



100 FIXES FOR COLLEGE SPORTS

One of these days, Dick Durbin, Tammy Duckworth and 98 other U.S. senators could cast votes on a bill that would slow down the transfer portal, cap athlete pay, prevent schools from slashing sports and keep the NCAA out of the courtroom. ¶ But the passage of the Protect College Sports Act won't do anything to solve the majority of the issues facing college athletics raised by a wide-ranging panel of 350-plus convened by **News-Gazette Editor Jeff D'Alessio**. ¶ It doesn't fix officiating, curtail gambling, speed up replay, limit buyouts, shrink coast-to-coast superconferences, reduce TV's influence, disband the NCAA, treat Notre Dame like everyone else, help underdogs, improve diversity or bring about systemic changes to the way men's basketball is played, postseason participants are picked or scandals are prevented. ¶ For solutions to those challenges and many others, turn the page.

FIXING COLLEGE SPORTS

BIG PROBLEMS CALL FOR BIG SOLUTIONS

Between all the transfer portaling and revenue sharing, championship buying and diploma de-emphasizing, **JOSH NILSON** fears that ‘collegiate sport as a whole is losing its soul,’ looking less and less like the profession the Illini women’s gymnastics coach got into two decades ago as a Utah State undergrad and more and more like professional sports. ¶ ‘There is little to no loyalty to a university, or to actually excelling in the classroom,’ he says, longing for the days of not so long ago, when athletic departments operated from the same rulebook, non-revenue sports elsewhere weren’t on the chopping block and a team’s GPA mattered as much as its NIL budget. ¶ Seems everyone has a beef with some aspect of college athletics these days, from eight-figure football coaches’ contracts and 18-team superconferences to gambling scandals and boosters gone wild. ¶ For solutions to problems big and small, **Editor JEFF D’ALESSIO** convened a panel of 350-plus influencers inside and outside college sports — coaches, commissioners, athletes, athletic directors, presidents, physicians, fans, faculty members and many more — in this special report.



DAN CAPRON

1. No more allowing networks to control college football

“I would force TV to conform to the game, not the game to TV,” says Chicago attorney and 1978 University of Illinois alum **Dan Capron**, who officiated 200-plus Big Ten football games before hanging up his whistle in 2019. ¶ “With four and five TV timeouts per quarter, college football games are taking too long. These commercial breaks, which add 45 minutes or more to the length of a game, are annoying for the TV-watching public, and momentum-breaking for the coaches and players. ¶ “Try standing around in Memorial Stadium in an icy cold November rain waiting for a guy in a red hat to give us the signal that it’s ‘OK to play.’ It should *always* be ‘OK to play,’ and TV should shoehorn their commercials into natural breaks in the action — like radio used to do. ¶ “Spoiler alert: This will never happen. See ‘money, love of.’”



“A conference should not sprawl across the United States like kudzu overtaking an untended garden,” says University of Toledo President **James Holloway**. ¶ When he was studying nuclear engineering at the University of Illinois in the early 1980s, the name “Big Ten” stood for the actual number of conference members. ¶ Four decades later, it’s a coast-to-coast superconference of 18 in which Maryland, a 2014 addition, travels 2,760 miles to Seattle to face Washington, a Big Ten member of two years. ¶ Many panelists long for a return to the days before Cal and Stanford competed in the ACC and Central Florida-BYU was a Big 12 game; when leagues were made up of “like universities with geographic proximity,” as former NCAA President **Judy Sweet** puts it. ¶ “Maybe not *sooo* far back as the old Big 8, Pac-8 and Southwest Conference,” says **Rick Allen**, Illinois’ assistant AD for compliance from 1980-97, “but back to the days before you had conference teams spread all the way across the country.”



2. Hold both of basketball’s Final Fours in the same city, on the same weekend



Armando L. Sanchez/Chicago Tribune/TNS

Were **Val Ackerman**’s idea in place in April, two Big Ten basketball powers — Michigan’s men, above, and UCLA’s women, below — would have been crowned national champions in the same city a day apart.



Ronaldo Bolanos/Los Angeles Times/TNS

Eight teams. Six games. Four days. One basketball bonanza.

That’s the recommendation of Naismith Basketball Hall of Famer **Val Ackerman**, the first president of the WNBA, soon-to-be-retired commissioner of the Big East and forever fan of tennis’ Grand Slam format.



“The current setup, which pits the events head-to-head in different cities on the same weekend, is inefficient and costly for NCAA organizers and has the effect of forcing key NCAA stakeholders to decide which event they want to support,” Ackerman says. “Most choose the men’s Final Four; in fact, I’m one of just a handful of Division I commissioners who has regularly attended both, which is always very difficult logistically.

