



AN ANALYSIS OF TRANSFER PORTAL MOVEMENTS AND THEIR EFFECTS ON THE ATHLETIC PERFORMANCES OF ACC REVENUE SPORTS AND STUDENT-ATHLETES

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Abstract

Despite its newfound prominence on the NCAA landscape, the transfer portal's effect on the flow of talent between conferences and programs has not been analyzed in close detail, and many constituents remain unsure of transfers' effects on athletic performance. Given the significance of the portal in college sports and the gaps in understanding that exist, we collected data on FBS football and DI men's basketball players who entered the transfer portal from 2019 to 2023 to gain a clearer understanding of how the portal functions and how transfers affect the performances of players and teams. Findings revealed that the ACC and other autonomous conferences have lost more players than they have gained in the portal; however, in relation to outgoing players, players entering the ACC had higher levels of prior performance and experience. Furthermore, teams that were able to play talented transfers, especially in place of freshmen, tended to perform better. At the athlete level, football transfers into ACC programs did not experience significant changes in opportunity or performance, though athletes leaving the ACC tended to earn significantly more snaps at their new destinations. In basketball, players averaged more win-shares per 40 minutes and more minutes per game after leaving ACC programs.

Data Collection

Records of transfer portal entries were obtained from *247sports.com*. Each observation contained the name of a men's basketball or football player who entered the portal, the name of the team they were transferring from, the name of the team (if applicable) they transferred to, and other descriptive information such as their playing position, hometown, and the recruit rating assigned to them by 247 scouts. This information was then merged with additional player- and team-level data from *sports-reference.com* (football and men's basketball) and *Pro Football Focus* (football) to create aggregated datasets that could be analyzed across the different research questions. It is important to note that we only analyzed football transfers that occurred between two FBS schools ($n = 3,769$), and basketball transfers ($n = 2,430$) occurring between two Division I schools. Athletes who did not enroll in a school after entering the portal, or who transferred to or from non-FBS or non-DI institutions, were excluded.

Research Question 1

Has the transfer portal resulted in net gains or net losses for the ACC compared to other autonomous conferences in relation to the number, talent level, and experience level of incoming and outgoing transfers? To answer this question, we first looked at the *volume* of transfers among FBS conferences (football) and DI conferences (basketball), subtracting the total number of out-transfers from the total number of in-transfers to calculate the net flow of transfers for each conference from 2019-2023. In football, "Group of Five" conferences and independents were net-gainers—AAC (212), SBC (205), C-USA (202), MW (82), MAC (68), and IND (14)—while the Big 12 (-55), Pac-12 (-120), ACC (-157), Big Ten (-184), and SEC (-267) were net-losers. For example, the ACC had 362 in-transfers and 519 out-transfers, resulting in a net loss of 157. The volume of incoming and outgoing transfers in men's basketball revealed similar trends, with the ACC ranking 29th out of 34 DI conferences in net-flow (-23).



Shifting to the flow of playing *talent* across conferences in the portal, Table 1 shows the average PFF ratings of the incoming and outgoing transfers by conference. PFF ratings range on a scale from 0 to 100 and are intended to quantify a player's performance in a single metric, something that has traditionally been difficult in team sports like football where players interact and have unique roles. Taking these ratings as current, more precise measures of talent, we see that the autonomous conferences have, on average, brought in more talented players than they have lost. The ACC ranks fourth out of 11 conferences in this regard, with its average incoming transfer rated over a full point higher than its average outgoing transfer. For basketball, we looked at win-shares per 40 minutes as a measure of player quality, similarly finding that the ACC and other autonomous conferences ranked much higher in this category; on average, the ACC brought in transfers that had contributed 0.036 more wins per 40 minutes than the players transferring out.

We concluded RQ1 by exploring how many prior snaps played, as a measure of *experience*, were being gained or lost from transfers among FBS conferences. The ACC was again ranked fourth out of the 11 conferences, receiving players with an average of 221 more prior snaps relative to its departures. The ACC was also ranked highly in basketball when looking at relative usage rates and how many minutes per game, on average, were being gained or lost in the portal. To this end, players arriving to ACC schools averaged nearly 7 more minutes per game and were involved in a larger percentage of offensive possessions (higher usage rates) relative to departing players. All told, the findings from RQ1 suggest that the ACC and other autonomous conferences tend to be net-losers in terms of transfer quantity (more outgoings than incomings), but they are often net-winners in terms of transfer quality (on average, they bring in more talented and experienced players).

