

Monopsony Fracture: An Exploration of College Athletes' Freedom to Move and Freedom to Capitalize Through the Lens of Push-Pull Theory

Kadence Otto and Charlie Parrish

In 2015 the National Collegiate Athletic Association's (NCAA) monopsony splintered when Judge Wilken ruled that the NCAA could not bar colleges from offering athletes the full cost-of-attendance (*O'Bannon v. NCAA*, 2015). By 2019, when California Governor Gavin Newsom signed the Fair Pay to Play Act into law, the NCAA's monopsony fractured, ushering in a quasi-free market wherein college athletes can more freely transfer and monetize their name, image, and likeness (NIL; Cal. Educ. Code § 67456, 2020). Therefore, this article begins by setting forth the necessity of the monopsony fracture in forcing NCAA policy change. Next, the authors examined college athletes' rate of transfer (freedom to move) and opportunity to secure scarce benefits via NIL (freedom to capitalize) due to NCAA policy change. Last, the authors explore an approach toward understanding college athlete labor migration through push-pull theory (Lee, 1966).

Keywords: college athletes, rights, freedom, transfer, NIL, monetize, capitalize

Introduction

Currently, 100 college athletes have an NIL valuation of a half-million dollars or more. The top 20 athletes' valuation is \$1 million or greater and the average valuation of the top five is \$4 million (On3.com, "NIL 100 Rankings"). And, from 2021 to 2023, Division I men's and women's basketball, and Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) transfers increased 7%, 11%, and 20%, respectively (NCAA Transfer Portal Data, 2023). College athletes making money? Moving (more) freely from school to school?

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How did this happen? The answer—monopsony fracture. The National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) has historically operated as a monopsony, the sole buyer of [athlete] labor. However, due to decades of litigation challenging NCAA bylaws, the monopsony fractured, resulting in newfound freedoms for athletes to move and capitalize on their talent.

The NCAA relies on skilled athletic laborers whose talent is not evenly distributed across member institutions. The demand for limited athletic talent results in competition among athletic programs. This competition—combined with athletes’ freedom to move and capitalize—has resulted in an increase in athlete labor migration. Push-pull theory (Lee, 1966) offers a useful lens to conceptualize possible motives for athletes to migrate (transfer).

Due to the monopsony fracture, an exploration into how athletes are beginning to operate in a freer market is needed to understand contemporary college athlete labor migration. Thus, the purpose of this study was to: (1) examine college athletes’ rate of transfer (freedom to move) and opportunity to secure scarce benefits via NIL (freedom to capitalize) due to NCAA policy change; and (2) explore how push-pull theory could be utilized to understand college athlete migration.

Conceptual Framework

Monopsony Fracture

A monopoly, wherein one seller controls a market, allows the single seller to keep its purchase price artificially high (controlling supply). Whereas in a monopsony, there is only one buyer, which enables it to keep its labor costs artificially low (controlling demand). It is rare for a business entity to be both a monopoly and a monopsony; however, the NCAA has been labeled as such (see Figure 1).

Indeed, until forced to change by the courts, the NCAA had total control of the college sports market (it was the sole owner, thus only seller of college sports). In 1984, the NCAA’s monopoly on college football abruptly ended when the Supreme Court of the United States (SCOTUS) ruled that the NCAA’s horizontal control of the college football television market violated the Sherman Act (*NCAA v. Bd. of Regents*). Simultaneously, the NCAA was (and still is) the only buyer of college sports labor (the athletes). But, in 2021, its monopsony fractured when SCOTUS unanimously ruled “that the NCAA enjoys monopsony control . . . depressing wages below competitive levels for student-athletes” (*NCAA v. Alston*, 2021, p. 2). To fully understand why college athletes now enjoy the freedom to transfer and the freedom to capitalize via NIL, an overview of the litigation and legislation that led to the NCAA’s monopsony fracture is necessary.

In 1998, the NCAA’s monopsony on coaches’ salaries ended when part-time coaches challenged the Restricted Earnings Coach (REC) Rule (*Law, et al. v. NCAA*).



