries are monumental legacies of this quintessentially violent game. Most retired players are scarred by major surgery, some from dozens of trips to the operating room. Many—Hall of Fame running back Earl Campbell, for example—can barely walk. Hundreds have had joint replacement surgery. Some—quarterbacking legend John Unitas comes to mind—lose use of their hands and fingers. And a few—Kurt Marsh and Jim Otto, in particular—have lost limbs from football injuries. In response to mounting health concerns, the NFL has instituted drastic rule changes and injury treatment protocols. In addition, in September 2012, the NFL announced a \$30 million grant to the National Institutes of Health to study brain injuries and other sports-related health issues and in 2013 the league and NFLPA announced a huge financial payout to players suffering from the aftermath of head injuries.⁸

If the ravages of injury aren't enough, former players by the dozen face financial disaster. Despite their lucrative contracts, ex-players are showing up flat broke shortly after retirement. Terrell Owens is nearly penniless despite earning top dollar for years. He reportedly owes the IRS \$438,000 in unpaid taxes. Seven-time Pro Bowl defensive tackle—and one-time multimillionaire—Warren Sapp has filed for bankruptcy. Court documents show he owes more than \$6.7 million to creditors and in unpaid child support.⁹ The NFLPA says that between 1999 and 2002, at least 78 players and former players were swindled out of more than \$42 million. *Sports Illustrated* claims that over three quarters of former NFL players are in desperate financial straits within two years of retirement.¹⁰

Still looking for trouble? Late in 2013, Patriots tight end Aaron Hernandez was arrested and placed under investigation for double homicide. Ryan Leaf, the second player taken in the 1998 draft (after Peyton Manning) and retired since 2002, was arrested in March 2012 on burglary, theft, and drug charges. Four days later he was rearrested for similar offenses. Leaf pled guilty to burglary and drug charges and has been sentenced to five years in a Montana state prison. In late April 2012, Texas authorities issued two additional warrants for his arrest. Leaf is just one of several recent additions to the list of convicted felons among NFL alumni. Some examples:

- Billy Cannon: counterfeiting
- Thomas “Hollywood” Henderson: sexual assault
- Dave Meggett: sexual misconduct and burglary
- Eugene “Mercury” Morris and Nate Newton: drug trafficking
- Lawrence Phillips: multiple assault convictions
- Art Schlichter: forgery and over 20 gambling-related felonies
- Lawrence Taylor: tax evasion, sexual misconduct, and patronizing a prostitute

While no one can forget O.J. Simpson, his actual convictions pale in comparison to some of his fellow alums'. Former Patriot and Colt Erik Naposki was convicted of homicide and received a life sentence without parole, but the standard may have been set by Keith Wright, a defensive lineman who lurked at the fringes of the NFL from 2003 to 2006. In 2012, Wright was found guilty on 19 charges including armed robbery, burglary, kidnapping, and false imprisonment, for which he was sentenced to a combined 234 years in prison.¹¹

The litany of horror stories goes on and on. But are they the entire story of life after the NFL? Are there other stories to tell, other chapters being written? Former players have coached Super Bowl winners and college national champions. NFL front offices are full of NFL vets. Fans love media personalities who graduated from the NFL: Michael Strahan, Troy Aikman, Howie Long, Terry Bradshaw, Boomer Esiason, and Herman Edwards, just to name a few. The list of NFL alums among successful local broadcasters is burgeoning as talk show radio and TV employ ex-jocks to talk sports 24/7, nonstop. While they've certainly capitalized on their football fame, there's also a long list of serious actors among NFL alums, including Jim Brown, Fred Williamson, Merlin Olsen, Carl Weathers, and, of course, O.J.

But former players succeed offstage, too. Ex-Viking Alan Page is a justice of the Minnesota Supreme Court. Jack Kemp, formerly of the Chargers and Bills, was a nine-term congressman from New York and U.S. Secretary of Housing and Urban Development. Steve Largent and Heath Schuler were elected to the U.S. House of Representatives. Duane Benson, member of the "badass" Oakland Raiders, was a Minnesota state senator. There's a catalog of other successful professionals—physicians, dentists, attorneys, and educators, among others—who've launched successful second careers after the NFL. Willie Davis, Jerry Richardson, and Eugene Profit have made millions of dollars in business and investments. Herbert Blumer, an All-Pro for the Chicago Cardinals in 1927, went on to become one of the foremost sociologists of all time.

In light of these contradictory stories, the question "*Is there life after football?*" demands a complex and nuanced answer. Perhaps several answers. The recent cascade of tales of lives gone awry has predisposed the popular media and sports journalists to emphasize the perils of both playing and retiring from football. But these hazards have been around for a long time. For decades, former NFL players have complained—sometimes bitterly—of being discarded and forsaken. They contend that *both* the league and their own union have abandoned retired players once they can't produce on the field. Many have decried the NFL's and NFLPA's indifference to the plight of old-timers, and the media have been especially eager to offer sensationalized accounts, sometimes corroborated with poignant, sympathetic personal stories. But the media tend to bury more mundane success stories in the process, leaving the public with little but visions of life after football as a cataclysmic mess. And they rarely have the patience for nuanced answers. Why do relatively young, capable men who are seemingly on top of the world so frequently fall off the cliff after retirement? Why has the lucrative financial situation of NFL players not translated into rich lives after football? What are most lives after football really like?

Is There Life after Football? offers an "insider's" look at the challenges facing NFL players when they leave the game, but it also provides an analytic distance from which to approach the many paradoxes of NFL life. The book draws upon the experience and stories of hundreds of former players as they describe their lives after their playing days are over. But it also incorporates stories about their playing careers, as well as times before entering the NFL, to provide context for understanding their current situations. The research is inspired by the NFL life and "afterlife" of former player George Koonce. Koonce initiated the project with his doctoral research on the "life course" of professional football players. This research draws upon his many years of experience in and around the NFL and in players, as well as a decade coming to grips with his own retirement. Koonce was a starting linebacker on the Green Bay Packers' Super Bowl teams of the 1990s. He also spent a year with the Seattle Seahawks at the end of his career. After continuing his education—he now has a master's degree from East Carolina University and a Ph.D. from Marquette University—he returned to Green Bay to work for the Packers in a number of off-field capacities, such as director of player development. Koonce also held positions in the athletic and advancement departments at Marquette, and served as director of athletics at the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee. He is currently the vice president of

advancement at Marian University. His involvement with retired players has deepened as a result of his research, and he is presently a member of the National Football League Player Engagement Advisory Board.