“But the biggest advantage of a combined Final Four would be the massive commercial appeal and value to sponsors and networks and the visibility the event would offer to women’s basketball, who would benefit mightily from the substantial men’s Final Four media turnout and exposure to a new demographic of fans.

“I’m convinced that one plus one would equal three — or more — with this concept and hope the NCAA will see fit to take the plunge when sites are awarded in the next bid cycle.”

Montana women’s basketball coach **Nate Harris** would take it even further, adding the Division II and III championships to the docket.



“Pick a city that has a football stadium and basketball arena and make it a weekend of six national championships,” he says. “I think it would make for a better experience for fans and everyone involved.”

3. Bring a map to the meeting where conferences are re-realigned

Adds Holloway: “Student-athletes should not have their studies disrupted by excessive travel with its attendant negative impacts on health, intellectual acuity or athletic preparation. Nor should coaches and their staffs. And unlike some others who support this notion, I would not exempt football.”

Brad Dancer would. The Illini men’s tennis coach’s extreme make-over calls for conferences to be realigned geographically — eight to 10 per league — in every sport but the biggest money-maker.



“Football is a unique animal in that the major schools only travel to five away games per year. They charter flights where their efficiency is almost perfect,” Dancer says.

“A large portion of the other sports — basketball included — play significantly more games. Geographic rivals create tremendous passion between the fan bases. Travel time and costs would decrease and shrinking a conference down to around eight to 10 schools gives more institutions more opportunity to win conference championships.

“The coaches associations in each sport would define the conferences and have the opportunity to make adjustments throughout seasons to create the most equitable and efficient conferences.”

THE FINE PRINT

Lengthy trips, now an annual occurrence in supersized conferences, have taken a big bite out of athletic departments’ budgets. How big? We obtained itemized breakdowns of four basketball teams’ travel in 2025-26 via open-records request:

ILLINOIS WOMEN

→ **Destination:** The Pacific Northwest for games against Washington on Feb. 1 and Oregon three days later.
→ **Transportation:** \$240,108.45
→ **Meals:** \$46,336.03
→ **Lodging:** \$25,274.01
→ **Total tab:** \$311,718.49



UCLA MEN

→ **Destination:** The East Coast for a Jan. 14 game at Penn State, followed by a stop at Ohio State three days later.
→ **Transportation:** \$361,982
→ **Meals:** \$38,990.60
→ **Lodging:** \$23,111.10
→ **Total tab:** \$424,083.70



RUTGERS WOMEN

→ **Destination:** Southern California for games against USC on Feb. 1 and UCLA three days later.
→ **Transportation:** \$244,000
→ **Lodging:** \$83,000
→ **Meals:** \$37,000
→ **Total tab:** \$364,000



OREGON MEN

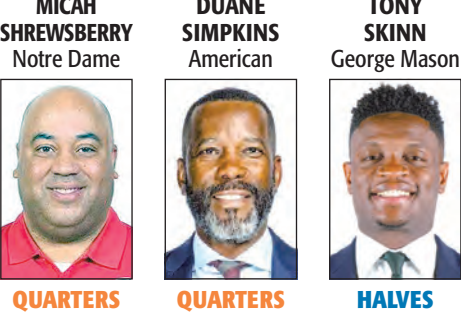
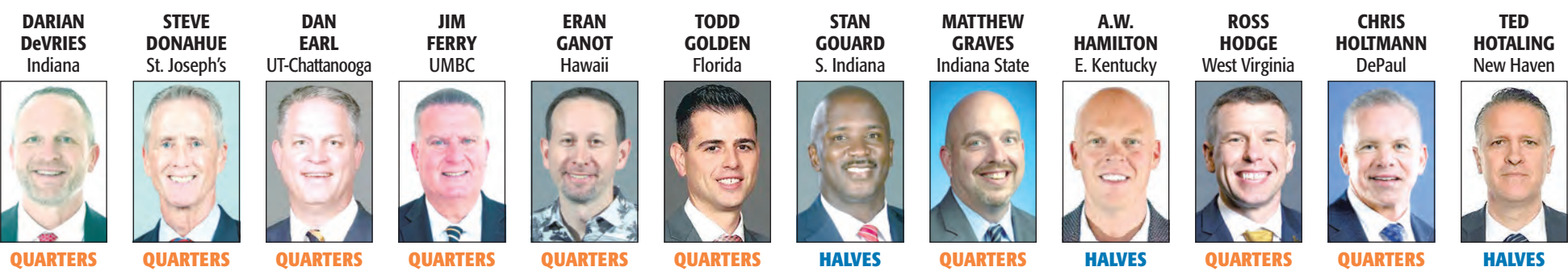
→ **Destination:** The East Coast for games against Maryland on Jan. 2 and Rutgers three days later.
→ **Transportation:** \$295,389.07
→ **Meals:** \$31,246.17
→ **Lodging:** \$26,340.04
→ **Misc. supplies:** \$408.42
→ **Total tab:** \$353,383.70