Monopoly and Monopsony

(*Bd. of Regents*, 1984)

(*Alston*, 2021)

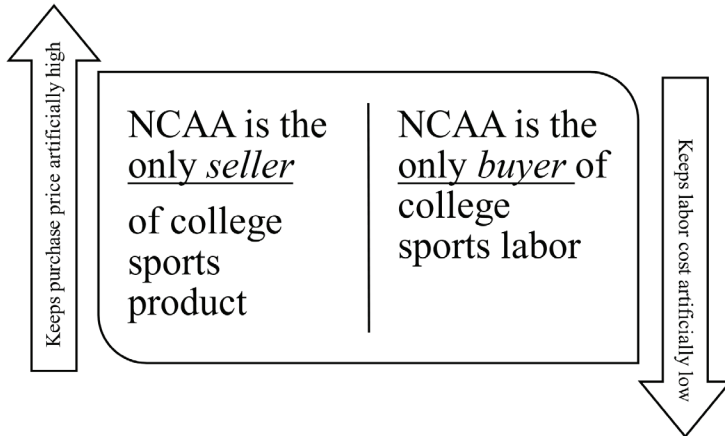


Figure 1. The NCAA is a monopoly and a monopsony.

The Court recognized that a horizontal agreement to fix prices and the price set by the agreement (a salary cap of \$16,000/year was placed on the REC) was more favorable to NCAA member universities than would be in an otherwise free market (*Law, et al.*, 1998). Today, 84 head football, 71 head men’s basketball, and 18 head women’s basketball coaches’ total pay is \$1 million/year or more (Schnell, 2024; *USA Today*, 2023, 2024).

Eight years later the athletes would apply a similar strategy—use antitrust law to fracture the NCAA’s monopsony. *White* (2006), current and former Division I football and basketball players, filed suit against the NCAA for its horizontal agreement (the Grant-in-Aid Policy), which unreasonably restrained trade by capping the scholarship and prevented athletes from being able to cover the full cost of attending a particular university. Following *Law et al.* (1998), the NCAA realized that cost-cutting measures (in the form of policies, rules, and bylaws) were unlikely to survive antitrust scrutiny and, whether intended or not, the longstanding Grant-in-Aid Policy was an effective measure (Baker et al., 2011). Nevertheless, *White* (2008) was forced to settle.

In 2009, former University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA) basketball star Ed O’Bannon filed a class action lawsuit against the NCAA alleging antitrust violations in relation to ownership rights of former athletes’ likenesses and images in EA Sports video games. Central to the NCAA’s defense was that the athletes signed a form releasing their publicity rights to the NCAA and third parties for commercial purposes in exchange for eligibility to play college sports (*O’Bannon v. NCAA*, 2009;



see Stippich & Otto, 2010). In 2015, Judge Wilken ruled that the NCAA could not bar colleges from offering the full cost-of-attendance, covering cost of living expenses, and granting up to \$5,000 per year to athletes (*O'Bannon v. NCAA*). Wilkens' decision, while narrow in scope, marked the beginning of the monopsony fracture.

In the midst of *O'Bannon* (2009), a cascade of pro-athlete activity was taking place at the federal and state levels. In 2010, the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ) began investigating the impact of the NCAA's cap on the number and duration of athletic scholarships (K. Otto, personal communication, April 28, 2010); in 2011, the State of Connecticut passed the Student-Athletes' Right to Know Act (Conn. Gen. Stat. § 10a-55k); in 2012, the National College Players Association (NCPA) spearheaded the Student-Athletes' Bill of Rights in California (Cal. SB 1525); in 2014, *Jenkins* filed a complaint against the NCAA and the Power Five Conferences alleging collusion and price-fixing by artificially restraining athlete compensation in violation of antitrust law, and the Northwestern football players filed a complaint with the NLRB (National Labor Relations Board, Case 13-RC-121359).

In response to mounting losses in the courts and the Fair Pay to Play Act moving its way through the California legislature, the NCAA loosened its transfer rules, allowing athletes to notify their current school of their intent to transfer (Cal. Educ. Code § 67456, 2020; Hosick, 2018). By the fall of 2019, the NCAA's monopsony profoundly fractured when Governor Gavin Newsom signed the California act into law and, soon to follow, Florida and Connecticut passed the Intercollegiate Athlete Compensation and Rights Act and Act Concerning the Name, Image, and Likeness of Student Athletes (Fla. Stat. §1006.74, 2022; Conn. Gen. Stat. § 10a-56, 2022). Indeed, nearly every state legislature in the country began crafting athletes' rights legislation (Keller, 2023; see Moorman & Cocco, 2023, for a comprehensive analysis of state NIL legislation). And, on June 21, 2021, SCOTUS unanimously ruled that NCAA rules limiting education-related compensation violated the Sherman Act, setting forth that the NCAA is a monopsony and "a monopsony cannot launder its price-fixing of labor by calling it product definition" (*NCAA v. Alston*, 2021, pp. 3-4).