In a sense, Koonce is the consummate “participant observer”—a researcher who has been embedded in his research subject most of his life. He’s an authentic insider who has seen and done it all. Koonce’s observations and insights inform the analysis throughout the book. In addition, the other authors (Jim Holstein and Rick Jones, both sociologists at Marquette) spent dozens of hours interviewing Koonce, conducting in-depth life history interviews. These interview data also appear throughout the book, with Koonce’s stock of experiential knowledge of football, the NFL, and retirement supplying the empirical bedrock for this study. In addition, the book draws upon dozens of formal, in-depth life history interviews as well as many more informal interviews conducted with former NFL players—players with experience on a variety of teams, from different eras, playing different positions, from diverse social, economic, and racial backgrounds, and experiencing varying degrees of success and financial reward in the NFL. Several other academic studies of NFL players, former players, and their families also provide revealing first-hand data. Finally, the book draws on narratives and interviews on retirement-related issues from a wide variety of media sources, citing hundreds of players.¹²

The sports and entertainment media provide plenty of sensationalized, sweeping generalizations and judgmental conclusions about life after football. An anecdote here and there is usually deemed sufficient to warrant the claims. But an empirically narrow, predetermined focus often distorts players’ lived realities. It’s likely to ignore complexity and discount the mundane. Life after football is as complex and variegated as it is in any other segment of society. It’s just lived in a spotlight, or under a microscope, but there’s more to discover if we recognize and honor the complexity, nuance, and paradoxes of ex-players’ lives that defy easy characterization.¹³

Recently, head injuries have been the big story. Prior to that, money dominated the discussion, with reports of monumental TV deals and collective bargaining agreements juxtaposed with lurid tales of profligate spending and bankruptcy. Crime, domestic violence, social relationships, sexuality, isolation, and addiction claimed the sidebars. But none of these issues emerges in a vacuum. Nor do they develop in stereotypic lockstep with media images. Like everyone else in 21st-century America, former NFL players live at the complicated intersection of race, social class, gender, and the economy. Everyone faces the mundane challenges of getting by from day to day in a world of jobs, bills, ailments, and relationships. Life after football is no different. If the challenges are distinctive, it’s due in large part to the radical social changes that players encounter when they exit the game. When NFL players leave football, they encounter a version of culture shock. They aren’t just retiring from a job or a career. They’re leaving a way of life, entering a world that is foreign to them. They know the language—sort of—but they speak a distinctive dialect. They’ve seen the sights from afar, but they’re no longer tourists or disinterested onlookers. Now they live in the neighborhood. The world after football for some players is so different from what they’ve experienced for their entire adult lives that it leaves them disoriented.


NFL players are tough, talented, and well-compensated. Their lives revolve around competition and commitment. Violence and injury lurk around every corner. Teamwork, loyalty, and camaraderie are transcendent themes, juxtaposed with individual glory and respect. Beyond question, the NFL is *man’s* world, where masculine pride and character are constantly challenged. Even though players occupy the spotlight much of the time, they also occupy a private world, shielded, if not isolated, from the mundane world of everyday life around them. They live in a “fishbowl”—an arena where they are scrutinized, but also insulated from many of the routine demands of everyday life.

When a player leaves the league, everything changes. It's not just the money or the lifestyle. The codes and principles by which players live in the NFL bubble no longer apply. Players are no longer part of the locker room culture. Everything they're used to is up for grabs. But old ways die hard; the NFL imprint is deep. How players adapt to radical post-career changes can be excruciatingly personal, even if they might seem avoidable, trivial, or absurd to outsiders. On top of that, former players are challenged daily to work things out at the intricate nexus of celebrity and oblivion.

George Koonce's personal story provides a point of departure for examining these changes. As informative as his accounts are, however, they aren't definitive. Instead, his experience provides the narrative anchor for telling the broader range of players' stories. Koonce faced his fair share of challenges and changes. He's met with plenty of setbacks and successes. But his story isn't everyone's story. Sometimes it confirms broader patterns; sometimes it serves as instructive counterpoint.

To grasp the range of challenges, we must carefully consider what life was like while players were still *in the game*, as well as the standards to which ex-players compare their post-NFL experiences. Players' lives both before the NFL and while they played serve as the backdrop for their lives after football. Understanding how players carve their niches within the NFL and embody the game's culture helps us to appreciate how they make their peace with life after football.

PURSUING “THE DREAM”

 *I had dreams of being a football player since I was a little kid. It was something I wanted from as far back as I can remember—something I’ve been striving for from the very beginning. Sometimes it was all that mattered.¹*

NFL careers start with a childhood dream. On NFL draft day, absolutely the most frequent comment by players just drafted is, “It’s a dream come true!” Of course, most American boys at one time or another dream of being football players, firefighters, or superheroes. But NFL players have devoted their lives to pursuing their dream through a combination of work, talent, and opportunity. George Koonce recalls his dream.

When I was a kid, I was going to be a football player, a basketball player, something like that. When I was nine years old, but even before that, I used to play behind the houses. I would go to the high school football games with my sister. I would be up under the bleachers with a bunch of kids. I wouldn’t really be watching the game. I was trying to play my own game with other kids of my own age. But I really got involved at nine years old officially, when I started playing Pop Warner. Then it was official, when I had my uniform and there were guys [referees] out there in pinstripes. About that time, I started thinking about it seriously. My mom was going to night school to become a beautician, going to cosmetology school. Like a lot of parents, she told me, “You stay out of my room when I’m not there!” Well, I went into her room, and I turned the television on and there was a Monday Night Football game on. I went and got my shoulder pads, my uniform, and put it on while I watched the game. Howard Cosell was up there talking and I think the Houston Oilers were playing. I said, “I’m gonna play on Monday night!” From that day forward, I said I am going to do everything I possibly can to make that happen. I watched the Sunday games and read the papers. I would save my money and get the Street and Smith [magazine] from the grocery store. I would ask my grandma to buy me sport magazines. I didn’t know anybody personally who ever played, but I knew from watching on television that being a big-time player was special. For whatever reason, I thought I was special, and I wanted to be a part of that scene.²

