

**The Decision to Transfer and the Impacts of Transferring on Leadership for Division 1  
Collegiate Football Players**

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## **Abstract**

The NCAA Transfer Portal is a portal that is used among D1 and D2 athletes to help foster a smooth recruiting process for athletes looking to go to different schools. The NCAA Transfer Portal was created in 2018. The portal is a recruitment mechanism that consists of a database that includes an athlete's name, school name, and weight, among various other metrics used by coaches to evaluate the transfer athlete. Since the Transfer Portal was created, many individuals have had mixed feelings about its potential use. This research will focus primarily on the use of the Transfer Portal by former college football athletes. Anecdotally, mixed feelings have been garnered by both football players and coaches on the use of the Transfer Portal. Coaches seem to have more of a consensus of disliking the portal, although some coaches like it because it gives a recruitment mechanism. In contrast, athletes favor the portal as it allows them to leave. Athletes appreciate the ability to have a smoother process when transferring and enjoy the ability to have the opportunity to transfer if their skillsets/talents are not being utilized, are trying to pursue the NFL and have a higher chance going to another school, or they are having trouble adjusting to the team or school (Feldman, 2023). Due to the increased use of the Transfer Portal, coaches describe not having to go into the portal to recruit players yearly as a "miracle" (Feldman, 2023). Specifically, a coach has stated, "If I get through this cycle and I don't lose any of these kids, it's gonna be a miracle" (Feldman, 2023, para 8). This qualitative research study will showcase the various leadership dynamics that come into play because of the use of the Transfer Portal. The study will focus on how team dynamics change when new players come to the school via the Transfer Portal (i.e., teammates recruited from the Transfer Portal taking spots, becoming leaders on the team, changing the team/leadership dynamics, etc.).

## **Chapter One: Introduction**

### **Background and Setting**

In 2018, The National Collegiate Athletics' Association (NCAA) created a portal known as the Transfer Portal (Elman, 2021, para 6). In order to enter the Transfer Portal, the athlete must first inform the university compliance officer that they wish to transfer to another school (Elman, 2021, para 6). Following this, the compliance officers must enter the athlete's name into the portal within two business days. Next, after the athlete can visibly see their name in the portal, they are allowed to announce on social media platforms their desire to continue to play their sport and be in contact with other coaches (Elman, 2021). Prior to the creation of this system, the NCAA had authority over athletes' transfers (Elman, 2021). In other words, the NCAA had a committee, and those who desired to transfer had to seek a waiver to transfer, which was left at the hands of the committee to decide whether they would grant the transfer (Prather, 2021). This fostered a lack of transparency, and those who desired to transfer and not understand what the committee was looking for to receive and admit a waiver (Prather, 2021). This issue has decreased with the portal as the NCAA does not have to authorize a transfer, as it no longer goes to the committee. It is one's decision as an athlete to transfer with the school's permission.

Coaches have criticized the Transfer Portal heavily, articulating that such a system is similar to a "free agency environment" (Elman, 2021, para 11). Coaches have also articulated that the Transfer Portal has created overcrowding, where many athletes are left without the ability to actually go to another school if they are not picked up because of the enormous number of athletes in the system (Elman, 2021).

Despite the criticism, there have been many success stories with athletes utilizing the Transfer Portal. One athlete who succeeded with the Transfer Portal is quarterback Jalen Hurts (Elman, 2021). Jalen Hurts's transfer helped him achieve ultimate success and gain the ability to play at a higher level. At the University of Alabama, Jalen Hurts lost his spot to another quarterback, which ultimately fostered his decision to transfer. At Oklahoma University, Jalen Hurts was first string and was in second place for the Heisman Trophy (the most outstanding college football player award in Division 1 Football); his ability to even be a candidate was created by his playing time and skillsets he showcased at Oklahoma University (Elman, 2021). Many athletes who have used the portal did so to further their opportunity to go to the NFL.

As teams form in college football, the same dynamics exist in other sports. Leadership becomes vital to fulfilling the team's needs and helping the team succeed (i.e., winning). In collegiate football, the team captain is named the formal leader, who has been studied to show that leadership impacts performance (winning) (Cotterill et al., 2022). Specifically, the team captain shapes effective communication between different positions and between players and coaches, motivates and encourages the team, and keeps the team cohesive (Cotterill et. al, 2022). Coaches also play a role in the positive leadership dynamics and team success. As opined by Kattoutla (2024), the Head Coach and “the coaching staff drive a team's culture by instilling good team-building characteristics that enable cohesion, increased effort, and coachability among team members” (p. 62). However, despite this, other leaders exist without formal leadership titles. These informal leaders consist of “ (a) *the task leader*, who gives teammates tactical advice and adjusts them when necessary; (b) *the motivational leader*, who encourages teammates to perform at their best; (c) *the social leader*, who develops a good team atmosphere; and (d) *the external leader*, who handles the communication with club management, media and

sponsors” (Cotterill et. al, 2022, Informal Athlete Leaders Section (n.p.)). Therefore, the NCAA portal has fostered a change in leadership dynamics and fostered the creation of new teams with new teammates who have never played together, thus disrupting the leadership dynamics of the team. The portal has constantly changed teams as athletes are now coming and going. For example, this year alone, in 2025, 24 players have entered the Transfer Portal, making Virginia Tech one of the top schools with the most collegiate football athletes transferring (Pope, 2025). Many of those transferring were top players again, causing a shift in the current Virginia Tech team dynamics (Pope, 2025). These players are also heading to better football programs such as LSU, Auburn, and Missouri, which now causes Virginia Tech to replace them with depth or a portal addition (Pope, 2025).

Thus, the overall goal of this project is to understand the factors associated with a collegiate football player's choice to transfer through the portal and the football team's leadership and group dynamics.

### **Statement of the Problem**

It is vital to understand how leadership dynamics change and play a role in player development, game-winning, coach/player dynamics, player success/future success, and how leadership roles develop and adapt over time in football (Cotterill et al., 2022). There is an endless amount of literature on the role of sports in leadership development, the impact of coaches on leadership development, and athlete success (Cotterill et al., 2022). However, there is minimal research on the impacts of the fairly new NCAA Transfer Portal on team leadership in football. There is a strong possibility that such changes in team dynamics will impact team performance.

As the NCAA Transfer Portal has become increasingly popular, it has become less rare for athletes to transfer at least once during their college football career. More research is needed to understand the role transferring may play on the team dynamics, how leadership is fostered and developed for transfer athletes, the attitudes of coaches and players on the Transfer Portal, the success of the Transfer Portal, the adaptability of a team, and the factors that play a role into the coaches recruitment of individuals on the Transfer Portal, and an athletes choice to enter into the Transfer Portal.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The study aims to explore how the Transfer Portal has helped or hindered leadership dynamics within the Power Four Conference football teams, and how leadership roles/team dynamics have changed due to a student-athlete transferring through the portal. To understand such dynamics, interviews are conducted with individuals who have been recruited from the Transfer Portal and athletes who have entered the Transfer Portal.

### **Research Questions**

- 1. What decisions prompt the desire to transfer to another Division 1 collegiate football team?**
- 2. How does transferring impact team relationships and leadership dynamics?**

## **Definition of Terms**

Change Leadership: When one works together to create a collective change ("How to Be a Successful Change Leader," 2024, p. 1)

Collaboration: Working together towards a common goal.

Adaptive Leadership: The ability to adapt and change when identifying issues and their root causes ("What Is Adaptive Leadership," 2021, para 1).

Transformational Leadership: The ability of a leader to encourage, motivate, and inspire other individuals to create change (AMACON, 2023, para 2).

Coaching Leadership: A leader can identify individuals' strengths and weaknesses and act upon those to create success (The National Society of Leadership and Success, 2022, para 3).

Transfer Portal: "The Transfer Portal was created as a compliance tool to systematically manage the transfer process from start to finish, add more transparency to the process among schools, and empower student-athletes to make known their desire to consider other programs" (Johnson, 2019, p. 1).

