

# “We are Practicing Just to Practice”: Investigating the Redshirt Football Experience at Lower-Level Division I and Division II Programs

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## Abstract

College athlete development and experience are growing topics of research in sport management literature. This scholarship tends to focus on the most elite revenue-generating athletes, football, competing in the National Collegiate Athletic Association’s (NCAA) Power Five Conferences. However, there is a dearth of literature exploring football athletes’ development outside of the Power Five, specifically redshirt athletes. The redshirt freshman year is a frequently used tactic for college athletes and their coaches (Division I and II only) to build an athlete’s physical skill and sometimes academic acclimation without compromising a year of eligibility (Walker, 2023). Generally, a college athlete receives four years of athletics eligibility and one redshirt year, barring exceptions pertaining to the COVID-19 pandemic or injuries.

One line of thought suggests that this year allows athletes to get adjusted to campus life, pursue classroom interests, and obtain a professional degree (i.e., Master’s) during their final year of eligibility. However, a second line of thought describes the redshirt year as a challenge, specifically as one goes from starting their senior year of high school to being benched for a season (Walker, 2023). For athletes utilizing their redshirt season during their first year of college, redshirting occurs during a turbulent time. Athletes not only physically transition from high school to college, but also experience significant shifts in identity as they transition from being a high school “star” to “sitting the bench” (Matteo, 2023; Medley, 2018).

Despite this being a crucial time for redshirt athletes’ development, little is understood about the redshirt experience and its social and psychological effects on athletes, specifically athletes in the NCAA’s lower-level Division I and Division II who are often overlooked in sport management scholarship. This study employed semi-structured interviews with football athletes (n = 11) from Division I Football Champion Subdivision (FCS) and Division II who redshirted their freshman year. We utilized a retrospective approach to incorporate the transition experience from high school to the redshirt year, and the redshirt year to an eligible season of play. These perspectives were explored through a unique coupling of Erikson’s (1950) Stages of Psychosocial Development and Adler and Alder’s (1989) Glorified Self. Through data collection, we sought to understand athletes’ overall identity development in athletic, academic, and social spheres throughout this transition.

Preliminary findings suggest athletes viewed the redshirt year as a formative experience; one that brought forth a variety of mental challenges that paid off in subsequent seasons. Athletes were close with their class of redshirt players and frequently talked about the difficulties of the redshirt season (e.g., no playing time, scout team, early morning lifts), and how different this was from playing an integral role on their high school team (Adler & Adler, 1989). Participants disclosed that these difficulties made football feel like a job to them and subsequently changed the nature of their identity as a football player (Erikson, 1950). However, they quickly learned to develop their own techniques and tips to move up in the ranks and increase their opportunities

for playing time. Additionally, one's redshirt season experience seemed to vary by position. Athletes in small position groups, quarterbacks for example, were offered more opportunities to receive practice playing time and one-on-one feedback compared to those who were in larger position groups, thus improving their redshirt experience. Practical and theoretical implications will be expanded upon in the presentation.

#### References

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