Compared to some, Koonce started dreaming late in life. Retired quarterback Brett Favre claims he got his first football uniform—complete with helmet and shoulder pads—when he was one year old. “By the time I was in second grade,” he adds, “sports were my life.”³ Journeyman running back Brandon Gold’s dream was just as poignant, and perhaps more prescient:

I always knew I was going to go to the NFL as a little kid. Even from the second grade, I signed my autograph and said, “You better keep it,” because I had dreamed it and thought it, and I knew I was going to the NFL. . . . I wanted to be an NFL player. That is all I wanted to be—period! So, that is when I made my goal. . . . I wanted to go to the Pro Bowl. I wanted to go to the Super Bowl.⁴

Gold accomplished everything he dreamed of, but simply wanting it isn’t enough. Initially, the excitement of the fantasy propels the dream, but eventually physical talent, opportunity, encouragement, and hard work take over. Growing bigger, stronger, and faster than the other kids is usually crucial. Prospects for five-foot-three, 113-pound high schoolers are pretty dim. Of course, not all big, fast kids turn into elite athletes. They need direction, as Koonce recounts.

I really fell in love with the sport once I got involved. That was because of my mom. She thought maybe I needed something structured. Needed something that would keep me out of trouble. She knew I was aggressive growing up. She didn’t want to—she actually used these words—she didn’t want to lose me to the streets or to prison or anything like that. So she thought the best way to keep me busy and keep me out of trouble was to get me involved in sports. And that was genius on her part because she didn’t have any models for this but she came to it on her own. She just felt like, hopefully, it’s something that can keep him occupied. . . . So

Opportunity and encouragement set the table for Koonce. He grew big, strong, and fast, and with his mother's foresight and guidance, the dream took shape.

At first, I had no plan. I was just a kid. I didn't know what the steps were at nine years old, but as time went on from talking with different coaches as I went from Pop Warner to middle school, from middle school to high school, it became clear that to get the dream that I saw when I was nine years old in my mom's room, there was a process. There was a lot of work. And college had to be part of that, to get to Monday Night Football. You had to go to college to play in the NFL.⁶

Other players didn't see real career possibilities until they had some life experience and organized sports under their belts. Former defensive back Charles Nobles, who played cornerback for seven teams during his 11-year career in the 1990s and 2000s, speaks about his turning point: "It was high school for me. Coming from a poor family, you realize you only have so many different ways out of getting yourself that education. My football dream came from a high school that was a pretty much football school, and I knew that was the start of it right there."⁷

Dreaming of a *lucrative* NFL career is a relatively recent phenomenon. Members of earlier generations of NFL retirees dreamed of playing an exciting game at an elite level of competition, but big money wasn't yet part of it. Their dream was relatively innocent, highly romanticized, and almost never commercial or economic. In his autobiographical reflection on football in the 1960s and 1970s, cultural historian and former Kansas City Chief and Notre Dame grad Michael Oriard argues that football captured his boyish imagination like no other sport or game because of its "heroic" qualities. From the perspective of a young boy, football was more exciting, dangerous, and intense than other sports. Players were more courageous, braver, larger-than-life heroes in outsized body armor. But Oriard never thought about the money. Others, such as Will Siegel, whose ten-year NFL career spanned the 1950s and 1960s, never gave football as a livelihood a second thought: "I really didn't think about it [playing in the NFL] until my senior year [in college]. I didn't anticipate going that far. I think we all thought about it, but never thought it would come to reality."⁹ A dream was merely a dream.

Television, marketing, Pete Rozelle, and Joe Namath changed all that, as the NFL became "America's game" by the 1970s. It was *Monday Night Football*, after all, that inspired George Koonce. Oriard and Siegel grew up in the infancy of televised sports, before it was a multibillion-dollar industry. Subsequent generations came to know football as a grand spectacle with great financial allure. For Koonce, football was heroic, but it also promised a way to make a better life for himself. Like Charles Nobles, he learned that football had financial promise, that it was a way of getting an education, of improving his lot in life.

As the NFL's financial promise blossomed, the dream took on new significance in relation to the dreamer's socioeconomic status, social class, and even race. Middle-class kids' dreams of making big in sports are often simply fantasies. For poor kids—often African Americans—the dream has more practical significance. If pursued with purpose, it has a compelling material payoff. So when poor kids dream of becoming NFL players, they may very well be plotting a practical life course that middle-class kids don't necessarily contemplate. The upshot, of course, is that boys of relative limited means may actually invest more of themselves in the pursuit of their dreams than do middle-class kids.¹⁰ This isn't necessarily the case for everyone. NFL players from middle-class backgrounds—Michael Oriard included—worked hard and sacrificed to bring their fantasies to life. But they probably played out those dreams alongside other dreams, if not plans, for adult success. Ultimately, these differences permeate the ways that players approach their NFL careers, and eventually, the

lives after football.

The Path to the Dream

The dream doesn't come easy. Childhood play turns into practice, commitment, and conditioning. For George Koonce, this meant honing his focus and specializing his efforts. A good all-around athlete, he started out playing all sports, but by high school, his priorities changed:

After my sophomore year, I basically just quit basketball. I didn't want to play varsity. I just wanted to concentrate all of my attention on football. I was probably about 185 pounds and six foot tall, and I knew that I needed to get bigger if I wanted the chance to play at the next level in college. . . . My mom didn't like it. She asked me what was going on with me. I said that I just wanted to concentrate on football. She said, "Are you sure?" I went like, "Yeah." And she said, "OK." I said I want to join a gym, and after school I went there and worked out. . . . I thought that it would better my chances of going to college. I needed to truly concentrate on just one sport. And I focused on football all of the time.¹¹

Today, such dedication is common. Boys with athletic potential know that it must be finely honed and not squandered in mere "play." Elite athletes "work" at their craft, on playgrounds, in gyms and weight rooms, and at elite sports camps, their dreams turning to goals. Work to be bigger, stronger, faster. Develop their skills, their games. Get "known" in order to improve their prospects of moving up "the next level." It may not be this way for all former NFL players, but for most of those growing up after the 1960s, football became as much a job as a game.