Transfer Student: Per the NCAA a transfer student is someone who was a full time student at two year or four year school during a regular academic term, someone who practiced or competed with a college team even if they were not enrolled full time and practiced before school started, someone that received athletic aid while attending summer school, or someone who received aid while attending an NCAA Division 1 school during the summer (Rickard, 2025, p. 3).

Transitional Leadership: The ability for a leader to guide an individual or organization through changes ("What is Transitional Leadership and Why Is It Beneficial to the Companies Today," 2023, para 1).

Leader-Member Exchange (LMX) theory: This theory emphasizes that each "leader–follower relationship within a workgroup is unique, varies in quality, and should be studied as a dyad" (Annad et al., 2011, p. 311). Further, this theory emphasizes that the “dyadic relationship quality exerts significant influence on a wide variety of organizational outcomes, such as in-role performance, citizenship behaviors, overall job satisfaction, and turnover intentions” (Annad et al., 2011, p. 311).

Power Four Conference: Previously known as the Power Five conference, the Power Four Conference consists of the SEC, Big Ten, Big 12, and ACC (Forde, 2024, p. 1).

### **Limitations of the Study**

This case study is limited to the information provided by former student-athletes, concerning their memories and the truthfulness of their responses. It is also limited in that it is not generalizable to other Division 1 collegiate football teams and student athletes' experiences due to this study's qualitative nature. While qualitative data is not generalizable to the broader population, it offers rich data to understand these football players' experiences. Other athletes who transferred through the portal may identify with similar experiences. Another limitation is that every athlete is recruited differently; some athletes are recruited by their position coach, or certain coaches based on geographic location. This could affect the relationships garnered with their coaches.

### **Basic Assumptions**

The assumption is that athletes will provide honest and truthful information so as not to skew the data and results obtained. The interview questions will be directly related to each

individual's capacity and personal involvement; however, some athletes may not feel comfortable telling the truth and/or may not want to tell the truth out of fear of retribution.

### **Significance of the Problem**

This research aims to understand how significant leadership dynamics and team dynamics change when new athletes enter a team or enter the portal (leaving their prior team). I assume that the old team where the player is leaving may feel the brunt of the consequences, as they may lose a skilled player. Additionally, the new team may incur changes as the new transfer athlete may take individuals' roles (e.g., leadership/team captain, may be first string, etc.). Further, it is unclear what factors motivate an athlete to transfer, nor the feelings that lead to transfer. Through interviews, this study will provide evidence about the factors that cause one to transfer, the attitudes and feelings of the Transfer Portal, and the impacts of the Transfer Portal on leadership development and team dynamics.

## **Chapter Two: Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

This chapter examines the current scholarship on the NCAA Transfer Portal and the development of leadership through sports. Although there is limited scholarship on the NCAA Transfer Portal, there is much more scholarship on leadership through sports. However, since this study is primarily concerned with the consequences and impacts of the Transfer Portal, the scholarship on the Transfer Portal is more pertinent. Much of the scholarship on leadership through sports and the theoretical framework used in this scholarship will be explained as it sets the basis for the theoretical framework used for this project and report.

### **Introduction**

Some view the Transfer Portal as a bureaucracy because of the portal being “highly insular,” one that is resistant to change, new ideas, innovation, and one that narrow-minded officials and agencies bog down with numerous policies and procedures (Reese, 2023, p. 99). Prior to the introduction of the portal, the NCAA was viewed as a bureaucratic organization because of its tight control over student-athletes’ privileges to play. Before the existence of the portal, athletes who would transfer to another school had to sit out for a year; thus, the university had a tight hold over the athletes’ rights to their name, image, likeness, and ability to transfer schools (Reese, 2023, p. 98). However, despite this ability to transfer and sit out a year, players were allowed to transfer. However, they were limited to how many times they could do this. Athletes were limited in their ability to transfer only once before initiating this portal. This is known as the One-Time Transfer Rule. Thus, as you can see, there has been much contention regarding the policies and procedures the NCAA has put forth on athlete transfers.

However, other issues have arisen since the NCAA created the transfer policy. One major issue is the unpredictability in recruiting and player development (Reese, 2023, p. 4). This portal

has also caused unpredictability for athletes. Athletes who enter the portal risk the school that they are currently at rescinding their scholarship due to the sense of disloyalty coaches and teams feel when a player desires/enters into the Transfer Portal (Reese, 2023, p. 101). This means that if no other school recruits them and they are stuck in the portal, they are without a scholarship and a school. This phenomenon is otherwise known as “A Shot at Glory,” due to the risk that one is taking by leaving another school and hoping to get admitted into another one (Reese, 2023, p. 102). Statistics show that in May 2023, 2,336 football players entered the NCAA Transfer Portal, and only 1,164, which equates to 50%, were offered to another school (Reese, 2023). The NCAA is aware of the risks of transferring and tries to make athletes aware before making such a decision. Specifically, the NCAA states:

“The decision to transfer to another school is an important and often difficult one in your college career. Before you act, do your homework. Make sure you understand how transferring will affect you, so you don’t negatively impact your education or your chances to play college sports” (“Want to Transfer,” n.d. para 1). Thus, these unintended consequences are not lost on the athlete or the coaches.

### **Known Consequences of the Transfer Portal**

One unintended consequence of the Transfer Portal is coaches aggressively recruiting off of the portal leading other current athletes at the school to feel unwanted and not good enough and/or coaches treating their current athletes immorally because they know all they have to do is shop on the portal should they “run off” their current athletes (Hummer, 2022, para 3). Despite the negative, there is also a positive consequence: now, all schools can recruit players that may help develop their teams into game-winning teams. Therefore, there is a sense of leveling the playing field with developing this form of recruitment (Reese, 2022, p. 104). Further, other

positives include better fan engagement as many fans are excited to see new players coming that they have heard about at other schools, players being able to get out of an environment where their coach dislikes them, and players being able to garner a second chance (Reese, 2022, pp. 104-105). However, this free market can lead to burnout among coaches, athletic staff, and programs because of constant change (Reese, 2022, p. 105). The Transfer Portal has also diminished relationship building and organizational culture as coaches no longer care about building relationships; they care about season success and bringing in experienced athletes from other schools (Corr et al., 2024). A head coach has described their culture with the use of the Transfer Portal as “plug and play” and one where “You’re not going to have a phenomenal culture...it just is what it is...these transfer kids they’re going to a place if it's the best at that time, it's not about the school” (Corr et al., 2024, p. 3-4). Coaches have also utilized the Transfer Portal to force student-athletes to utilize it when they no longer want the player at the school (Carlay, 2024, p. 1). Thus, these decisions put players in a catch-22 as they must decide whether to enter the Transfer Portal and play somewhere else potentially as this is not guaranteed or stay with the current team despite the coach threatening loss of playing time or the loss of their scholarship if they don’t transfer (Carlay, 2024, p.1). Further, an athlete who decides to transfer and does not get picked up after entering the portal has ended their career. Such a decision could impact the athlete’s mental health as they can no longer live out their passion and dreams (Reese, 2022, pp. 106-107).

### **Overview of LMX Theory**

This study utilized Leadership Member Exchange Theory (LMX) to study the decision to transfer and its effect on team and leadership dynamics. LMX explains that each “leader–follower relationship within a work group is unique, varies in quality, and should be studied as a

dyad” and that this relationship can affect “organizational outcomes, such as in-role performance, citizenship behaviors, overall job satisfaction, and turnover intentions” (Annad et al., 2011, p. 311). There are studies utilizing LMX Theory in the context of sports. Sinclair et al articulated that collegiate sports are usually housed within another organization (the academic institution) and studied how coaches have to fit in with the academic institution by adjusting their goals and objectives with the institution’s goals and objectives (Sinclair et al., 2014, p. 36). Further, the LMX theory has examined athletics and the college football recruiting process. Siclair et al. (2014) contended that "it is not necessary to treat all subordinates exactly the same, but each person should perceive that they are an important and respected team member. Not every team member may desire the same level of responsibility, but each team member should perceive he has the opportunity to earn playing time and receive praise for academic and athletic accomplishments” (p. 38).