FIXING COLLEGE SPORTS

SURVEY SAYS

We asked 101 Division I men's basketball coaches: Would you prefer the college game switch to four quarters or stick with two halves? Sixty-three voted for quarters ('No brainer,' says Utah's **ALEX JENSEN**; '1,000 percent quarters,' adds Long Beach State's **CHRIS ACKER**). Sixteen voted for halves, IU Indy's **BEN HOWLETT** doing so passionately ('The game is perfect how it is. It'd be stupid to consider changing it'). Twenty-two others were indifferent about the issue: Purdue's **MATT PAINTER**, Tennessee's **RICK BARNES**, Auburn's **STEVEN PEARL**, Eastern Illinois' **MARTY SIMMONS** and the head coaches at Appalachian State, Army, Bellarmine, Bucknell, Charlotte, Coastal Carolina, Denver, East Texas A&M, Furman, Illinois-Chicago, Liberty, New Mexico State, Northern Kentucky, San Diego State, South Alabama, Temple, Tulsa and Wichita State.



4. Switch to four quarters in men's basketball



Robin Scholz/The News-Gazette

Illinois' **Brad Underwood**, left, and Kansas' **Bill Self** both favor switching men's basketball from halves to quarters. Says Underwood: 'The flow of the game and the breaks are more natural with quarters.'

Four of basketball's biggest winners — current college coaches **Brad Underwood** and **Bill Self** and former ones **Brad Stevens** and **Dusty May** — think it's high time that the men's game takes a page from the women's rulebook.

"I am 100 percent in favor of going to quarters," says Illinois' Underwood, who sits on the National Association of Basketball Coaches' board of directors. "The men's college game is the only entity in the sport of basketball that plays halves instead of quarters, which has never made sense."

"Now that I'm in a role where I'm scouting games at all levels across the globe, I think men's college basketball is making a mistake by not going to quarters," says Stevens, the Boston Celtics' president, who led Butler to back-to-back national championship games in 2010-11. "It's such a smoother game to watch, and teams that manage the end of those quarters can get a real strategic advantage."

Plus, May's hunch is that switching to quarters would make the sport "more enjoyable for fans."

Other pluses coaches point to:

1. Everybody's doing it. "It would give our game more consistency with four quarters being played in women's college basketball, the NBA, G-League, WNBA, FIBA and the Olympics," says USC's **Eric Musselman**.

That's reason enough for many of our panelists, including Indiana's **Darian DeVries**, North Carolina's **Michael Malone**, Kentucky's **Mark Pope** and Cal's **Mark Madsen**, who's in favor of quarters "because it mirrors the NBA game."

2. Resetting teams' foul totals at the end of each quarter will soften the blow of crummy calls. "When the referees call some poor fouls on your team, it doesn't bury you for the entire half when you have quarters," says St. Joseph's coach **Steve Donahue**.

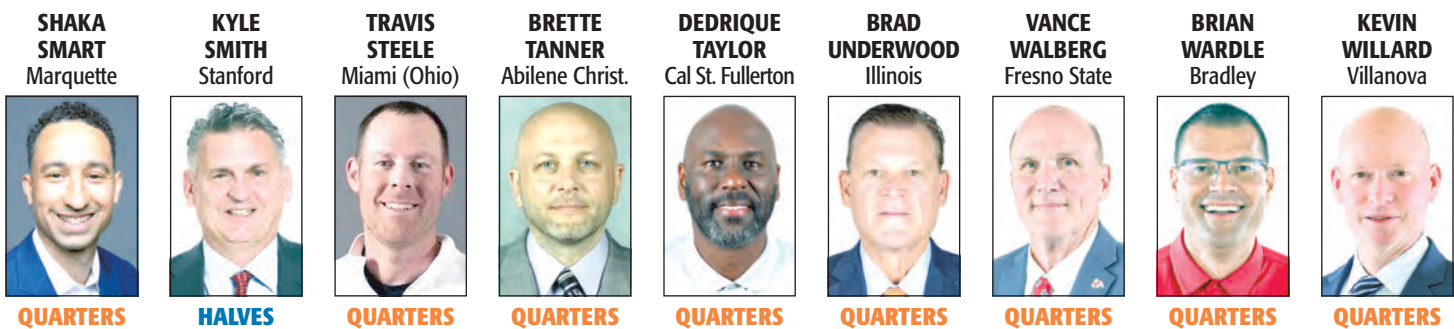
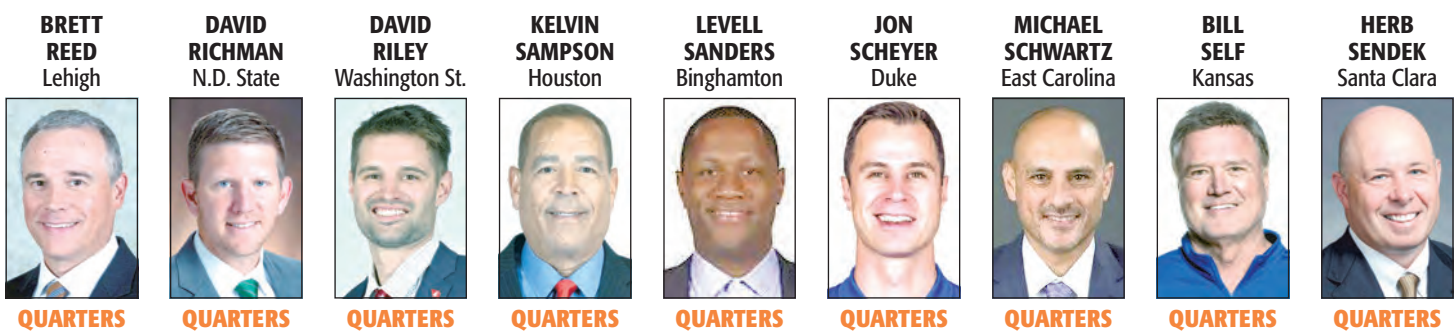
3. Go with the flow. "A team getting into the 1-and-1 with nine minutes to go in the half becomes a foul-fest," says Houston's **Kelvin Sampson**.