With the passage of state legislation, athletes can now secure compensation for their NIL and continued litigation has led to further NCAA policy concessions resulting in increased freedom of movement. In 2022, the NCAA approved the Division I one-time transfer exception and retention of athletic financial aid through graduation (Durham, 2022; NCAA Eligibility Center, 2022). And, due to the DOJ, 10 states, and the District of Columbia joining a civil antitrust lawsuit challenging the NCAA's Transfer Eligibility Rule, the Division I Council approved emergency legislation allowing all undergraduate athletes to transfer and play immediately if they meet certain academic requirements (Dinich, 2024; *State of Ohio et al., v. NCAA*, 2024; U.S. DOJ Office of Public Affairs, 2024). Indisputably, pro-athlete litigation



and legislation fractured the NCAA's monopsony, forcing NCAA policy change. Now college athletes are beginning to operate in a quasi-free market.

Labor Migration

Labor migration involves the movement of both skilled and unskilled workers. Skilled workers have higher levels of education and/or more experience in their field, and the movement of skilled workers has increased as a percentage of all migration (Iredale, 2001). Elliot and Maguire (2008) proposed athletic labor migration is similar to the migration of highly skilled workers. When athletic workers first began migrating, the movement was primarily within a single country. Over time, the geographical dispersion of athletic laborers expanded to encompass the entire globe (Sage 2010). Researchers have examined sport labor migration in many contexts, such as, but not limited to, British basketball (Falcous & Maguire, 2005; Maguire, 1994b), Latin American athletes (Carter, 2007; Klein, 1994; Regalado, 2002), Canadian ice hockey (Genast, 1994; Maguire, 1996), international soccer (Lanfranchi, 1994; Lanfranchi & Taylor, 2001; Maguire & Pearton, 2000; Magee & Sugden, 2002; McGovern, 2002; Stead & Maguire, 2000), international female athletes (Adjepong, 2019; Agergaard, 2008; Agergaard & Tiesler, 2014; Butler, 2018), rugby (Stewart-Withers et al., 2017; Williams, 1994), and cricket (Hill, 1994; Maguire & Stead, 1996; Stead & Maguire, 1998).

Specific to sport labor migration within the NCAA, John Bale (1987, 1991) examined international collegiate athletes in the United States and his work served as the foundation for studies in the decades that followed. Some researchers have focused on the lived experiences of international college athletes (Chepyator-Thomson, 2003; Lee & Opio, 2011; Popp et al., 2010; Ridinger & Pastore, 2000; Rodriguez, 2014; Sato et al., 2011). Others have explored motives for international athletes to migrate to universities and colleges in the United States (Butler et al., 2020; Edwards et al., 2019; Love & Kim, 2011; Popp et al., 2011; Stokowski et al., 2013). Jolly et al. (2022) combined both foci and studied experiences and motives associated with the migration of international NCAA tennis athletes. Newell (2015) explored best practices associated with advising and mentoring international college athletes. Weston (2006) and Pinegar (2010) studied the recruitment and eligibility of migrant college athletes. Popp et al. (2009) investigated differing perceptions among domestic and international college athletes, and Trendafilova et al. (2010) focused on experiences and satisfaction of support services for international college athletes. More recently, researchers have explored geographical patterns and changes in rates of movement associated with the migration of NCAA athletes in basketball, soccer, and tennis (Chepyator-Thomson et al., 2016; Kirk & Weaver, 2019; Parrish et al., 2020).



Push-Pull Theory

E. G. Ravenstein's *The Laws of Migration* (1885, 1889) is often cited as the starting point for work on migration theory. Ravenstein used census data from 1881 and later incorporated data from 20 countries in an attempt to explain human migration with seven "laws." The seventh law is most applicable to athlete labor migration (transfers). This law addresses a variety of motives for migration, with a particular emphasis on economic motives whereby migrants' "desire to 'better' themselves in material respects" (Ravenstein, 1889, p. 286). This seventh law (economic motives) serves as the foundational element for Lee's (1966) development of push-pull theory. Lee (1966) established push-pull theory as a lens to understand why humans migrate. He theorized that, despite how short or long or how easy or difficult, an individual's decision to migrate involves factors at the area of origin, factors at the area of destination, a set of intervening obstacles, and varying personal factors (see Figure 2).

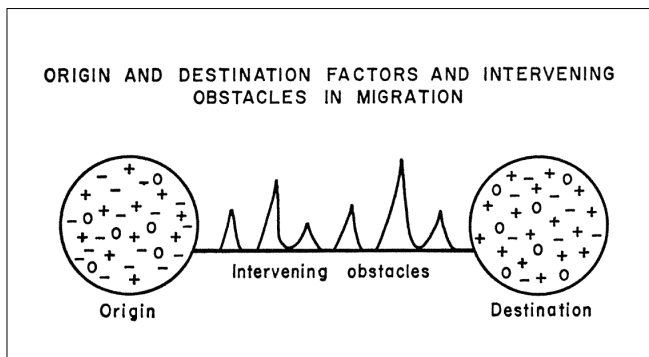


Figure 2. Origin and destination factors and intervening obstacles in migration. The "push-pull obstacles" model.