Most often, LMX theory is utilized in organizational studies. LMX is a relationship-based theory that analyzes the relationship between leaders and their followers (Aggarwal et al., 2020). The relationship is built on various interactions and exchanges between the leader and the followers, which are constantly evolving (Aggarwal et al., 2020). This theory is useful in this study, given the consistently evolving teams due to the NCAA portal. Team dynamics change as players leave and become leaders at new schools or followers. Further, as players who are leaders stay and new players come, the interactions and exchanges between players may alter. Cranmer et al. (2015) study particularly analyzed the exchanges between athletes and their coach and the influence on satisfaction with the coach, communication symmetry, cohesion, and cooperative communication. Thus, utilizing the LMX theory to evaluate “the effectiveness of these relationships and determine how they directly influence the growth and productivity” of

each collegiate athlete is vital (Indeed Editorial Team, 2023, para 3). Further, it is vital to study this to help coaches and sports organizations foster quality interactions/communication and pro-social experiences for athletes (Cranmer et al, 2015).

One study authored by Cranmer et al. (2015) utilized LMX Theory to understand the influence of athlete-coach interactions on the relationship between the athlete and coach. Cranmer et al. found that "athletes who have in-group relationships with their coach report greater levels of satisfaction and communication symmetry with their coach, task cohesion, social cohesion, and cooperative communication with teammates than athletes who have out-group relationships with their coach" (Cranmer et al. 2015, p. 110).

Although LMX is used more often in studying organizations, LMX in the sports realm is vital because LMX recognizes the dynamic and ever-changing relationships between athletes and coaches. Further, sports are organizations as they share the five key features of organizations: "a collection of individuals and groups, goal orientation, deliberate structure, deliberate coordination, and identifiable boundar[ies]" (Cranmer et al., 2015, p. 101). Additionally, in the context of sports, there are numerous roles based on position (e.g., running back, quarterback, etc.), skillset (1<sup>st</sup> string, <sup>second</sup> string, etc.), experience, and knowledge (captain, etc.) that all interact and work together to achieve a common goal (Cranmer et al., 2015). Adding to this complexity, sports teams also consist of those within the team having formal or informal leadership positions (Cranmer et al., 2015). Thus, using LMX is justified in exploring the relationships between players and other players at their new university and with their new respective coaches, trainers, and other formal and informal authority figures.

In the context of this study of collegiate football players, it will be important to utilize some of the same variables in the Cranmer et al. study, such as satisfaction with the coach, satisfaction, communication with teammates, and team cohesion. Some other factors to consider in the context of this study include the affective mental states of transfer athletes, the roles of various players (captain, etc.) within the team, and the effect of the role on communication and relationships.

### ***Team Member Exchange Theory***

Other studies have utilized a version of LMX theory called Team Member Exchange theory (TMX) to showcase how social interactions among teammates also enhance retention, interactions, and relationships on the team. TMX is a theory that defines a group of individuals on the same hierarchy, all working and interacting towards a common goal (Crammer, 2018). TMX differs from the aforementioned LMX in two distinct ways (Crammer, 2018). TMX differs in that its central focus is on horizontal exchanges amongst teams and because it analyzes "it examines the exchanges between a team as a collective with a single member student athlete." (Crammer, 2018, para 8). TMX is similar to LMX in that there are ranges in the quality of relationships, as those with high-quality TMX relationships are associated with "reciprocal communication, including exchange of feedback, information, advice, support, assistance, and recognition" (Crammer, 2018, para 8).

Quality relationships are a central part of socialization as individuals must be accepted by those around them (Crammer, 2018). Coaches and student athletes exchange resources important to socialization (Crammer, 2018). These social exchanges are a part of team member and leadership member exchange (Crammer, 2018). A study done by Tak-yin Hui (2021) showcased

that social interactions between teammates enhance satisfaction and well-being; Therefore, those with high quality TMX along with feedback from team members have a more successful experience and are more likely to stay on the team because it provides individuals with a sense of meaning and impact in comparison with those experiencing low quality TMX who are likely to quit the team.

### **Reflexivity Statement**

The research topic I have selected is vital because I can relate to it based on my own lived experience. From 2017-2021, I was a Virginia Tech Football athlete and was in the OMALS program prior to transferring. After the spring of 2021, I transferred to Morgan State University, an HBCU, through the Transfer Portal. My experience with the Transfer Portal was particularly negative, and so was my transfer experience.

I was forced to transfer by a coach who no longer believed in me due to the injuries I had sustained throughout my athletic career at Virginia Tech. At the end of the 2021 season, I had an exit meeting, which occurs every year, but this exit meeting was like no other. At this exit meeting, the coach told me he wanted to invest in the younger/new players he had recruited, who did not have injuries like I did. During this meeting, the coach gave me an ultimatum and said I could remain on the team, keep my scholarship, and be a good role model for the younger developing guys, but I would never play. The coach also articulated that this would continue to allow me to finish my master's degree, or I could enter the Transfer Portal and start over. However, I was warned that if I entered the Transfer Portal, I could not return to Virginia Tech and would be forfeiting my scholarship. This was a risk I had to take and probably one of the riskiest decisions I made--- one that was extremely saddening because Virginia Tech was home to me, and I loved my time at Tech.

At my new school, Morgan State, I noticed many things at play. My father was the head coach of the football team, so when I arrived at the school, I dealt with various forms of leadership dynamics and teammate animosity. When I arrived at Morgan State University, the season was fall camp, when team dynamics are quite tense and competitive, as everyone is fighting for a position and to be on the depth chart. Many of the teammates would often make snide comments such as "I am sure you will be handed the position of running back since you came from a school like Virginia Tech," "I am going to show coach you are not all that, you must think you are because of where you came from," etc. Being a transfer athlete was also hard because once you get to the new school, especially from a Division I school like Virginia Tech, you are already prejudged by both coaches and teammates. Teammates expect you to take their spot and are extremely aggressive and have animosity towards you, and coaches expect a lot out of you as soon as you arrive. This was my reality at a new school where the dynamics quickly shifted from a team of cooperation and collaboration towards winning games and creating a winning team, to competitive and harmful comments. These comments and the dynamics of the team led to a player purposefully injuring me, causing me to break my clavicle, because he "wanted to show the coach he deserved first string and was better" than me.

Based on my experiences and background as an athlete, I have mixed feelings about the Transfer Portal and the strife it causes amongst team and leadership dynamics. I do believe the Transfer Portal is a helpful avenue to have so that you can at least have a chance at finding another school and another chance to play the sport you desire. However, I think there are a lot of downfalls that make it impractical. I was in the Transfer Portal for a long time before I got picked up. I felt defeated, upset, worthless, and not wanted during this time. However, I think it

is important to understand why people are pushed into the Transfer Portal, the impacts of the Transfer Portal on a team, and the leadership dynamics regarding players.

## **Chapter Three: Methodology Section**

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to explore how the Transfer Portal has helped or hindered the football team's leadership dynamics and how leadership roles/team dynamics have changed due to a student-athlete transferring through the portal. To understand such dynamics, interviews are conducted with individuals who have been recruited from the Transfer Portal and athletes who have entered the Transfer Portal.

### **Research Questions**

1. What decisions prompt the desire to transfer to another Division 1 collegiate football team?
2. How does transferring impact team relationships and leadership dynamics?