Sometimes the dream becomes a virtual reality itself, played out across myriad forms of communication media that originally inspired it. For example, De'Anthony Thomas, who eventually played for the University of Oregon, was a standout as a 12-year-old youth league player. Before long, hip hop superstar and entertainment mogul Snoop Dogg took a special interest in this "superstar" christening him the "Black Mamba." By the time he was 17, Thomas was reading in *Sports Illustrated* that he was already a sports legend on his way to a spot in the NFL and an acting career after that.¹²

Thomas isn't the only "kid" in the limelight. *Friday Night Lights*, H.G. "Buzz" Bassinger's detailed chronicle of Odessa (Texas) Permian High School's 1988 football season, became a major motion picture and long-running NBC TV series.¹³ The nonfiction book illuminates the degree to which local cultures elevate prep football players, highlighting their importance to the life of the community. Boys become heroes to grown men, public icons upon whom the self-esteem of the entire community depends. This is all part of the football "career" of many NFL players.

Football stardom often means more than adulation. Certainly not everyone, but plenty of teenage stars reap tangible rewards for being special. Every high school has its mythology regarding the perquisites of being a star player: dating cheerleaders, lower expectations in the classroom, rules that can be bent if not ignored. Raised a notch, players get highly paid summer jobs requiring little work. Merchants offer "discounts." School officials and law enforcement officers are particularly lenient and "understanding" regarding players' childish "mishaps" or legal transgressions.¹⁴

George Koonce got a few perks early on, but nothing extravagant:

[I got some] attention from girls, better summer job opportunities. Help in the classroom as teachers gave me more opportunities. Most teachers and staff wanted to see a talented student-athlete graduate from high school and then go on to college. Students were willing to help with classroom assignments and offered assistance as tutors. There were even students in the class asking me if I needed help with a project, or if I wanted to be a part of the smart kids' group.¹⁵

Onto the "Conveyor Belt"

Most players realize that going to college is the only route to the NFL. If the odds are astronomical against making it to the NFL, the chances of earning a Division I football scholarship aren't that much better. Annually, more than one million boys play high school football, but only about 19,500 earn scholarships to Division I and II schools *combined*. There are roughly 10,000 players on scholarship any one time at all major college football schools (the Football Bowl Subdivision—FBS) combined. Less than three out of every 1,000 high school players will get football scholarships to one of the big-time schools.¹⁶ Undaunted, most players set out to become one of the chosen few. For many, college is simply a stepping stone to the NFL, a path that's entered earlier and earlier every year. De'Anthony Thomas may have been exceptional, but more and more he epitomizes a new rule: "Get the players with 'the program' as soon as possible."

In the summer of 2012, for example, Southeastern Conference (SEC) powerhouses Alabama and LSU began recruiting an eighth grader. LSU offered 12-year-old Dylan Moses a scholarship to play football in Baton Rouge. Not to be outdone, Alabama matched the offer. Was this a dream come true for Moses, or had everyone lost perspective? Imagine the scenario of coaching legends Nick Saban and Les Miles—both winners of national championships—pleading with 12-year-old Moses, promising him the experience of a lifetime based on his *preteen* gridiron talents.¹⁷

From the very inception of college football in the 19th century, special incentives—inducement, promises, and bribes—have been the stock-in-trade of college recruiting. In recent times, "legitimate" recruiting expenses are extravagant. On one routine recruiting weekend hosted by the University of Oregon, the Ducks spent over \$140,000 on 25 recruits. The entire point of the weekend, according to Coach Mike Belotti, was to make the young men "feel special." Dawn to dusk attention is mandatory. Coaches text, use Facebook, and call recruits dozens, even hundreds of times—leading to frequent "improper contact" violations of NCAA recruiting rules over the past few years.¹⁸ In February 2011, the NCAA Board of Directors addressed this problem, opening the recruiting floodgates by removing nearly all restrictions on the type and number of contacts coaches can employ in recruiting prospective players.¹⁹ By spring of 2013, recruits were reporting landslides of recruiting pitches. The University of Mississippi made headlines by sending at least 54 *handwritten* recruiting messages to recruit *in one day*. All the letters conformed to NCAA guidelines.²⁰ Clifton Garrett, one of the top high school prospects in the country, tweeted: "#OleMiss aint playin no games!! 54 hand written letters today #RebelNation!!" Not to be outdone, Ole Miss defensive line coach Chris Kiffin, the coach responsible for recruiting Laremy Tunsil, exchanged more than 800 Facebook messages with Tunsil and more than 400 with Tunsil's *girlfriend*. Ole Miss also had 14 staff members write letters to Tunsil and other people close to him. These tactics are all within NCAA rules, and, with electronic communication restrictions relaxed, they will likely become more and more common in future recruiting classes.²¹

Not only are players on college radars from childhood, colleges and their agents often act like Santa Claus 12 months a year. Illicit payments and extravagant inducements are commonplace and well documented. High profile recruits such as Reggie Bush and Cam Newton reportedly reaped and solicited hundreds of thousands of dollars in benefits during their recruitment and college years.²² In January 2013, Ole Miss five-star recruit Laquon Treadwell posted a series of online photos showing himself surrounded by attractive young women and holding \$100 bills during his recruiting trip to the school. Whether the photos are documentary or merely suggestive, they convey the prevalent attitude among some recruiters that football talent can literally be bought and sold.²³

Stories like these may be part mythology, but they are so commonplace that their underlying truth can't be discounted. Consider, for example, how University of Michigan quarterbacks Denard Robinson and Devin Gardner reflected on their recruiting experiences. On one visit to an SEC school

one of them arrived at his hotel room, only to discover two attractive coeds in the room, already in bed. “It was weird, man.” On another trip, one of them was given a rental car and told, “You don’t have to return that.” Another SEC school offered to pay for a relative’s tuition. “Man, am I the only one to do it clean?” lamented Gardner. “Michigan didn’t give me anything!” he continued in mock outrage. “This place sucks.”²⁴

Such perks have been dangled in front of recruits for decades. Hakeem Chapman, an all-city player from the West Coast in the 1950s, tells his recruiting tale: “I was offered money, cars, women, by all the big schools. My mom asked me what everyone was promising me and I told her. She asked, ‘What did [one college] say they’d give you?’ I said, ‘They didn’t offer anything.’ ‘Good,’ she said. ‘That’s where you’re going.’”²⁵ The inducements offered “back in the day” may be small change by today’s standards, but they were ubiquitous. For decades we’ve probably seen a mere tip of the inducement iceberg, generally when a school gets caught violating NCAA rules.²⁶