[Lee, E.S. (1966). A theory of migration. *Demography*, 3(1), p. 50.]

Lee then explained there are both positive and negative factors within the area of origin and area of destination. These factors work to pull and/or push individuals to either stay at the area of origin or relocate to a new destination. In addition to the positive and negative factors, a set of intervening obstacles and an individual's personal factors affect migration decisions. Specifically, migration decisions are not made from a simple comparison of negative and positive factors at origin and destination. Rather, "the balance in favor of the move must be enough to overcome the obstacles" (Lee, 1966, p. 51). Obstacles may include issues such as distance of travel, financial resources, and laws/regulations among others. It is important to note the effect of such obstacles varies from person to person (personal factors). For example,



a given set of obstacles may be minor for some migrants yet insurmountable for others. Further, other personal factors influence migration decisions, such as familial context (single, married, children), differences in lifecycle stages (school, entering the workforce, retirement), and individual personalities among others. These personal factors have varying degrees of influence on one's decision to migrate or not to migrate. Therefore, migration decisions are "never completely rational, and for some persons the rational component is much less than the irrational" (Lee, 1966, p. 51).

Lee (1966) extended push-pull theory beyond providing a four-factor model by proposing hypotheses that explain the variance in migration volume, streams and counter streams of migration flow, and characteristics of migrants. Of the three, the hypothesis associated with migrant characteristics has applicability to current and future studies on college athlete labor migration. Specifically, he proposed migration is selective in the sense that migrants are not a random sample of the population. This is because some individuals will respond differently to plus and minus factors at the areas of origin and destination and the set of intervening obstacles they may encounter. This variance, in response, is tied to variance in perceptions and interpretations of the plus and minus factors, as well as the intervening obstacles. Therefore, motives for migration vary and do not follow a rigid set of laws. While this creates difficulty with predicting migration behaviors, it does provide a useful framework to begin to understand migration.

Since its introduction, researchers have extended Lee's work in different contexts that may prove helpful toward understanding college athletes' motivations to transfer. Moon (1995) introduced the idea of 'mooring' variables, which is consistent with Lee's emphasis on how personal characteristics interact with intervening obstacles. He maintained that understanding the migration process is highly complex and should account for a migrant's perception of a social structure rather than simply on the individual and/or the structure in isolation. In addition, Bansal et al. (2005) applied push-pull theory to better understand consumer switching behaviors across service providers. This study also provides support for understanding individual perceptions of key variables associated with switching intentions rather than simply identifying the key variables that impact customer acquisition and retention.

Within the context of college athletics, push-pull theory offers a useful lens to understand college athlete labor migration. It can be said that college athletes assess both positive and negative factors at the area of origin (current college team) as well as at areas of destination (possible future college team). Also, college athletes will interpret a varying set of intervening obstacles differently due to unique experiences that influence individual perceptions. For athletes, some obstacles may be perceived as significant and ultimately prohibit transferring to a new team. For others, those obstacles may not pose a significant issue, thus the athlete completes the migration (transfer). Of course, each individual will navigate her/his own set of personal factors



as part of the decision-making process and ultimately arrive at a decision that is difficult to predict due to mooring variables.

Method

To examine college athletes' rate of transfer (freedom to move) and opportunity to secure scarce benefits via NIL (freedom to capitalize) due to NCAA policy change (Inquiry 1), the authors accessed secondary data from Gallup (2020) regarding athlete transfers from the NCAA. Conducted on behalf of the NCAA, Gallup (2020) examined the undergraduate experiences and post-college outcomes of college athletes ($N = 4,889$) and students who did not compete in NCAA athletics ($N = 69,012$) from 1975 to 2019. In addition, the authors retrieved data from NCAA Research (2022) examining the rate of college athlete transfers among different sports and the NCAA Transfer Portal's online database (2023) identifying college athlete transfers. Data pertaining to transfer rates of NCAA Division I athletes before and after the inception of the transfer portal, post-*Alston* (2021), and the transfer rate of the general student body are presented.