### **Research Design**

The qualitative case study uses former collegiate football athletes from Division 1 Power Four programs. A qualitative case study is “an inquiry process of understanding based on distinct methodological traditions of inquiry that explore a social or human problem [where] the researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyzes words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting” (Creswell, 1998, p. 15). Understanding how the Transfer Portal works and what motivates individuals to utilize it is important. It is also crucial to understand the impacts of using the Transfer Portal and the consequences of such use in relation to leadership and team dynamics. In an ever-evolving collegiate arena, it is crucial to have a study designed to understand the impacts of the mechanisms used by athletes and how these systems impact one’s leadership development, potential, and success. The Transfer Portal

continues to be used by athletes, and the number of athletes placing themselves into it has continued to rise. Therefore, now is the time for this researcher to explore the factors and decision-making process of an athlete who puts themselves into the Transfer Portal, the decision-making process of choosing an athlete from the Transfer Portal, the changing dynamics and adaptation of the collegiate team, and the development of leadership skills obtained by the athlete.

### **Participants Selection**

Eight former collegiate student-athletes participated in this qualitative study. All eight participants were from the Power Four Conference and utilized the Transfer Portal between 2018 and 2022 to join a new collegiate football team within the Power Four conference. Participants were selected based on having been a former player during those years. I conducted and transcribed the interviews via Zoom. Invitations were sent to these individuals through convenient sampling and the snowball method. Snowball sampling recruitment method allowed for asking study participants for individuals who may also fit the criteria of this study and may be willing to participate (“Snowball Sampling,” 2010).

### **Instrumentation and Data Collection**

Data was collected via the Zoom platform through semi-structured interviews. Every athlete was asked the same questions, although sometimes in a different order, to garner rapport and data from the participants. Using the same questions allowed for standardization and better reliability of results.

### **Data Analysis**

The data were gathered from in-depth Zoom interviews. All Zoom interviews were transcribed via the Zoom platform. The interview transcripts were then analyzed and reduced

inductively. To do this, the initial coding of the interviews was used to discover the emergence of themes. Themes were coded manually by research question and divided into two categories in the conclusion section of this paper. These themes were: (1) Perceived Leadership Characteristic of Coaches and (2) Characteristics of the Follower (Football Player). Within each of these categories, subcategories emerged based on repetitive themes brought out by participants (findings discussed in the conclusion section of Chapter 5)

### **Timeline and Budget**

The timeline for this research spanned from February 2025 to April 2025. This period allowed invitations to go out to participants, participants to answer invitations, time to interview participants, and time to analyze the qualitative data collected from the participants. The supplies needed are internet and email access, a cellular device for phone calls, and the Zoom papp. The project and report did not have an associated cost.

## **Chapter Four: Findings**

### **Introduction**

This chapter explores the findings from data collection while interviewing formal collegiate football players. This study aims to explore what prompted a Power Four Division 1 Football player to transfer to another Power Four school and how relationships were altered or affected by the decision to transfer or one's experience at their new school. Each former Division 1 athlete was asked the same questions, albeit sometimes in a different order. In this section, the themes of each question are identified based on the interview questions listed in Chapter Three. Responses to questions one and two have been omitted to protect anonymity.

Table 1 is a list of the participants and the conferences that they transferred to:

Table 1

## Participant Transfer Data

Participant Number	First School Conference	Transfer School Conference
1	Big 10	ACC
2	ACC	Big 12
3	Big 10	ACC
4	Big 10	ACC
5	SEC	ACC
6	ACC	ACC
7	ACC	Big 10
8	ACC	ACC

The data presented below is organized by interview question and the themes of each research question.

### **Interview Question 1: Why did you decide to enter the Transfer Portal?**

Three out of the eight participants (Participant 1, Participant 2, and Participant 3) articulated that they decided to enter the Transfer Portal to gain a new experience and start fresh. As participant two cited, "I needed a new environment; I needed new opportunities and a place where I would have better opportunities to display my talent and play football." The new experience desired was gleaned from the desire to find a campus that felt like home and where their skills and talents would be utilized.

Two participants (Participant 3 and Participant 4) entered the Transfer Portal due to relationship issues with their position coach and/or head coach. Participant five articulated, "I chose to enter the Transfer Portal because I didn't really like my position coach; he also didn't like me, and I felt like I wasn't going to get a fair opportunity if I stayed at the school." Participant Four articulated that the head coach was contemplating whether to give him a scholarship in the upcoming season. This contemplation made the participant feel that he was not needed, nor did the coach care for him, because he felt that the coach should not be

contemplating whether to provide a scholarship; he should know that he would give him a scholarship. Thus, he felt other schools would want him to play now and would provide a scholarship, no question, without having to think, so he chose to take his talent elsewhere.

Like contemplating a scholarship, another participant (participant five) cited entering the Transfer Portal due to financial need and the dishonesty of coaches. The university he attended was not fulfilling his financial needs to attend school.

Further, the school articulated to him things that were not true or that did not come to fruition regarding playing time and his potential growth on the team. As a result of this dishonesty and these discrepancies, he and his family thought it would be best to transfer. This participant (participant five) sought schools that would be a better fit, including a lower attendance cost, being in-state, and a place where he would have financial aid to help with academics.

Participant seven chose to transfer due to a lack of trust among the coaching staff. He articulated that he could see how drastically the coaches switched on him after breaking his leg. As one of the best freshmen quarterbacks in college football, while he was recovering from his injury, he was told that he would start as soon as he got healthy and recovered. Shortly after he recovered, the coaches advised him that there would be quarterback battles. At this time, he felt the coaches had ruined his trust and that he could not trust the coaches to allow him to play after being lied to.

Participant eight was a potential first-round pick and one of the top players in the ACC, with the country's leading sacks at the time. This participant entered the Transfer Portal after being forced out of the team by being dismissed. He advised that he had an argument with one of his strengths coaches, which led to him having a conversation with the head coach and getting dismissed from the team.

**Interview Question Two: Were there any conversations to keep you at the school rather than transfer, or were they okay with your decision?**

One half of participants (four participants= Participant 1, Participant 3, Participant 4, Participant 5) articulated that the coaching staff wanted to keep them on the team. In contrast, three participants (Participant 2, Participant 7, participant 8) articulated that the coaches accepted them transferring and did not fight to change their minds. Participant three's coach was unhappy with their decision to transfer and sent them home to give him two days to think about it. At this time, he could not practice. Participant six articulated that they tried to convince him to stay, but he knew the best decision for himself after speaking with family was to transfer. Further, Participant Seven articulated that in deciding to transfer, the head coach talked with him, told him that he was abandoning the team, and asked why he was transferring. This conversation was tough because he had to outline his reasons for transferring. He explained that he articulated to the coach that, rather than him feeling he was abandoning the team, he felt like he was being abandoned due to having to have a quarterback battle and having to compete again after he beat the same individual twice, while also continuously being a strong captain for the team. He also articulated that he felt retaliated against because, after the injury, his name was not put up for captain the following year.

**Interview Question Three: Can you tell me about a moment when, in your head, you thought I need to transfer from this school?**

Every participant had a different defining moment for them, where they thought they needed to transfer. Participant One articulated that he prayed about his decision to transfer after

redshirting the year before he transferred, and God put in front of him the decision to transfer, so he did. Participant two contended that he thought he needed to transfer when the head coach sat him down and asked if he wanted to finish the season. The third participant articulated that it was when they changed their position in practice. Specifically, he stated, "It was actually the practice right before I decided to tell the coach I wanted to transfer because they moved me to a different position from corner to safety." The fourth participant articulated that it went through his head multiple times, "I was beating first-string people on the field at practice consistently, like day in and day out, but I wasn't seeing that correlate to more play time on the field." The fifth participant articulated that he was pulled out of a game and was scapegoated into thinking he would be able to get playing time later, and realized that was never going to come to fruition. The sixth participant articulated that he was expressing his feelings to his friends and family one night, and reality hit that this team would not fit long term. Further, the seventh participant articulated that it was when he was continuously practicing, when his leg was still broken, so that he could play. However, the defining moment for him was when the coaches tried to force him to get a plate in his leg so that he could come back quicker, rather than listen to the doctor, who articulated that it would be better for the bone to heal naturally, although it would take longer. The last participant (participant 8) articulated that he never thought about transferring, that was never in his playing cards, but he was dismissed and had no choice but to.