Research Question 2

Which ACC teams have achieved net gains or suffered net losses in the transfer portal in relation to the number, talent level, and experience level of incoming and outgoing transfers? This question mirrored RQ1 but examined the flow of transfers among FBS (football) and Division I (basketball) schools rather than conferences. In terms of *volume* among ACC teams, Georgia Tech (10) and Pittsburgh (3) were the only two football programs that brought in more transfers from FBS schools than they lost. The Clemson Tigers (-38), who only brought in two FBS transfers from the portal during the examined timeframe, and North Carolina (-40) suffered the largest net losses in transfer volume among ACC schools. In ACC men's basketball, Wake Forest was the biggest beneficiary and most engaged school in the portal, bringing in 17 players and losing 13 for a net-gain of four. Florida State was the least active (only involved in 16 transfers), and Pittsburgh suffered the largest net loss in transfer volume (-10).

Shifting to the *quality* of the transfers, most (9 out of 14) ACC schools received players with higher PFF ratings relative to those who left. Miami ranked first in the ACC and third in the entire FBS in this category, boasting incomers with an average PFF rating of 65.1 and outgoers with an average PFF rating of 53.87 (Net of 11.23). Virginia (-0.74), Pittsburgh (-1.66), N.C. State (-3.48), Wake Forest (-3.89), and Clemson (-8.08) were among those, on average, suffering net-losses in football talent to the portal. In basketball, Wake Forest was ranked seventh in all of Division I when it came to the net quality of its transfers as the Demon Deacons acquired players who averaged 0.092 more win-shares per 40 minutes than the players who left. All ACC basketball programs, aside from Clemson (-0.009) and Syracuse (-0.017), were net-gainers when it came to the relative quality of ingoing and outgoing transfers.

As for the movement of *experience* (prior snaps played) in the portal, Miami, N.C. State, and Pittsburgh offloaded players with minimal playing experience relative to those being transferred in. Five football programs—Wake Forest, Georgia Tech, Virginia, Clemson, and Syracuse—tended to lose more snaps than they gained in the portal. For men's basketball, every ACC school transferred players in who were



averaging more minutes per game relative to the players transferring out. Florida State (-0.41), Louisville (-1.62), and Virginia Tech (-3.90) aside, all ACC teams were net-gainers when it came to the usage rates of their incoming transfers relative to the outgoers.

Research Question 3

Are the athletic performances of ACC teams affected by the arrival of transfer-portal athletes? To explore this question, we constructed a series of multiple regression models that regressed team-level performance outcomes (win percentage and SRS rating) on variables related to prior performance (lagged outcomes), coach experience, and—most pertinently—roster composition. Among football teams, the roster variables represented the percentage of offensive, defensive, and special team snaps played by freshmen and new transfers (relative to returning players). A second iteration of the model further decomposed these categories into blue-chip (had 247 recruit rankings 4 stars or higher) and non-blue-chip (3 stars or lower) players to further account for the relative quality (talent) of these types of players. For men’s basketball, we followed the same formula but examined the percentage of total minutes played by the different types of players across the guard, forward, and center categories.

For football, results (see Figure 1) showed that, all else equal, teams giving a higher percentage of snaps to freshmen on offense and defense posted lower win percentages; more precisely, for every 1% increase in offensive (defensive) snaps played by freshmen, win percentage was expected to fall by nearly a quarter (third) of a percent. After decomposing these categories further into the percentage of snaps played by blue-chip and non-blue-chip players, we found that SRS ratings—as a measure of how many points worse or better a team was than an average team—were more positively affected by a higher new, blue-chip transfers playing a higher percentage of offensive snaps. Among men’s basketball teams, similar effects on both win percentage and SRS were evident as increases in the percentage of minutes played by new transfers in the guard and forward positions were associated with increases in team performance. This was particularly evident among blue-chip transfers at those positions, and like football, higher percentages of minutes played by non-blue-chip freshmen displayed negative effects.

Research Question 4

Do players who transfer in or out of the ACC via the transfer portal experience changes in their athletic opportunities and performances? On average, FBS transfers into ACC schools went from averaging 248 snaps per season (21 per game) to 273 snaps per season (22 per game); conversely, portal entrants who left ACC schools for other FBS programs tended to earn a significantly higher rate of snaps (152 to 287 snaps per season; 12 to 23 snaps per game). Nonetheless, simple t-tests fail to account for positional differences in snap rates (e.g., quarterbacks play almost every offensive snap while other skill positions do not), as well as differences in the success/talent, coaching, and hometown proximity of a player’s new and old schools. To control for these potential effects, we conducted additional regressions with changes in playing time (snaps per game) and performance (PFF rating) serving as the outcome variables. Positive values in these cases were indicative of greater performance or more playing time *post-transfer*. Though the models displayed a relatively low fit, transfers moving further from home (relative to their prior school) and to higher quality teams (SRS rating was higher at new institution) were linked to decreases in performance.