Further, to explore the application of push-pull theory (Lee, 1966) within the context of college athlete labor migration, the transfer and NIL data of Caleb Williams (the 2022 #1 rated football transfer portal prospect) and Angel Reese (the 2022 #1 rated women's basketball transfer portal prospect) are presented (Inquiry 2). Researchers utilized transfer data from 247Sports and NIL data from On3.com. Founded in 2010, and acquired by CBS Interactive in 2015, 247Sports is a widely referenced comprehensive digital platform covering football and basketball recruits and transfers that creates innovative technology and data-driven products (i.e., the 247Sports Composite Rankings and Player Database). Data on the #1 football transfer portal prospect were collected by clicking on "transfer portal," "top FB transfers," "2022," "#1 (Caleb Williams)," then scrolling to "Timeline" and clicking on "see all entries." "See all entries" provided a historical timeline beginning with the year "2022" and back to all the schools that sought to recruit him as a transfer as well as the schools that initially tried to recruit him out of high school. The same method was used to access data on Angel Reese ("transfer portal," "top WBB transfers," "2022," "#1 (Angel Reese)," then scrolling to "Timeline" and clicking on "see all entries"). On3.com is a cutting-edge dashboard that provides current NIL valuation of athletes using a "proprietary algorithm" based on performance, influence, and exposure and a "brand and roster value index to ... determine ... high school and college athletes' projected annual value (PAV)" (Terry, 2022, para 1-3). On3 NIL data for Caleb Williams and Angel Reese were collected by clicking on "NIL Rankings," then "college football NIL rankings" and "women's college basketball NIL rankings," respectively. From that point, clicking on the profile of the athlete revealed a historical timeline of Williams' and Reese's NIL deals. Utilizing 247Sports and On3.com provided



researchers a factual and detailed record of both athletes’ recruiting and transfer history, and NIL opportunities.

Results

Inquiry 1: College athletes’ rate of transfer (freedom to move) and opportunity to secure scarce benefits via NIL (freedom to capitalize) due to NCAA policy change

The average transfer rate of college athletes prior to the transfer portal (1975-2018) was 22% while the transfer rate of the general student body up to 2019 remained constant at 38% (see Figure 3). Gallup (2020) reported that the difference in the rates of transfer between athletes and non-athletes may have been due to NCAA eligibility standards. Following the inception of the transfer portal in 2018 the transfer rate of athletes increased 5% and increased an additional 2% after *Alston* (2021).

Prior to 2018, NCAA legislation prohibited four-year college athletes in the sports of men’s and women’s basketball, football, baseball, and hockey from transferring without a one-year sit-out from competition penalty. In the fall of 2020, the NCAA granted a blanket waiver for athletes to transfer laterally (from a Division I school to another Division I school) and compete immediately if certain criteria were met (first transfer attempt, good academic standing at the departing school, full-time enrollment at the transfer institution, and documentation by coaching

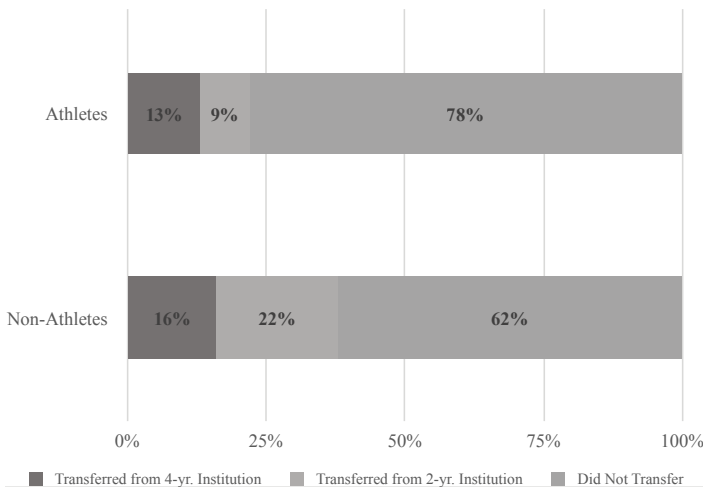


Figure 3. Transfer status among NCAA student-athletes overall compared to non-athletes.

[Gallup, Inc. (2020). A study of NCAA student-athletes: Undergraduate experiences and postcollege outcomes, p. 22.]



staff that impermissible recruitment did not take place; Hosick, 2021). In 2021, the Division I Council adopted new transfer legislation allowing athletes in baseball, women’s and men’s basketball, and FBS/FCS football the one-time opportunity to transfer and compete immediately and without penalty (Hosick, 2021). The impact of NCAA legislative changes related to the one-time transfer exception can be seen in the sport of baseball in 2008 when the NCAA voted to restrict one-time transfer ability, resulting in a drop from 8% to 2% by 2012. With the implementation of the transfer portal in 2018 and the further loosening of transfer rules, the percentage of four-year transfers in FBS football, baseball, and men’s and women’s basketball has sharply increased (see Figure 4).