**Interview Question Four: Were there any dynamics with either coaches or players where you noticed things got better or worse prior to transferring?**

Many participants (seven participants = participant 1, participant 2, participant 3, participant 4, participant 5, participant 7, and participant 8) cited the changing of coaches and/or

the changing relationship with their coaches prior to transferring. Prior to transferring, many coaches were getting fired, and as new coaches came in, the staff and culture of the program began to shift. Further, these participants articulated that they did not have positive relationships with their position coaches.

On the other hand, participant six reported that before transferring, and after relationships between coaches and players remained cordial, everyone came from a place of understanding, and nothing seemed to change. On the other hand, participant seven reported feeling isolated and noticing a shift in how coaches communicated with him. In the same vein, participant eight articulated prior to entering the Transfer Portal and while in the Transfer Portal that he was depressed, was constantly worrying, that he felt like everything was crumbling, and that he began to find himself and distract himself with poetry, which he found a newfound love for.

**Interview Question Five: Prior to transferring, did you take any actions to improve your relationship with either coaches or players?**

A majority of the participants articulated that they tried to improve their relationships with both coaches and players. Specifically, Participant One articulated that he was trying to create a team meeting with his old teammates before transferring to let them know about his situation. However, the coach declined to allow him to do this. Instead, he went to his dorms and had a meeting where he explained to players what was going on. He articulated, "You know some people understood, some people didn't, but, you know, you can't let go of what other people think about you." Participant two tried to improve his relationships with players and coaches, and his strategy was to stick around coaches he saw often and who had his best interests (strengths coaches and position coaches). Further, participant four sat down with the coach and

began watching the film with them to improve their relationship and playing. However, participants three and eight made no effort to improve the relationship with the coach. Participant five cited that he remembered distinctly that no one liked the position coach and would never be liked, so he didn't want to exert energy into trying to repair a relationship. One moment he remembered was on Thanksgiving, he stated, "On Thanksgiving, he invited us all to his house, and not a single person went. That speaks volumes about the kind of person he was, but it felt like no matter what I did, he still wasn't going to like me, so that kind of was what it was." Lastly, participant three maintained relationships with the players but did not take any action to fix relationships with the coaches.

**Interview Question Six: Why were you or why were you not motivated to improve your relationship with coaches or teammates?**

Most participants (n=7, except participant 7) reported not feeling motivated to improve relationships with coaches because it felt pointless and a waste of energy and time. Participant Two articulated that they felt the relationship would not change, that sports are more like a business/political, that the coaches were stuck in their ways, and that the relationship would remain stagnant. However, those motivated to improve their relationship articulated that they tried, but that did not necessarily fix the situation. However, they were motivated because of the position that the coaches were in, as their position coaches directly influenced their lives. Further, they were influenced because they wanted to continue bonding with their friends with whom they had played.

**Interview Question Seven: Is there anyone prior to you transferring that you wish you would've had a better relationship with and why?**

Participants two, four, and eight reported wanting a better relationship with their position coach. These participants who desired a better relationship also transferred due to relationships with their coaches and their inability to afford them opportunities. On the other hand, participant one reported that they wished they had better relationships with their teammates. Further, participants three and five reported not wanting to have a better relationship with anyone due to the corporate nature of sports and the lack of effect a better relationship would have had on their opportunities for playing. Participant three stated, "Coaches move on, and they make decisions based on what they feel is best for them at the collegiate and pro levels." Additionally, Participant Six articulated that they would not want a better relationship with anyone; they just wished they had more time with people. Lastly, participant seven wished they had a better relationship with the team psychiatrist and the chaplain, as he valued the team chaplain and his uplifting him spiritually in conjunction with what he was going through. He needed the psychiatrist for all the emotional turmoil he was enduring.

**Interview Question Eight: Was there anyone influential in helping you decide to transfer?**

Many (five participants: participant one, participant two, participant three, participant six, participant seven) reported their support system as influential in helping them decide to transfer. Their support system varied. Many individuals described their support system as their parents, family, friends, or mentors. Participant five also reported being influenced by other teammates and coaches as he stated, "My position mates and friends all told me if I were you, I would leave, I had coaches tell me the same thing." On the other hand, one participant (participant four) stated

they made the decision themselves. Lastly, participant eight explained that they didn't want to transfer; they got kicked off, so no one was influential in helping them decide to transfer.

**Interview Question Nine: What did your teammates or coaches think or say when you entered the Transfer Portal?**

Participant one expressed that the coaches were mad, and it blew up on ESPN, Twitter, etc. However, during this time, he had a few coaches who would visit him, and his roommates, who were also athletes at the school, would report it to the coach, and they would get in trouble. This participant also experienced a negative experience when his friends removed him from group chats. Despite this, he had two best friends who continuously supported him and visited him in his new college town. Participant Six said their teammates and coaches had mixed feelings when they found out he had entered the Transfer Portal. Some teammates were sad, some coaches didn't want him to leave, while others didn't care. Another participant (Participant Four) reported that teammates wished him luck wherever he went, but coaches did not want him to leave. Participants two and five reported that their teammates wished him luck but were sad he was leaving. Further, participant six articulated that his friends reached out and coaches were empathetic saying, "We completely understand what's going on, we would do the same thing if we were in your situation and there's no love lost; we still love you and you'll always a part of what we did this past year." Similarly, participant five stated that teammates understood his decision and said that if they were him, they would make a similar decision. Participant Seven reported that coaches were talking badly about him so much that he would get calls from the coaches. They would talk cordially, and then the coach would curse him out to the point that he had to hang up on them. Lastly, participant eight reported that coaches were accepting of him

leaving, especially after getting kicked out of the school. He stated some coaches were supportive and said that if he needed a recommendation for his new school, they would provide it, but when they found out the interested school, he would not write it.

**Question Ten: Once you entered the portal, did your old coach or school help you navigate the portal and the next steps, or were you alone in the process?**

All participants reported that neither their old coach nor school helped them navigate the process. Every participant reported entering the Transfer Portal independently with the help of their support system and previous coaches from high school. Participant one articulated, "Coaches and staff definitely didn't help me out, they were very distant, and when I started getting scholarship in the division, they were saying they were going to block me from going to another school." Additionally, participant two reported, "I kind of did everything on my own, it was like high school again." Further, one individual (participant five) stated, "I was alone in the process, but I hit up friends at other schools and basically was like I am thinking about transferring, but I am not dead set on it, but if I do transfer, ask your coach if he would take me. I did that with a good number of schools, so I knew at the very least I would have somewhere to go."

**Interview Question Eleven: Tell me about your experience being recruited while using the Transfer Portal?**

Most participants (participant 2, participant 7, participant 3, and participant 4) reported their recruitment drastically different from their recruitment from high school to their first school. In high school, they described their recruitment process as more flashy, whereas this transfer experience from one college to another was more business-like. One participant reported

that his process was awesome and that he received ten offers, his phone was blowing up, and coaches were flying out to see him the next day. Participant two described the process as "It was just like high school again, except this time, the coaches were a little bit more straightforward. It wasn't too much of the flashiness trying to woo me. It was more so, what are your goals, what are you looking for?" Thus, the process was described as more business-oriented, political, and straightforward. Participants one and seven described it as being more focused. Further, participant four stated that many people contacted him on Twitter to recruit him, similar to how he was coming out of high school. Additionally, Participant Six reported his experience in the Transfer Portal and that he was recruited immediately. He said they talked to him and asked what I could bring to the table and their need. Another participant again felt that it felt like high school. Lastly, participant eight felt that he was very popular in the Transfer Portal, and at the school he went to, they were similar to after high school. The visits were flashy as they laid out the red carpet for him, gave him a lot of information, and the school's President was with him on the visit, which he viewed as a huge honor.

