

# When I Grow Up, I Want to be a Fired Head Football Coach

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## Abstract

“The excitement of college football on campuses around the nation each September changes with the arrival of fall for college football programs that are not winning games. College football fans love to watch their favorite teams, tailgate on Saturdays, and the 24/7 media attention in the lead-up to big game days. However, when the team begins to struggle and lose games, and the prizes of national championships, college football bowl games, and national limelight start vanishing, the cheers fizzle down to boos. This echoes from the stadium bleachers out to the tailgates and around the university campus before spreading in the college town. The frustrations are relayed to the stakeholders, the big boosters, athletic directors, and college presidents. The media further ignites “the noise,” or lack thereof, with comparison to past university championship teams, to other teams in the conference, and other coaches who are doing a better job and winning. This downward trend starts the hot topic discussion, “Is it time to make a head coaching change?”

The escalation of salaries of head coaches at Division I schools in the often highly visible sports of football and men’s and women’s basketball have been increasingly discussed and scrutinized in recent years (Reynolds & Pederson, 2016). Rhoden (2008) noted how athletics is widely considered the front porch of the university.

College football, with its ability to generate large sums of money, has become the main focus in many athletic departments because of its potential to raise funds, inspire alumni, and garner positive media exposure (Reynolds & Pederson, 2016). Karcher (2009) highlighted how the financial and legal implications of intercollegiate athletics have drastically influenced how intercollegiate athletic departments operate both administratively and competitively. Many schools rely on the publicity and revenues generated by their college football programs and football coaches are often the highest-paid state officials (Clayworth, 2012). Coaching salaries, too, have skyrocketed across college football (Portnoy, 2024). The overall increase in spending on facilities and salaries in college sports is a natural byproduct of each school’s mission-driven desire to compete in a zero-sum game, where leaders are incentivized to spend available revenue towards the competitive mission rather than make profits (Blue, 2019). Wealthy boosters typically donate money for big contracts and buyouts (Blinder, 2021). Oftentimes, the majority of financial compensation is tied to bonuses which hinge on winning on the field.

Similarly, severance packages have tripled since the CFP began (Portnoy, 2024). The increasing commercialization of college athletics over the years has led to a flood of money for major programs, particularly those with top-flight football and men’s basketball teams (Moody, 2021). The Knight Commission’s database suggests public FBS schools spent an average of just less than \$1.8 million more on coaching salaries in the 2022 fiscal year compared to the first season of the CFP in 2015 (Portnoy, 2024). In the latest info from Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics (2022), coaches compensation ranked second overall at (20%) in major

athletics operating expenses for all institutions in the Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS).

This presentation focuses on a content analysis of thirteen Football Bowl Subdivision head football coaches that were fired during the fall of 2023. Content analysis was conducted from coaching articles, the USA Today financial database, and Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests for coaching contracts of all dismissed coaches. Discussions will include breakdown categories on base salary, supplemental compensation, bonuses, deferred and retention compensation, automatic extension clauses, outside income, summer camps, buyout provisions, and mitigation offset clauses. While it may generally be beneficial to include numbers and averages in an abstract, the presentation will outline the drastic differences in coaching contract terms, compensation levels, bonuses, and other remunerations and explore exactly why an average of these numbers would be wildly misleading.

A handful of studies have been completed on college head coaching compensation. For example, Wilson et al. (2011) performed a comparative analysis of the athletic and academic incentives contained in men's basketball head coaching contracts. Likewise, Leeds et al. (2018) and Thomas and Van Horn (2015) studied the remarkably high levels of financial incentives for college football head coaches. Furthermore, a majority of current research on college football coaching compensation is completed from a legal perspective in relation to contract language, the internal revenue code, or bonus investigation (Mitten et al., 2023; Mikesell, 2022; Oja et al., 2015; Soebbing et al., 2016). However, paying significant money to coaches upon termination is a fairly new phenomenon without much scholarly review. For these reasons, this study is pertinent to the current college football coaching landscape and could provide valuable information for practitioners, athletic directors, and other important stakeholders within institutional athletic departments, as well as display the major differences between compensation types and levels.

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