

Exploration of Player Experience in College Football

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to gather information to guide the process of defining player experience using insights from current football players at a Division 1 university in the United States to identify what matters most to players throughout their entire athlete journey. Existing research literature has highlighted many of the factors impacting college choice among student-athletes (Letawsky et al., 2003; Barnhill et al., 2013). There has also been significant discussion on the subject of retention of student-athletes and how coaches play a role in their overall experience (Becker et. al., 2013; O'Connell et al., 2022), however, there is not much research identifying the factors that influence the experience of college athletes covering the entire journey. Using the audio recordings from eight guided focus groups with over 35 players, researchers transcribed, coded, and using a grounded theory methodology (Creswell, 2013) analyzed the information to articulate results. We anticipated that there would be three segments of a player's experience: (1) the recruiting experience, (2) the concurrent student-athlete experience, and (3) the post-grad or alumni experience. Our findings indicate that the main focus for players is the first two areas, but considerations of the post-grad experience are used as guiding factors in the other two areas. Our analysis identified the following four major themes across the three phases of the athlete journey: (1) relationships, (2) communication, (3) coaching tactics, and (4) player experience. Relationships are a defining factor of player experience from recruiting to post-grad. A player's relationship with their parents is significant as athletes are choosing a school to attend. In the concurrent student-athlete phase, player experience is highly impacted by the non-football relationships that their coaches create with the players and opportunities to connect with teammates. While the players we spoke with have not yet entered the alumni phase, they indicated that the strong alumni-player connection is reassuring and provides them with confidence for their post-grad life. One player stated: "Relationships are the foundation of your program, and you won't have a successful

program without having solid relationships.” The communication theme is an essential precursor to the successful relationships that players desire. Many players indicated that the lack of communication during the recruiting phase was a negative point along their athletic journey. As players enter the concurrent student-athlete phase, communication appears to improve, but when expectations and decisions are unclear, many players consider transferring significantly impacting trusting relationships between players and coaches and the retention ability of the program. When asked what could elevate the player experience further, one athlete said: “Communication is hard, but I'd say just more open communication...from the top down.” Because a coach is in control of many aspects of their life, players indicated that their coach’s approach to leadership and training had a large impact on their overall experience. A culture of high love and high expectations leads to higher respect and better performance. Discipline and adversity are seen as opportunities for growth and leadership when they stem from love and respect. Coaching that creates fear leads players to feel unmotivated and consider other opportunities to play elsewhere. One player stated this about a coach’s behavior: “High love, high expectations. When he's trying to hold you accountable or push us to be better or being hard on us, you know where that comes from, and you know why he's there.” The final theme from our analysis was that of the overall player experience. Players were asked to define what player experience was to them and one described it as “your overall outlook of what happened when you were a player.” Players recognize that a lot of their experience is dependent upon them and how they choose to see things, namely their “outlook”. Good relationships and communication combined with effective coaching tactics are not enough if a player isn’t motivated to get the most out of their experience. Most players agreed that relationships, communication, and coaching tactics significantly impacted not only their player experience but their performance on the field. To effectively support players throughout their entire athletic journey and develop top performers, Division 1 coaches should strive to develop better relationships, open communication, and coaching tactics that mesh high expectations with respect. Further opportunities for research include delving into specific coaching tactics and effective ways to implement them, how to measure the level of trust between players and coaches, and the impact of team culture on performance.