**Interview Question Twelve: What motivated you to interact with your new teammates and coaches?**

The central theme that resonated with all participants was the desire to win, create a brotherhood, gain respect, and showcase one's talent. Every participant articulated that football is a team sport rather than an individual sport, and they knew they could not win alone. The traits of trust and brotherhood continuously came up as they knew that other teammates needed to trust that they were there to put the work in and to win. Participant eight spoke about the competitive nature and having to strike a balance between competing and building brotherhoods and bonds to

gain respect and love from players. While only participant four spoke about competition, the other participants spoke about wanting a family working towards one mission; they articulated that they treated transferring like a business decision, which helped them stay serious, but also showcased that they wanted to win, which helped other members on the team respect them. Lastly, participant seven was a quarterback, so he articulated that being in that position caused him to interact with people he didn't know. Thus, the overall theme can be portrayed in a quote by a participant who articulated, "I want to win. You know, the game of football is a team sport. I can't do it by myself. So, you know, I got to take that step and bond with my teammates to instill that brotherhood and trust so when we go out there playing, they can trust that I'm going to make the right play and make the right call. I'm in a new environment, so you know, I'm unfamiliar. I needed those guys to help me navigate and help us win."

### **Interview Question Thirteen: How did your new teammates and coaches treat you?**

All participants expressed deep respect and great treatment from their coaches and teammates. They felt as if their coaches cared about them and that their teammates saw their effort and potential and respected that. Participant two felt that this treatment from teammates came from the fact that they respected him more because he was an older guy with more experience. Also, they respected him more because he was not an older guy but had come from a winning team, so they trusted him to help build the team into a winning one. Similarly, Participant Four articulated favorable treatment from coaches and teammates because of the high effort he put into practice and the previous school he attended. Coaches thought he was a good steal, and players thought he had a lot of talent based on his school. On the other hand, Participant Three articulated that his teammates were initially intimidated because of the school

he came from. However, over time, he garnered better relationships with teammates. Lastly, participant five articulated that he felt the coaches treated him well, and he was voted captain because he was a guy the coaches brought in rather than inherited. Thus, he was given more agency. Lastly, participant eight reported feeling more at home because the coaches checked on him daily, making him feel cared for.

**Interview Question Fourteen: How was your experience trying to build relationships while competing for a starting role?**

All participants described playing college football and competing for a starting role as a business, and something that their teammates understood. They articulated that their teammates knew they had to compete and do what they had to do to get a starting role. As participant two stated, “You build a relationship with these guys, especially when you're in the same position and you spend a lot of time together. You end up becoming close friends and brothers. But at the end of the day, you still have to have that voice in the back here and say, man, I'm here to compete. I have a family dependent on me. I have goals and dreams to reach. So, it's a bittersweet moment, but everybody in the locker room kind of knows that, you know, this is what we signed up for. Those who want to chase their dreams, you've got to do what's necessary.”

**Interview Question Fifteen: When coming into the new school, did you manage to meet the expectations set out by the coaches?**

All participants believed they met the expectations set out by coaches, and some even believed they surpassed them. As participant two articulated, I was able to meet the expectations set forth by the coach by “being me, continuing to stand on my morals and my character. I was

taking the lessons and losses and things I learned at my old school before and applying them to my new school, doing things differently, whether networking or being more vocal or stepping back and being more observant, I was just learning from my past mistakes and applying them to my new environment." Participants eight and three reported having injuries and recovering from those injuries, and exceeding coaches' expectations. Participants six, seven, four, and eight further emphasized meeting expectations by working hard, showing up, and exerting a lot of effort because, as participant six stated, "respect is earned, not given."

**Interview Question Sixteen: How do you typically form relationships with teammates?**

All participants articulated that they formed relationships naturally rather than being forced. They all articulated that they got to know each other because of the time they spent together. Some people articulated their relationships formed through joking in position rooms or the locker room, from hearing people talk about adversity or their experiences, listening to people's music taste when in treatment or lifting, parties, eating out together, or through team bonding events. However, although some relationships with teammates were closer than others, they all emphasized that they had a bond with everyone on the team. For example, participant two stated, "You still have to take that mature step and learn to figure out everybody and have a relationship with everybody because we need each other; We're a team, so if I don't know you, it's a liability in the winning program."

**Interview Question Seventeen: How do you typically form relationships with coaches?**

Many participants articulated that they formed relationships with coaches through interactions outside the facility. The participants cherish the moments they had at a special occasion or a coach's house, getting to know their family and their spouse outside of football. As participant one articulated, building a relationship with coaches takes trust. Participant Two said

it's about being vulnerable, being able to reiterate your goals, and being an open book about why football is important to you. Participant eight said it's about constantly being in the coaches' face and asking questions. Participants three and four also articulated that it is about spending time with the coach through watching film, working hard, and asking questions to better yourself and understand the coach. Lastly, Participant Seven articulated that players don't initiate relationships with coaches because of the power dynamic and that relationship building is done through coaches' initiating. As participant five stated, "one of the biggest thing is when coaches show guys they actually care about them as people, outside of football that is a great way they build relationships with us...having real conversation outside of meetings, kicking it in the dining hall, around the facility, that type of stuff and getting individual one on one time outside of practice, position meetings or team meetings.

**Interview Question Eighteen: Did you notice a difference in teammate and coaching relationships at your new school compared to your previous school?**

Every participant articulated that they noticed a difference in their new school's teammate/coaching relationships compared to their previous school. Participant one articulated that at the new school, he felt more of a brotherhood; he could hang out with teammates at their house and feel more of a bond. Further, participant two articulated that he was closer to the coach and teammates, as a new coach was building the program and was actively involved. Participant three reported that he did not notice a difference and felt it was the same because "D1 is D1." Further, participant four reported feeling much more respected and appreciated by both coaches and teammates. The coaches and teammates appreciated his great effort to the team. Additionally, participant five felt a shift due to the environment. At his previous school, there was a closed-

door policy, so the only time people were in coaches' offices or in the facilities after practice was because they were in trouble; however, at his new school with an open-door policy, coaches were always with players and talking about film and watching things together. Lastly, participants six and seven articulated that they felt more of a high-intensity commitment to football, more traditions, and closer bonds and brotherhoods at their new schools. Participant eight articulated that he felt a closer bond at his old school because it was a small town and there was not much to do.

**Interview Question Nineteen: When you encountered a new teammate for the first time, how did you interact with them?**

Two participants (participant 6 and participant 2) articulated that they met new teammates for the first time through mutual friends that they had either met through official visits in the past or through friends they had before they transferred to the new school. Participant one articulated encountering a teammate for the first time through complementing them about how much they were lifting and admitting how strong they were. However, the other six participants (participant 3, participant 4, participant 5, participant 7, and participant 8) articulated that when they encountered a new teammate for the first time, they would introduce themselves, ask questions, and make an effort to get to know them.

**Interview Question Twenty: In your own words, based on your demeanor, why would fellow teammates be motivated or not motivated to develop a high-quality relationship with you?**

Many participants articulated that fellow teammates would want to talk to them because of their experience. Upon transferring to their new school, many participants were viewed as the "older guys." Individuals talked to them and engaged with them because of the schools they had come from, and due to the experience they had from playing at the other school or from simply being at other schools. Participant one articulated that they were motivated to talk to him because they viewed him as a potential teammate going to the NFL. Participant two articulated that people would not be motivated to talk to them because of his blunt personality and his desire to never sugarcoat. However, he also stated that people would talk to him because they took his blunt personality as a desire to make them better. Specifically, he stated, "I wanted their best interest because I expect them to want the best interest in me because that is the only way we are going to win." Further, this participant articulated that others would be motivated to talk to him because he was motivating, worked hard, was goofy, and could make others laugh. Participant three said people would be motivated to talk to him because he was real and humble. The other four participants (participant 4, participant 5, participant 6 and participant 7) cited that others were motivated because they could see they were serious about the game and had experience. These same participants articulated that many teammates would ask questions to better themselves and thought of them as people who could help them. Lastly, participant eight articulated that people were motivated to talk to him because of the way he carried himself and "stood on business." Further, he stated that teammates may not want to talk to him because I am confident and quoted Deion by saying, "If my confidence makes you insecure that's a you problem."