Some college recruiters will say or do just about anything to entice a prospect. In addition to material inducements, college football programs are willing to “overlook” recruits’ academic deficiencies in order to bring them into the program. Many players are enrolled with grades and/or test scores far below those of regularly admitted students. A 2008 study conducted by the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* found that for a cross section of FBS schools, football players were admitted with mean (average) SAT scores that were 220 points below the mean of the full student body. The largest gap was at the University of Florida, where the average SAT score for football players was 890 (out of a possible 1600 points), compared to the university’s 1236 average—a gap of 346 points.²⁷ Instances of individual players being enrolled without minimal academic qualifications are legendary. Dexter Manley—who went on to an 11-year NFL career (but who was also suspended for life for repeated drug use)—provides an egregious example. Manley confessed that he was functionally illiterate when he enrolled at Oklahoma State University. He had scored an 8 on the ACT (the equivalent of 400 on the SAT).²⁸

Journalist William Rhoden has adopted the term “conveyor belt” to characterize how the big-time collegiate athletic/financial machine captures and co-opts young athletes. He argues that the best athletes are funneled into college programs via the conveyor belt, which runs through a feeder system of youth leagues, camps, clubs, clinics, summer leagues, and scholastic leagues. “The Conveyor Belt transports young athletes from the innocent fun and games to clubs and specialized leagues—where they find increasingly rigorous competition and better training and coaching—and finally to colleges and professional leagues. . . . The contemporary Conveyor Belt is a streamlined mechanism for developing players and offering training and showcases where talented players display their talents for college scouts. Unfortunately, precious few of them succeed in fashioning NFL careers, notes Rhoden, and even those who make it to the pros pay a steep price in terms of personal autonomy and identity. By the time an elite player is ready for college, he may already be convinced that he is entitled to the opportunity—and a whole lot more.”²⁹

While Rhoden is skeptical about the conveyor belt and what it ultimately does to young athletes, there’s no doubt that, in recent years, players have eagerly jumped on board. Their sense of entitlement aside, many have studiously mapped out the realization of their dreams. That route normally runs through weight rooms, nutritional supplements, elite summer camps, personal trainers, and recruiting gurus and street agents.³⁰ For top-flight teenaged players, football is more than a dream. It’s a full-fledged commitment. And by the time a player signs a college letter of intent, he’s likely convinced that he’s an exceptional player and a special person. He goes on national TV to announce his college choice. His self-esteem is on steroids.

The Dream Goes to College

Most elite players go to college to play ball. Were it not for football, most big-time players wouldn't have attended the universities where they enrolled. College educations and degrees are valuable perks, but they aren't the main course on players' menus. Football is *the* centerpiece of the college experience, and being a top-tier player requires nearly total investment of time, energy, and attention. George Koonce was typical.

*Football was pretty much year-round. Spring training ran February through April. June and July consisted of working out, running, and conditioning. In season, we played from late August through December. . . . I would get to the stadium around 2:00 p.m. each day and leave after study hall around 9:00 p.m. . . . Somewhere, we'd fit in dinner. . . . I'd go to bed dead tired. Get up the next morning and do it again.*³¹

Twenty years later, a midseason day for Michigan quarterback Denard Robinson provides a variation on the same theme. Up at 6:30 a.m. to make it to Schembechler Hall (the football facility) by 7:00 a.m. for treatment for his swollen knee. An hour for Kenesio taping, electrical shock treatment, stretching, ultrasound treatment, and laser therapy, then into another training room for rehabilitation exercises. After this, a trip to the cold tub to reduce pain and swelling. By 9:00 a.m. Robinson was in the swim tank. At least this was warmer. Finally, like all other players, he had his ankles taped to be ready for that afternoon's practice. From 10:00 a.m. to 2 p.m., it was classes and lunch. Then Robinson was back in the cold tub. At 2:30, he had a quarterbacks' position meeting and film study. Then practice. After practice, he headed immediately for the training room for more treatment. A quick dinner at 7:30, then back to Schembechler Hall for unsupervised film study. Robinson finally left the building at around 10:30. There he ran into autograph hounds for whom he signed photographs ostensibly for charities and children (but in all likelihood, to be sold as Michigan memorabilia, with no cut given to Robinson). He was in bed by 11. That's a 16-hour work day, 16 hours devoted to football-related activities. The next day would be different. He had to fit in "study table."³²

In 1991, the NCAA instituted rules limiting actual practice/contact hours for varsity sports to 20 hours per week during the season. Organized off-season workouts were also severely restricted. Nevertheless, the widespread practice of "voluntary" conditioning and film sessions, plus time devoted to physical therapy and rehabilitation, mock the 20-hour rule. Denard Robinson's 11-hour football days were all legitimately within guidelines.³³ A few years back, an NCAA survey of football players at FBS programs reported that players devoted an average of 44.8 hours per week to football. Moreover, during the past two decades, the college schedule has been extended from ten games to 12 (or even 13 in special circumstances) plus approximately 35 postseason bowl games for the top 25 teams.³⁴ The college football season itself extends for nearly six months for some players—and that doesn't count spring and fall practices. Even summers are far from "free," with individual voluntary workouts paired with organized activities to make football a full-time, year-round enterprise.

So it goes in pursuit of the dream. Of course, there are compelling reasons to forge on. An athletic scholarship and a college education are themselves integral parts of the playing package—a valuable inducement, opportunity, and reward in its own right. Even though it's not the *ultimate* dream for many players—after all, the NFL is still the Holy Grail—it's a precious commodity, worth tens of thousands of dollars over the course of a college career. But as we discuss the value of athletic scholarships—and how they are used and misused—let's be crystal clear on one point. College football players put an extraordinary amount of time, energy, and sacrifice into their sport. They literally lay their bodies and futures on the line. The sport is typically both an emotional cornerstone for the college and the source of immense revenue for athletic departments. But even though the

often put in 40-plus-hour work weeks on top of being full-time students, football players aren't directly paid a penny for their labor. They get free tuition and comfortable living arrangements, but colleges don't come close to covering all reasonable living expenses or compensating players for their contributions to the financial enterprise. College football is big business, and players are cheap labor.³⁵