In basketball, a significant increase (12.88 to 18.36) in minutes per game was evident for players leaving the ACC, and players arriving to (departing) the ACC posted significantly lower (higher) win-shares per 40. Much like football, regression models controlling for additional influences on these changes in performance and playing time were low-fitting but showed that moves to stronger institutions and institutions with better offenses—relative to their prior program—were associated with reductions in usage rate and playing time.

Appendix

Table 1

Average PFF Grades of Incoming/Outgoing FBS Transfers by Conference

Conference	In	Out	Net
SEC	63.69	61.54	2.15
Pac-12	63.50	61.71	1.79
Big Ten	62.50	61.30	1.20
ACC	63.35	62.24	1.11
Big 12	63.11	63.01	0.10
IND	61.27	61.96	-0.69
MW	61.53	62.80	-1.28
AAC	61.36	63.15	-1.79
C-USA	61.54	63.75	-2.20
MAC	60.49	63.28	-2.79
SBC	60.77	64.34	-3.58

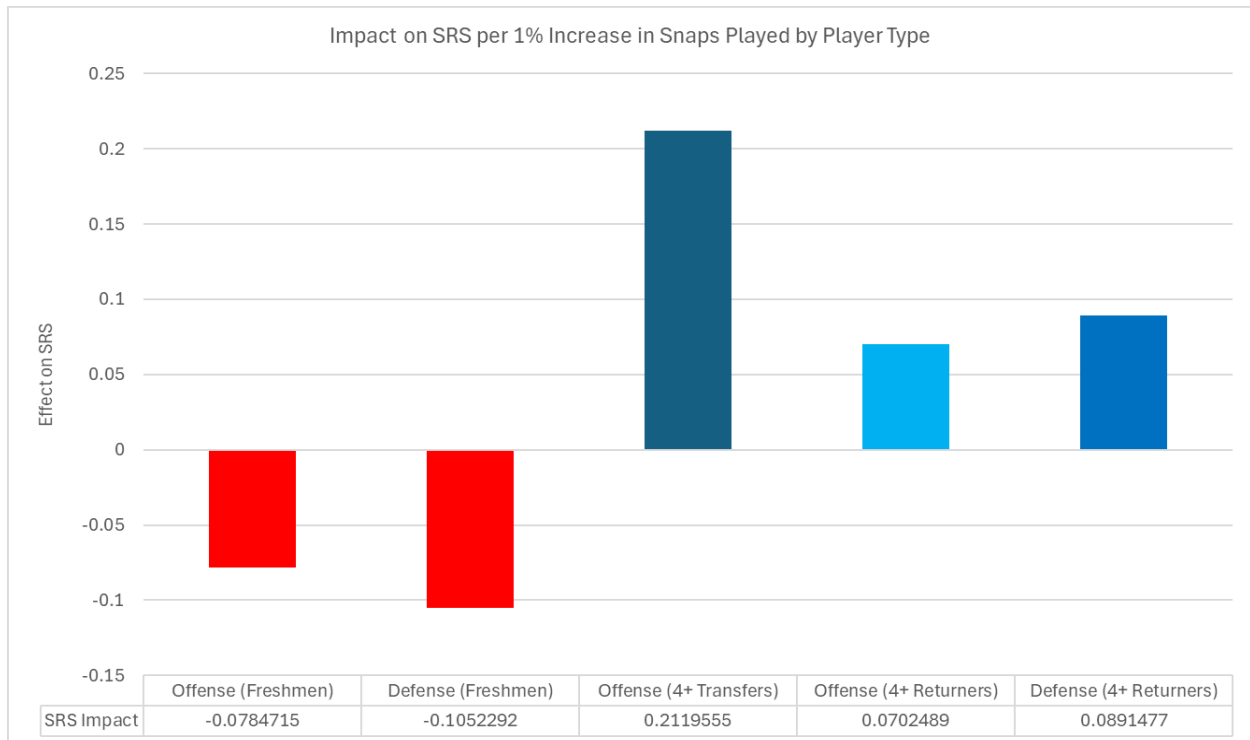


Figure 1. Effect of 1% increase in snaps played by player type on teams' SRS ratings, holding prior performance and coach experience constant.