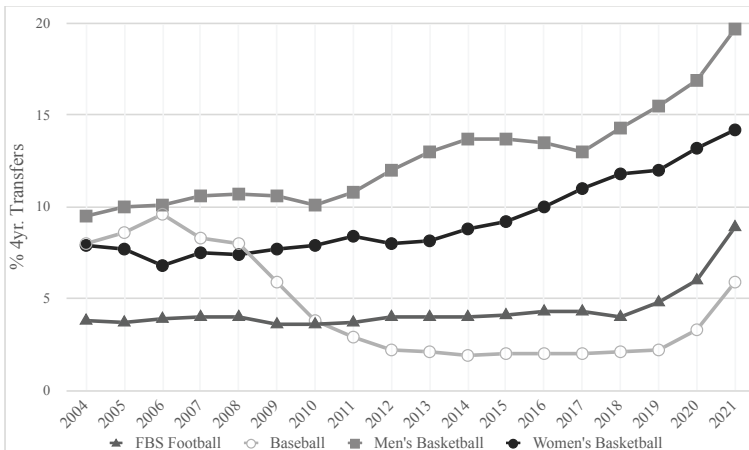


Figure 4. Trends in proportion of four-year college transfers in APR cohorts.

[NCAA Research (2022). Transfer composition of Division I teams. [NCAA.org](https://www.ncaa.org), p. 9.]

Table 1 reveals the impact that the loosening of transfer rules has had on the team composition of men’s and women’s basketball (34.5% and 23.3%, respectively), baseball (26.9%), and FCS and FBS football (17.2% and 16.9%, respectively). Other notable transfer proportions are found in men’s soccer (22.9%), women’s beach volleyball (19.7%), and men’s and women’s tennis (19.25% and 17.7%, respectively).

With the one-time transfer exception extending to all sports (freedom to move) and the opportunity to secure business deals in exchange for use of their NIL (freedom to capitalize), athletes are realizing the beginning stages of market freedom. Indeed, NCAA transfer portal data reveal a sharp uptick (+17.6%) in Division I athlete transfers from 17,781 in 2021 to 20,911 in 2022 (Johnson, 2023).



Table 1. 2020-21 Percentage of Total Transfers among Division I Student-Athletes. NCAA Research (2022). Transfer composition of Division I teams. NCAA.org, p. 11.

Men		Women	
Basketball	34.5%	Basketball	23.3%
Baseball	26.9%	Beach Volleyball	19.7%
Soccer	22.9%	Tennis	17.7%
Tennis	19.2%	Volleyball	15.0%
Football (FCS)	17.2%	Softball	13.3%
Football (FBS)	16.9%	Track & Field	11.2%
Track & Field	13.8%	Golf	10.5%
Golf	13.6%	Soccer	10.3%
Ice Hockey	13.0%	Cross Country	8.8%
Cross Country	9.6%	Bowling	8.3%

Inquiry 2: Explore how push-pull theory (Lee, 1966) could be utilized to understand college athlete migration by examining the movement and monetization of Caleb Williams and Angel Reese

To understand how athletes are beginning to operate in these emerging markets, the researchers applied push-pull theory (Lee, 1966) to the movement (transfer) of the top male and female athlete in the transfer portal—Caleb Williams (2021 #1 transfer prospect rating) and Angel Reese (2022 #1 transfer prospect rating). In the case examples that follow, the authors show how aspects of push-pull theory are operative inside the transfer and NIL systems of college sports denoted in parentheses and emphasized in italics (e.g., positive pull factor).

From 2017-2020, Caleb Williams, a top quarterback recruit from Washington, D.C., received 17 offers from schools across the country (247Sports.com). In 2020, Williams signed with the University of Oklahoma. In February 2022, with a transfer prospect rating of #1 in the country, Williams left Oklahoma (*area of origin*) and followed head coach Lincoln Riley (*positive pull factor*) to the University of Southern California (*area of destination*). Four days later, Williams signed an NIL deal with Beats by Dre (*positive pull factor*). As the #2 ranked NIL athlete with 217,000 followers and an NIL valuation of \$3.6 million annually, Williams secured two more



deals with Futuremood and Athletic Brewing Company (*positive pull factors*). By December, Williams was awarded the Heisman Trophy (*personal and professional advancement*). Two days following his receipt of this prestigious award, Williams signed an NIL deal with Celsius Energy Drink (*positive pull factor*). And, in early 2023, Williams added to his portfolio, securing deals with AT&T and Alo Yoga (*positive pull factors*) (On3.com, “NIL 100 Rankings”).