The basic reward for playing college football is an athletic scholarship—a grant-in-aid. The *2012-13 NCAA Division I Manual* specifies that a full grant-in-aid, more commonly known as the “full ride”—cannot exceed the typical “cost of attendance” for a particular institution. This is the amount calculated by an institution’s financial aid office, using federal guidelines, that includes the total cost of tuition and fees, room and board, books and supplies, transportation, and other expenses typically considered in the cost of attending a college.³⁶ Tuition, room, and board are the “big ticket” items, but there are a variety of other minor benefits to which student-athletes are entitled, including medical insurance, a small number of complimentary tickets provided by the university, institutional awards (and gifts) given to all team members, and summer school and preseason training expenses, among other things. All grants-in-aid are awarded on a one-year basis, so no player is actually guaranteed four-year college education. If a player is a bust on the field, his scholarship can be terminated.³⁷

The standard grant-in-aid at an FBS school is worth about \$50,000 annually, give or take a few thousand dollars. Near the top of the heap, for example, a full scholarship at the University of Southern California (USC)—a private institution and perennial football powerhouse—might cost more than \$62,000: \$45,602 for tuition, \$13,000 for room and board, \$1,500 for books and supplies, plus other sundry expenses. Among private schools, Stanford, Miami, and Duke are a little less expensive. At top public institutions such as the University of Texas, out-of-state tuition is only \$34,000, helping to keep costs down, while Alabama weighs in with an economical tuition rate of \$23,000 a year.³⁸ Nevertheless, full-ride scholarships fail to cover many typical college expenses and don't provide players with funds for minimal discretionary spending.

School Days

Why should we have to go to class if we came here to play FOOTBALL, we ain't come to play SCHOOL classes are POINTLESS

Third-string Ohio State quarterback Cardale Jones's 2012 tweet caused a social media buzz when he openly proclaimed sentiments many have long suspected regarding how big-time college athletes approach their educational opportunities.³⁹ Public perception—right or wrong—holds that college football players are single-minded, “dumb jocks” for whom education is more of a nuisance than a reward or opportunity. While Cardale Jones does nothing to dispel this belief, let's not single him out for castigation. As legendary Alabama coach Bear Bryant once put it, “At the level we play, the boy is an athlete first and a student second.”⁴⁰

“Student” Athletes?

The student-athlete situation is even more complex than these comments suggest. In general, Division I football players enter college less qualified and less prepared than their non-athlete counterparts. Nevertheless, Division I players graduate from college at rates only slightly lower than comparable college students in general—about 59 percent compared to 63 percent. Black college players graduate at substantially higher rates than their black student counterparts. At the same time, however, many

elite football programs have substantially lower graduation rates.⁴² “Dumb jock” image aside, college players are relatively successful students, not all that different from members of their age cohort. Martin Willis, who played 16 years in the NFL, sounds just like the computer geek next door as he recounts his college experience: “I majored in computer science. I always loved math, and I got involved in a couple of computer classes back in high school. When I got to college, I already knew what I wanted to do. I wanted to be a software analyst . . . so I immediately pursued computer science and that’s what I graduated with my degree in.”⁴³ Stories like this—of direction, purpose, and success—aren’t uncommon among former NFL players.

Still, they aren’t as common as tales of indifference, lack of preparation, and neglected opportunities. In many respects, George Koonce’s college experience was typical. He dutifully attended classes, followed a recommended course of studies, maintained his eligibility, and set school aside after his eligibility ran out. The dream took precedence over school: “*After my last season, I signed up for classes my spring semester, but I didn’t go to class. I was enrolled in four courses and got four incompletes. I needed to be enrolled so I could have access to the dorm and the meal plan while I worked out trying to get ready for the draft.*”⁴⁴ Koonce, however, did eventually earn bachelor’s and master’s degrees, and received his Ph.D. from Marquette after his NFL playing days were over.

Going to college simply isn’t the same for elite athletes as it is for typical students. Studying to compete with football and myriad related activities for the student athlete’s time, attention, and energy. Will Siegel, for instance, saw college merely as sidelight to sports: “To be very honest with you, I was just going there to play football. I wasn’t a great student. I was an average student. . . . It was all football, and I had basketball and track, and I just enjoyed the athletic part of it. . . . I took a few morning classes. I never cut class. I figured if you just attend classes, you are going to pass, and that’s all I did, I just passed.”⁴⁵ Others weren’t as calculating; some were less conscientious. Many players simply give themselves over to football and fit studying in on the side. Still others pile on other “distractions.” Tommy Jones, a veteran linebacker, for example, recalls, “I didn’t focus on my classroom work, because I was too focused on the girls and the social life. . . . I struggled at [college]. I had to go to summer school just to be eligible the next year, because I was partying every Thursday and not going to study hall, and stuff like that.”⁴⁶ Jones never got his degree.

Making the Grade

Colleges protect their investments. A five-year commitment to a football player at a major BC school may be worth nearly \$600,000 when all is said and done—and this doesn’t include the costs of academic support programs, strength and conditioning, facilities, administration, athletic trainers, and myriad other sundry expenses.⁴⁷ Football programs can’t afford academic eligibility problems, so they spend vast sums to promote classroom success. At the time most NFL retirees played the college ball, schools offered some form of academic assistance and special considerations. More recent retirees, however, had access to multimillion-dollar academic support facilities, tutors, study halls, technology, and more. According to the *New York Times*, in 2006, Division I schools spent \$150 million on academic support for athletes. USC alone had an academic support budget of \$1.5 million while the University of Georgia spent \$1.3 million for academic tutors for athletes—roughly the same amount the university spent on the campuswide tutoring program for its other 25,000 undergraduates.⁴⁸

Academic support programs and facilities have now become part of the “facilities arms race” for attracting recruits.⁴⁹ For example, the University of North Carolina’s academic support program is housed in the 150,000-square-foot Loudermilk Center for Excellence. The Student-Athlete Academic

Support Center provides classrooms for teaching and tutoring, advanced computer technology, writing lab, reading rooms, and office space.⁵⁰ At Michigan State, the Clara Bell Smith Student Athlete Academic Center—a two-story, 31,000-square-foot complex—serves student athletes and houses a 210-seat auditorium, a “hall of fame” gallery, two study halls, 60 computers, structured study areas, a student lounge, a conference room, four classrooms, tutoring rooms, a director’s office, academic advisor offices, and a reception area. There’s also the Student-Athlete Support Services offering an academic support program that assists student-athletes with the transition to college and continues that support throughout the athlete’s collegiate career, providing academic counseling, tutorial programs, and career exploration, planning, and placement.⁵¹ State-of-the-art academic support facilities are now de rigueur if a program is to compete in big time football.