**Interview Question Twenty-One: How was your performance on the field prior to transferring?**

Four out of the eight participants (participant 1, participant 7, participant 6, participant 8) articulated that prior to transferring, they played well. Two participants (participant 6 and participant 7) articulated that they dominated as a freshman and were considered “the guy” for their position. Four of the eight participants (participant 1, participant 6, participant 7, participant 8) indicated they were also starters. One participant (participant two) articulated that their performance on the field was not great. Specifically, he stated, "My performance on the field before transferring wasn't what I wanted, it wasn't what I expected, and that is part of the reason why I transferred." Another participant (participant three) stated that his performance was decent, but he was still learning and playing a brand-new position that he had never played before. Further, participant four) articulated that he didn't get a lot of plays where he could make a play, even though he got to be on the field. Participant five articulated that his performance was very “up and down.” He stated, “I lacked confidence and lost a sense of my identity from high school; Part of that was from my position coach and the other was from you know, getting to college and things being harder---you go from being the best player on the field every single time you step on the field to now going against some dogs and getting really beat for the first time and that’s hard to manage.”

**Interview Question Twenty-Two: How was your performance on the field at your new school?**

All eight participants reported that their performance on the field at their new school drastically differed from that at their old school. Many participants cited statistics and

awards/accomplishments as they spoke about their performance at their new school. Some indicated they were ACC player of the year, all conference, or had over 30+ tackles. Participant one articulated that his first year at his new school didn't go as planned, but his second year was great; he was back-to-back player of the week and ACC player of the week. Participant two articulated that his performance was better, and he attributed that to having an open mind and having coaches who articulated what was needed/expected from him. He also stated that coaches expected him to perform on the field and be a good example. Participant three articulated that his performance started shaky at first, but continuously got better, and he won all conference two years in a row at his new school. Participant four articulated that he had 40 tackles and 4.5 sacks, a significant improvement from not being able to make big plays at his previous school. Participant five stated, "It was night and day, I developed more in 12 games at my new school than I did in four years at my old school. It was nice having a position coach who actually was a good coach and empowered us to use different techniques that work for us because a lot of coaches especially offensive line coaches are very dogmatic in the way they teach things, they only want things done a specific way and don't understand the fact that not everybody's the same athlete, not everybody's the same person, and they can't all use the same techniques." Lastly, participant seven articulated that it was good until they got injured and had a concussion and two sprained shoulders, requiring him to get a shot before every game to continue playing.

**Interview Question Twenty-Three: How did your athletic performance on the team compare to your relationship with your coaches? For example, did you feel that you played better when you had a close relationship with your position coach or head coach, or was it**

**when you had a difficult relationship with your position or head coach that you played better?**

All participants articulated that they saw a correlation between having a positive/close relationship with their coach and playing better. Participant one articulated, "They treat you how you play, performance is everything; They love you when you're winning, but they hate you when you are losing. If I had a bad game, they would shoot me down. So, when we lost, I took it really hard. I felt like it was all on me, and I should have done more." Another participant two articulated that "When I had a better relationship with my coach it made me want to run through a brick wall for him." He articulated that having a relationship with his coach was so important to him because "they're one of the ones who can help elevate your career and get you to your goals and dreams." Another participant (participant three) articulated that having a closer relationship allowed him to play more freely. He stated that previously, he had coaches who would scream, yell, and cuss him out, but having coaches who educated him rather than do that helped him play better. Additionally, participant four articulated that the closer he was to the coach, the better he played. He stated, "At my new school I could see the work that I put in on and off the field equal out to something, but at my old school it didn't matter how much I lifted weights, it didn't matter how better I was than the person in front of me, how fast I was, how strong I was, I wasn't going to see more time on the field." Participant five correlated having a better relationship with teammates and coaches as helpful to performing better. He stated, "The better relationship you have with your coaches, the harder you're willing to play for them, and the same thing goes for your teammates." Lastly, participant seven articulated that everything was excellent regarding relationships at his new school, except with the head coach. He articulated that as a quarterback, it is hard when the head coach and you are not on the same

page. He stated that the head coach would say things to the media that were not true, and it was hard not being on the same page, but because he had a relationship with the Graduate Assistant, position coach, and other coaches, his performance was still good.

## **Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations**

### **Introduction**

This study examined what decision prompted former collegiate Division 1 football players in the Power Four conference to transfer and the impact their transferring had on both team relationships and leadership dynamics. Utilizing LMX theory, which recognizes that relationships are built on various interactions and exchanges between the leader and the followers, which are constantly evolving, one can see just how important relationships between coaches and players are and how that fosters their decision to transfer (Aggarwal et.al., 2020). Through this qualitative study utilizing semi-structured interviews via Zoom, one can see the impact of relationships and negative environments on athletes' decisions to transfer, while also seeing the positive impact of positive relationships and environments allowing athletes to flourish and change their everyday interactions.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of the study is to explore how the Transfer Portal has helped or hindered the football team's leadership dynamics and how leadership roles/team dynamics have changed due to a student-athlete transferring through the portal. To understand such dynamics, interviews are conducted with individuals who have been recruited from the Transfer Portal and athletes who have entered the Transfer Portal.

### **Research Questions**

- 1. What decisions prompt the desire to transfer to another Division 1 collegiate football team?**
- 2. How does transferring impact team relationships and leadership dynamics?**

## Conclusions

This section will outline the themes identified through manual coding based on the data from the semi-structured interview. Each research question is associated with a theme connected with the LMX theory to understand the connection between the given theme and the theory. The general commonality between both research questions is the characteristics of the follower (the football player) and perceived leadership characteristics/perceptions. The following themes emerged within the first research question: wanting a fresh start and rewards/expectations not being met. The second question's themes are as follows: relationship uncertainty with coaches, a desire to win, and improved relationships with coaches leading to improved performance.

### **Themes identified associated with Research Question #1:**

#### ***Characteristics of the Follower (football player):***

Within the data collected, many football players articulated that their desire to transfer stemmed from not having a positive relationship with their coaches. LMX emphasizes the connection between leaders and followers. In many of these instances, the players did not have connections with their coaches as they did not get along, the coaches did not care for them, the coaches did not check on them, or the coaches only poured into them when they did something good (win a game, etc.). Thus, as one can see, there was no two-way dyadic relationship between leaders (coaches) and followers (players) when many reported that they did not get along with their coaches. Thus, this relationship was stifled due to the relationship only being transactional rather than trust-based and supportive, which is necessary. "Trust plays a major role in interpersonal relationships, and it is correlated with the efficiency, success, and well-being of work organizations and the dyadic relationships within them" (Hirvi et al., 2021, p.18).

Due to these negative relationships, many of the participants in this study desired a fresh start—a fresh start where they could build positive relationships with coaches and feel appreciated by them. They also wanted a fresh start because coaches did not keep their promises about how they would use their athleticism within their program. They needed to find a new coach and a new home where they could trust the coach and where the coach would make good on their promise to play them and meet their expectations.

### ***Perceived Leadership Characteristics (Coaches)***

Participants' interactions with the coach also impacted their perceptions of them as leaders. The athlete and coach dynamic relies on a contingent reward system. A contingent reward system is based on a transactional relationship where certain behaviors and task requirements “provide followers with material or psychological rewards [that are] contingent on the fulfillment of contractual obligations” (Wu, 2008, p. 251). In other words, there is an exchange between followers (players) and leaders (coaches) where players are expected to fulfill specific tasks and requirements set out by coaches to gain something (e.g., playing time). Many participants' responses articulated that they were promised things, yet they were unfulfilled. The relationship that was built on trust was tarnished as coaches were not keeping up their obligations or promises that they made to them during the recruitment process or in conversing with them. Thus, players did not see any rewards, and their expectations to play and create statistics were not being met. As emphasized above, LMX theory emphasizes the relationship between follower and leader and articulates that these interactions are important. However, if these relationships are tarnished, it can be hard for the follower to continue having a relationship or feel valued; instead, low-quality interactions are formed.