A native of Baltimore, Maryland, Angel Reese was recruited by numerous NCAA Power 5 women’s basketball programs. She ultimately decided to stay in state and play for the University of Maryland (247Sports.com). In her second year at Maryland, Reese earned All-American honors and led the Terrapins to a Sweet 16 appearance in the 2022 NCAA Tournament. Shortly after the tournament, Reese decided to transfer from Maryland (*area of origin*) and was listed as the #1 prospect in the transfer portal. She eventually chose to play for legendary coach Kim Mulkey (*positive pull factor*) at Louisiana State University (LSU) for the 2022-2023 season. Upon arrival to LSU (*area of destination*), Reese signed an NIL deal (*positive pull factor*) with Coach (designer brand for women’s handbags) to complement her other deals (*positive pull factors*) with McDonald’s and Amazon Merch on Demand. Her NIL portfolio continued to expand at a rapid pace up to, and after, leading LSU to the 2023 NCAA Women’s Basketball National Championship and receiving multiple national awards (*personal and professional advancement*). Her NIL deals (*positive pull factors*) expanded to include major companies such as Bose, Sonic, Intuit Turbo Tax, PlayStation, Amazon, Airbnb, and Reebok. As of October 2023, Reese had an NIL valuation of \$1.7 million, which was rated number one among all women’s basketball players and number seven among all college athletes (On3.com, “NIL 100 Rankings”).

Discussion

This study brought to light the necessary role that pro-athlete litigation and legislation played in fracturing the NCAA’s monopsony, thereby opening the first stages of a free market for college athletes. Results revealed that the rate of transfer increased due to NCAA policy change and continued to increase following *Alston* (2021) (e.g., allowing immediate transfer and participation at the new institution). And, given the U.S. DOJ’s move to join 10 states and the District of Columbia in challenging the NCAA’s transfer eligibility rule, further increases in the rate of transfer are anticipated (*State of Ohio et al., v. NCAA*, 2024). Indeed, the NCAA’s recent move approving emergency legislation allowing unlimited transfer and immediate eligibility reinforces the monopsony fracture as the prime mover of NCAA policy change and suggests that total freedom of movement for the athletes will soon be realized (Dinich, 2024).



With state legislation having paved the way for athletes to secure NIL deals, the freedom to move (transfer) has been coupled with an additional opportunity—the freedom to capitalize. As pro-athlete litigation continues to push for genuine economic freedom it is likely that, in the not distant future, the NCAA’s “price-fixing monopsony” will come to an end, “players at academic institutions [will be deemed] statutory employees who have the right to act collectively to improve their terms and conditions of employment,” and college athletes will be paid for their labor (*Johnson et al. v. NCAA, 2021; NCAA v. Alston, 2021*, p. 3; National Labor Relations Board, 2021, para. 3). All signs point toward economic freedom. *Johnson et al. (2021)* argues former athletes should be classified as employees subject to the Fair Labor Standards Act and be paid for their time and effort in relation to their athletic activities; “a NLRB regional official ruled that Dartmouth basketball players are employees of the school” and “the players voted 13-2 to form a union”; and the NCAA voted to agree to settlement terms in *House et al. (2021)* (Golen & Russo, 2024, para. 1; Golen, 2024, para. 1; Thamel & Murphy, 2024). As part of the \$2.7 billion settlement, “the conferences agreed to create a forward-looking system that will allow schools to pay athletes roughly \$20 million per year ... representing a formal severing of a decades-long tether to unpaid amateurism—an unprecedented paradigm shift in college sports” (Thamel & Murphy, 2024, para. 3-4).

At this juncture, the NCAA should implement a fair and just college sports system (see Otto, 2016, pp. 152-155, 162-163 for ‘athlete-centered’ reform models). The *House et al. (2021)* settlement will not absolve the NCAA of its employment obligations into the future. Indeed, the \$20 million allotment is another example of a horizontal restraint. As such, the establishment of a salary schedule in line with the market value of the players’ services must be established with, and be agreed upon by, a college athletes’ players union. To be sure, the NCAA could have averted prior litigation by implementing a modest tiered-payment structure based on athletic merit decades ago. Now, with the inclusion of the \$20 million allotment to pay athletes, schools will be looking at a very different pay scale than they otherwise would have if they were in control of the payment schedule from the beginning. With NIL having come before the employee-employer relationship, the highly competitive market for athletes’ services has been exposed. Thus, to secure the services of the most talented athletes, member schools will likely find themselves in a position of having to pay salaries similar to that of coaches. In fact, NCAA member schools are already working toward “rein[ing] in the marketplace for third-party NIL deals” and two private equity investment firms created “Collegiate Athletic Solutions ... which would lend money ... to athletic departments in exchange for a share of future revenue” (Associated Press, 2024, para. 2, 4; Murphy & Thamel, 2024, para. 24).