“Majoring in Eligibility”

While academic support is a vital service, it tends to spoon-feed players their college education. Academic advisors design daily schedules and programs of study to fit both students’ needs and the demands of their sport. Support staff members register athletes for classes, typically with priority registration arrangements. They monitor athlete’s classroom attendance and performance, and enforce mandatory study hours. This was a mixed blessing for George Koonce:

ECU gave me my schedule with professors and times already chosen and a map to get to class. I had tutors and got help if I needed it. Football players had to be done with class by 2:00 p.m. If there was a class or lab that took place at 3:30, 5:30, or 6:30, you were not allowed to take it. . . . A professor once told me that a student should study about two to three hours outside of the classroom for each class hour. That meant I should have been devoting roughly 40 hours per week in and out of class. That was impossible. The coaches scheduled ten hours a week for study hall. I put roughly 20 to 25 hours per week into my academics. I put in at least 10 hours of training and game time each week, and my coaches encouraged me to do more hours of weight training and film study.⁵²

Unlike many players at ECU, Koonce picked his own major. In discussions with various advisors, he recalled the work he did around his father’s contracting business. He was interested in the financial aspect of construction and wanted to pursue the field professionally, so he declared a major in industrial technology and construction management. This pleased his advisors because, coincidentally, they were steering a large majority of the scholarship football players into this major. “*If you were a football player,*” recalls Koonce, “*there was probably a 70 percent chance that you would be in industrial technology.*”⁵³

While this worked out well for Koonce, in the bigger picture, this sort of academic career management may limit players’ academic and career horizons. And bucking the system can annoy the coaches. Jim Harbaugh, San Francisco 49ers head coach and former NFL quarterback, recalls that football players at the University of Michigan were steered toward easy coursework to ensure their eligibility. Harbaugh was talked out of majoring in history because it would take too much of his time. “Michigan is a good school, and I got a good education there,” says Harbaugh, “but the athletic department has ways to get borderline guys in and, when they’re in, they steer them to courses like sports communications. They’re adulated when they’re playing, but when they get out, the people who adulated them won’t hire them.” Myron Rolle, who won a prestigious Rhodes Scholarship while playing at Florida State, recalls that his college coaches were concerned about him being a premed major because they feared it would distract him from football.⁵⁴

Every campus has its reputedly easy courses and “jock” majors. Of course, these “gut” courses and majors vary widely from campus to campus, but athletic department advisors know where to find them. Players aren’t prevented from pursuing their own courses of studies, but there are well-traveled paths down which players are steered. The University of Michigan appears to have changed since Jim

Harbaugh's days, since, in 2008, 78 percent of UM football players declared majors in general studies compared with 1.6 percent of Michigan students overall. Around the same time, 68 percent of Texas A&M players were majoring in agricultural development (versus two percent of all undergraduates) while at the University of Texas, 41 percent of the football team was majoring in youth and community services, compared to 0.2 percent of all undergrads. Such "clustering" is widespread among FBS football programs. In 2008, *USA Today* found 79 FBS programs with clusters where more than 25 percent of the football team was in the same major and 28 programs with "extreme clusters" where more than 40 percent of a team shared the same major. The "jock" majors varied widely from school to school. There were many of the "usual suspects" (e.g., communication studies, criminal justice, sociology, recreation and leisure studies), but there was also notable clustering in general and interdisciplinary majors (e.g., general studies and university studies) as well as highly specific and esoteric-sounding programs such as apparel, housing, and resource management.⁵⁵

There are two significant upshots of the special academic handling that college football players receive. On one hand, college football players are likely to get college degrees. On the other hand, even if they receive degrees, big-time college players often get empty educations.⁵⁶ They make it through school, staying academically eligible, but often find their degrees haven't prepared them for life after college. Many fall short of earning degrees before their eligibility runs out and discover that while they have accumulated considerable academic credits toward graduation, they are woefully short of fulfilling the specific requirements of an actual degree program. Even when they earn degrees, many of them can hardly be considered college educated because of the way they've avoided academic challenges. Along the way, as a matter of simply getting through college, many players cede control of their academic lives. It's part of the cost of majoring in eligibility.

Special Treatment

Academic support isn't the only special treatment afforded college football players. Indeed, the perceived "perks" of playing ball are legendary around any college campus with a major football program. Some things are obvious, especially to other students. For example, George Koonce lived in an athletic dorm at ECU, and his accommodations were probably better than those of most other students. But in comparison to some campus accommodations for college football players, Koonce was living in "affordable housing." For almost a half century, athletic dorms were the signature of serious and successful football programs. The NCAA, however, put an end to them in 1996. Why? In 1991, *Sports Illustrated* characterized athletic dorms as a "perverse combination of Plato's Retreat [the notorious New York swinger's club] . . . cocaine den . . . and munitions dump."⁵⁷ By the standards of the day, living quarters were luxurious, the amenities lavish, and rules of residence life were loosely interpreted and enforced.

Hoping to stem the excesses, the NCAA banned housing catering only to scholarship athletes by instituting a rule that requires that every dormitory floor housing scholarship athletes must be occupied by at least 50 percent non-athletes as well. In recent years, colleges have been finessing the regulation by re-creating athletic palaces, but allowing equal numbers of non-athletes to live there, too. The opulence of today's accommodations is astounding. In 2013, the University of Oklahoma opened the \$75 million Headington Hall housing facility; the six-story, 230,000-square-foot building features an outdoor dining and grilling gazebo in its central courtyard, a 75-seat theater, a formal "living room" commons that includes a fireplace and oak paneling, a restaurant-style dining hall, a game room, and retail space that is expected to include a coffee shop, a convenience store, and a restaurant. Each residential floor also will have space devoted to individual or group study, a computer lab, a conference room, and an academic center. The residential rooms themselves will be

more like hotel suites than dorm rooms. “We wanted to create a living and learning experience,” said an OU administrator. “We know that students and student-athletes come to campus living away from home for the very first time. We wanted them to have the greatest possible start to their career from a living perspective.”⁵⁸