### **Themes identified associated with Research Question #2:**

### ***Characteristics of the follower (football player):***

Many participants articulated that having an uncertain relationship with their coaches led to decreased performance and the desire to transfer. As athletes, players have to navigate dyadic relationships; however, it was hard to do so when it felt that coaches did not pour into them or care about them. Participants reported only seeing coaches in a business relationship capacity, as they saw them at the facility, but did not have much connection with them outside of practice. The coach did not connect with them on a personal level. However, for a majority of the participants who transferred to a new school, they found that coaches connected with them on a personal level. Coaches allowed them to come to their homes, coaches checked on them, etc. Thus, players began to learn to navigate this dyadic relationship at the new school, perhaps due to their previous relationships. However, with this relationship came a desire to win and increased performance.

Many participants reported that at their school, not only did they have a better relationship with their coaches, but they also had more of a unified team. As Cranmer et al. study utilizing LMX theory found "athletes who have in group relationships with their coach report greater levels of satisfaction and communication symmetry with their coach, and task cohesion, social cohesion, and cooperative communication with teammates than athletes who have out group relationships with their coach (Cranmer et al. 2015, p. 110). Thus, participants reported more meaningful relationships with both coaches and players.

### ***Perceived Leadership Characteristics (Coaches)***

Participants felt that they had improved relationships with coaches at their new school, and they felt more supported and more able to develop their skills. This, in turn, led to not only improved relationships but also improved performance. As Dionne et al. (2010) contends, "High-quality

exchanges are typified by increased effort and personal loyalty to the leader, and in exchange, leaders allow these followers more control and influence” (pp. 1037-1038).

### **Final Conclusions**

As opined by Kattoutla (2024), the Head Coach and "the coaching staff drive a team's culture by instilling good team-building characteristics that enable cohesion, increased effort, and coachability among team members" (p. 62). The participants correlate that a lot of their decisions to transfer stemmed from their relationships and experience on campus as a collegiate Division I football player. Thus, it emphasizes the importance of relationships between coaches and players. By focusing on what factors into a collegiate Division I athlete's decision to transfer and on the dynamics and relationship they had prior to transfer, it underscores the need to foster better positive relationships and the necessity of creating a team culture/program culture that emphasizes cohesion, positivity, and care for others.

The participants all had variances in their ultimate decisions for why they transferred. Some participants transferred due to the desire for better opportunities or a need for more financial support. However, most participants transferred due to unhealthy relationships with position coaches, a lack of playing time, and a lack of positive outlook for their football career. Many participants emphasized that they did not feel that building and/or improving their relationship with coaches would have improved their opportunities or kept them at the school. Many articulated that they viewed trying to improve their relationship as a waste of time. It is imperative that we start to listen to players, that we understand their needs, and that we understand their feelings. A majority of participants articulate feeling depressed, losing their identity, and feeling isolated while in the Transfer Portal. Most collegiate athletes received no help transferring or navigating the system. During this stage, they felt alone. Not only did they

feel alone at this stage, but they felt isolated while playing at their old schools. Oftentimes they were cussed at, yelled at, or belittled when they lost a game or didn't do something right. They were torn apart rather than being educated or fostering close relationships with coaches. Thus, this underscores the importance of creating a relationship where players can learn and develop rather than be harmed.

### **Recommendations for Practice**

The first step in mitigating the issues that many of these collegiate athletes experienced is awareness. After their players decide to enter the Transfer Portal, many coaches don't reach out to these players to understand the underlying issues/what decisions factored into their transferring. Thus, many coaches are unaware of how these players felt or what they were enduring at the time. As I spoke to many of these participants, many had purposely forgotten these feelings and were glad I allowed them to speak about them. They felt heard, seen, and able to finally get some of the things they endured off their chest. Many were super emotional as they had tried to detach from these "rough/hard times" in their life. Thus, it is imperative that researchers research and bring awareness to what goes on in the collegiate football sphere. Coaches need to understand what is going on with players emotionally to better facilitate relationships and better navigate their communication, especially when they don't see a need for individuals on their team anymore.

Further, I recommend training that can aid in the recognition of athletes' experience, as well as in coaching and leading with empathy and care. Many athletes reported feeling isolated, anxious, put down, etc. They also emphasized that they appreciated coaches who spent time with them even outside of playing. Those who let them meet their family, come to their house, go out to dinner, etc., were players who had positive experiences with their coaches that also shone in

their playing ability. All participants emphasized that they played better when they had a positive coach.

For players, I recommend making an effort to build personal connections with coaches outside of football. As the participants articulated, relationships matter as they can enhance performance. I also recommend transferring if one feels that their relationship is tarnished and cannot be improved, given that relationships play such a huge role in a player's confidence, self-esteem, opportunities in the future, and playing time.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

This study explored the factors that play into a decision to transfer for Power Four Division 1 collegiate football athletes and how relationships between coaches and teammates play out in transferring and at the athletes' new school. However, the collegiate football recruitment landscape and Transfer Portal have changed with the introduction of NIL. Thus, there is an opportunity to study how the NIL has changed why individuals transfer (such that possibly athletes are transferring not only for better opportunities but also for more profit/sponsorships, etc.). However, there are other recommendations for future research outside of the introduction of NIL. The following recommendations for future research include:

- Replicating this study with players that transferred from a Power Four school but to not another Power Four school.
- Replicating this study with players in different divisions (Division II and Division III) to see if their experiences and decisions to transfer and relationships are different.
- Replicating this study with players who entered the Transfer Portal but never got out. In other words, they entered the Transfer Portal but did not receive offers to play anywhere else.

- Further research should focus on interviewing coaches to get their perspectives on why individuals transfer, their coaching style, and how they make decisions to bring someone in off the Transfer Portal.

This research should continue given the current athletic landscape. Coaches must understand the dynamics that they can play in developing and fostering collegiate athletes. However, it is also important to understand the resources and dynamics at play with the Transfer Portal and the new factor of NIL. This study should be continued to understand how different collegiate football players experience relationships and interactions in other contexts outside of the Power Four conference and Division 1.

## Appendix

### Interview Questions

1. What school did you attend and for how long?
2. What school did you transfer to and how long were you there?
3. Why did you decide to enter the Transfer Portal?
4. Were there any conversations to keep you at the school rather than transfer or were they okay with your decision?
5. Can you tell me about a moment where in your head you thought I need to transfer from this school?
6. Were there any dynamics with either coaches or players where you noticed things got better or worse prior to transferring?
7. Prior to transferring, did you take any actions to improve your relationships with either coaches or players?
8. Why were you or why were you not motivated to improve your relationship with coaches or teammates?
9. Is there anyone prior to you transferring that you wish you would've had a better relationship with and why?
10. Was there anyone influential in helping you decide to transfer?
11. What did your teammates or coaches think or say when you entered the Transfer Portal?
12. Once you entered the portal, did your old coach or school help you navigate the portal and the next steps, or were you alone in the process?
13. Tell me about your experience being recruited while using the Transfer Portal.
14. What motivated you to interact with your new teammates and coaches?

15. How did your new teammates and coaches treat you?
16. How was your experience trying to build relationships while competing for a starting role?
17. When coming into the new school, did you manage to meet the expectations set out by the coaches?
18. How do you typically form relationships with teammates?
19. How do you typically form relationships with coaches?
20. Did you notice a difference in teammate and coaching relationships at your new school compared to your previous school?
21. When you encountered a new teammate for the first time, how did you interact with them?
22. In your own words, based on your demeanor, why would fellow teammates be motivated or not motivated to develop a high-quality relationship with you?
23. How was your performance on the field prior to transferring?
24. How was your performance on the field at your new school?
25. How did your athletic performance on the team compare to your relationship with your coaches? For example, did you feel that you played better when you had a close relationship with your position coach or head coach, or was it when you had a difficult relationship with your position or head coach that you played better?

\*Questions adapted from Mosley, 2012, pp. 81-82\*

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