Conclusion and Recommendations for Future Research

In conclusion, fracturing the NCAA's monopsony has resulted in athlete freedom to move and capitalize, which has fundamentally changed the relationship between the athlete and NCAA member schools, resulting in a paradigm shift—the athlete now has autonomy and leverage to decide which school to play for (transfer) and for how much (NIL deals and direct pay from the school). As a result of this seismic shift, exploring college athlete labor migration through the lens of push-pull theory holds promise toward understanding athletes' migratory motivations. The cases of Williams and Reese suggest that playing for their respective coaches and monetizing their image at the area of destination were positive factors that 'pulled' them from their previous institutions (*area of origin*). Did Williams perceive Lincoln Riley the ideal coach to play for given Riley's track record of developing elite level talent at the quarterback position? Among Riley's former quarterbacks are several starting NFL quarterbacks (e.g., Baker Mayfield, Jalen Hurts, and Kyler Murray). With respect to monetizing his image, did Williams perceive better economic conditions at Southern California compared to Oklahoma? As it turned out, he secured numerous lucrative NIL deals upon arrival in Los Angeles. He later increased his portfolio, resulting in an NIL valuation of \$3.6 million. Similar questions can be raised for Reese. Did she perceive Kim Mulkey as the ideal coach to play for given Mulkey's history of success? Did Reese perceive better economic opportunities at LSU compared to Maryland? Like Williams, Reese expanded and increased the value of her NIL portfolio soon after moving to LSU. It is important to note that Williams and Reese are examples of positively selected migrants pulled to a new area of destination. As Lee (1966) emphasized, positive selection tends to result in personal and professional advancement for the migrant. In both Williams' and Reese's case, the theoretical outcome of migrant positive selection fits the actual outcome. Williams experienced immediate personal and professional success while also enhancing his draft stock (he was the #1 pick in the 2024 NFL Draft). Likewise, Reese experienced immediate personal and professional success at LSU (2023 NCAA Women's Basketball National Champion and the #7 pick in the 2024 WNBA Draft). Indeed, it will be interesting to observe the migration of other college athletes in the years ahead. Although all are certainly not guaranteed personal and professional advancement like Williams and Reese, the monopsony fracture has provided all athletes the freedom to pursue it. Therefore, it will become increasingly important to understand what motivates athletes to migrate. As we have proposed here, push-pull theory (Lee, 1966) is a good starting point, and exploring the applicability of Moon (1995) and Bansal et al. (2005) to college athlete labor migration may further enhance our understanding.

The authors are in the process of deepening their understanding of college athletes' motives for transferring by conducting semi-structured interviews toward



uncovering the factors and process that led athletes to migrate from one school to another. Data from this inquiry will reveal the factors that push and/or pull individual athletes (Lee, 1966). Also, data will provide a rich contextual understanding of how mooring variables (Moon, 1995) and athletes' perceptions of these variables influence switching behavior across athletic programs (Bansal et al., 2005).

Other studies should examine why college athletes who attempt to transfer are unsuccessful. Doing so would provide insight into which athletes, by sport, are at a higher risk of not being selected from the transfer portal. In this study, the cases of Caleb Williams and Angel Reese suggest coaches and NIL opportunities can act as pull factors at the area of destination. However, in some cases athletes are pushed from the area of origin by a variety of negative factors. For example, coaches may pressure players to migrate as a mechanism to free up scholarships for replacement players (Martin, 2019). Findings from an inquiry focused on motives for migration would inform both retention and recruitment efforts, as well as provide insight into how college athletes navigate the transfer process.

Finally, future researchers should explore the scope of college athletes benefiting from NIL deals and the value of these deals. Determining this would inform the extent to which scarce opportunities are available to athletes. It would also shed light on an interesting future dilemma: If athletes are making money from NIL deals, who are they beholden to—the NIL provider or the school? This question may be further muddied as the NCAA voted to agree to settlement terms in *House et al.*, (2021), an antitrust challenge in which former college athletes argue that NCAA rules illegally blocked them from money they could have otherwise earned from selling rights to their NIL, which includes allowing “schools to pay \$20 million per year in permissive revenue sharing to athletes” (Thamel & Murphy, 2024, para. 4). Will the \$20 million pool be enough to pay athletes a salary that exceeds their NIL deals?

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