The concept of housing athletes together, but apart from other students, however, remains controversial. Those supporting athletic dorms argue that student athletes deserve excellent accommodations: they’ve “earned” them. Further, the dorms facilitate the use of both athletic and academic training facilities and resources. Finally, having players live together both fosters team cohesiveness and facilitates the supervision of young men living on their own for the first time. But others note major drawbacks, often pointing to aspects of the special culture it fosters—a culture that’s both a boon and a blight. A cradle of camaraderie and a shelter from outside aggravation, the athletic dorm can also become an isolated hangout for bad habits. Separated from the general student population, athletes aren’t well integrated into campus life. They stay to themselves, inhabiting virtual “islands of homogeneity,” and sometimes fail to grow into well-rounded students. They miss out on the socialization that typifies the college experience. As early as the 1970s, the faculty athletic representative at Indiana University warned that “the student-athlete has become a specialized product of contemporary culture” and was in danger of being cut off from the larger life of campus.⁵⁹

Even more insidiously, athletic dorm culture can spiral out of control, with dramatic implications. For example, during the 1980s, a time when many of today’s NFL retirees attended college, a series of scandals rocked the athletic dorm scene. Perhaps the most notorious involved the athletic dorm at the University of Miami. In September 1986, 14 police units were summoned to Foster Hall because about 40 players were engaged in what police reports characterized as “a brawl” and others called a “riot in the football dorm.” Seven times in 1985, police arrested Hurricane players at the dorm on charges ranging from trespassing to arson. “It was like being the caretaker of an Old West bordello,” recalled Alan Beals, an academic counselor during that time. “Saturday nights were ugly. You’d see girls rolling around outside your window, fighting over [former wide receiver] Michael Irvin. [The player] would just trade around.” University of Miami president Edward Foote eventually shut down the dorm, explaining: “Part of being a college student is learning how to manage the treasure of freedom. It’s true, there is more control if you have them [football players] all in one place. But the point of education is not to control but rather to create an environment that is rich in the opportunity for personal growth. Part of that is to make mistakes, to stay up too late or to fail an examination. And to face the consequences.”⁶⁰

For better or worse, athletic dorms often become “athletic islands,” isolated from much of student life.⁶¹ While he doesn’t lay all the blame on athletic dorms, George Koonce thinks that football diminished his college experience.

*My social circles were limited. Just about all of my friends were teammates, not classmates or fraternity brothers. . . . One of my biggest regrets about being a student-athlete is that I did not get a chance to take part of all of the things a university has to offer. . . . I didn’t have a balance.*⁶²

And the balance is further upset as players find their college life closely tethered to their training facilities. All the top football schools have shining new athletic complexes that provide meeting space, weight rooms, rehab centers, and recreational outlets. Indeed, the “arms race” for training facility superiority is positively nuclear. With multimillionaire donors such as financier T. Boone Pickens (Oklahoma State: \$265–400 million) and Nike’s Phil Knight (University of Oregon: \$300 million) paying the way,⁶³ universities are building increasingly extravagant sports palaces to attract the best recruits and “nurture” superior players. The University of Oregon’s Football Performanc

Center tops the list. With a cost conservatively estimated at \$68 million, the 145,000-square-foot complex is a palace designed to satisfy nearly all of a young sportsman's dreams. Giant screen TV, video games, lavish furnishings, locker rooms, training facilities, and more. It's enough to make a young man feel special.

Premium Perks

The NCAA boasts of a plethora of additional benefits beyond tuition, room, and board. The official list includes: degree completion and postgraduate scholarships, life skills training, and development grants. Among the primary financial benefits is the NCAA Catastrophic Injury Insurance Program, which assists student-athletes who suffer catastrophic injuries while participating in an intercollegiate athletics activity. The NCAA also provides other insurance programs and also helps student-athletes with unmet financial needs through the Student Assistance Fund.⁶⁴

Nevertheless, additional perks—many of them “off the books”—are widespread and legendary, but not systematically documented. These include direct financial payment to players by coaches, alumni, and boosters, financial enticements offered to recruits, money made by selling football awards and memorabilia, shelter from university and criminal justice sanctions, academic fraud to preserve players' eligibility, provision of prostitutes to players, and special incentives and “bounties” offered for game performance. Such transgressions at high-profile programs are too numerous to catalog, and have been going on for decades. Recently, for example, former players at Auburn University made a series of startling, yet all too familiar allegations: coaches were paying football players; payments were offered to players to forego entering the NFL draft; prospects were offered illegal recruiting enticements; players were commonly engaged in illicit drug use; players were sheltered in dealing with the criminal justice system; grades were inappropriately changed, and on and on.⁶⁵ Similarly, the University of Miami has been accused of illicit payments of hundreds of thousands of dollars implicating 72 former Hurricane athletes.⁶⁶ At USC, a Land Rover and airline ticket were provided to a key football player.⁶⁷ Ohio State players were guilty of accepting improper benefits and selling awards (including Big Ten championship rings), gifts, and university apparel valued from \$1,000 to \$2,500.⁶⁸ Some of these “bonuses” are negligible and many are written off as the consequence of players merely trying to tap into the tremendous financial profits turned by big-time football, although all players are apprised from the start about NCAA regulations relating to financial benefits. But other rewards are far from trivial, occasionally approaching six-figure payoffs. In the 1970s and 1980s, for example, Southern Methodist University boosters maintained a \$400,000 “slush fund” for paying athletes—with the knowledge and cooperation of coaches and the complicity of university presidents and members of the university Board of Governors, including a governor of the State of Texas. The situation got so out of hand that two players hijacked the entire slush fund without repercussion because coaches were afraid the players might expose the program to the media if they were punished.⁶⁹

Such payouts have been around from the beginning of intercollegiate sports, and tales—both mythical and true—have long circulated regarding special treatment accorded campus football heroes.⁷⁰ While the magnitude of contemporary perks is often staggering, old-timers remember legendary LSU running back and former NFL star Billy Cannon making extra money by selling off entire sections of Tiger Stadium seats.⁷¹ Clearly, rules and regulations didn't fully apply when you could run the ball like Billy Cannon. George Koonce recalls that they might even be bent for inside linebackers who seldom touched the ball.

Boosters were always around. They wanted to be involved. . . . After a pep rally, or the hotel on the road, they would try to get

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