A change to quarters would mean one media timeout per 10-minute quarter versus than the current four per 20-minute half, which "can be a real trudge to the finish line," Stevens says. "I understand the commercialization aspect of the extra breaks, but I'm sure that coaches, ADs and TV partners can all get in a room and figure it out in the spirit of growing the game."

4. There's more X-and-O'ing. Quarters "provides two additional portions of the game that have more strategy involved," Butler's **Ronald Nored** notes, "which I think is a bonus for fans, players and coaches."

"More opportunities to strategize at the end of quarters" also appeals to Miami of Ohio's **Travis Steele**.

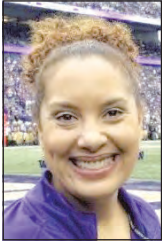
5. It could open the door to other changes championed by coaches. Such as: "potential elimination of the 1-and-1, which most levels don't have any more" (Old Dominion's **Mike Jones**) and a "quicker shot clock" (Florida State's **Luke Loucks**), among others.



FIXING COLLEGE SPORTS

6. Don't stop the minority-hiring push at football coaches

"Here's a radical thought," says **Alexes Harris**, the faculty athletics representative at the University of Washington. "Given that football and men's and women's basketball programs generate the majority of revenue for athletic departments, effectively subsidizing many other teams, the leadership and administrative personnel within university athletic departments — including athletic directors and staff responsible for advancement, mental health and academic support — should more fully reflect the voices of former athletes from these revenue-generating programs. "My bet is that the perspectives, experiences and expertise of these former student-athletes would provide an important lens for evaluating the treatment of student-athletes, the prioritization of departmental budgets, the hiring of coaches, the retention of students and the cultivation of a more supportive, inclusive and equitable athletic culture."



7. Make Financial Literacy 101 part of the core curriculum for every athlete

The underlying problem, as former Baylor pole vaulter and Urbana-based Litania Sports Group president/CEO **David Hodge** sees it: "Kids who are now being paid are ill-equipped to manage the money being thrown at them." The solution, from sports attorney, AthleticDirectorU co-founder and Gies College of Business grad **Jason Belzer**: "A structured financial literacy and life-skills infrastructure tied directly to NIL. Every school should be required to provide certified, independent financial and legal education before an athlete signs their first NIL deal. Not a one-hour orientation, but a real curriculum with measurable outcomes. "The NCAA and its member institutions were slow to act on amateurism reform for decades, and now they are equally slow to protect the athletes who finally have something worth protecting. If we're going to treat college athletes like market participants, we owe them the tools to participate intelligently."



8. Add a course on concussions for athletes (and coaches) in certain sports

They may not all like the sound of the subject matter but they need to hear it anyway, says former Harvard football lineman and WWE wrestler **Chris Nowinski**, now the CEO and co-founder of Boston University's CTE Center. "College football must acknowledge the scientific facts about chronic traumatic encephalopathy (CTE) and require education for athletes, so they have informed consent to play," he says. "They must also require CTE education for coaches, so they understand what will happen to their players if they continue to design practices that involve repeated head impacts. "The facts are that playing college football will cause some players to develop CTE, a brain disease that causes dementia. The risk of developing CTE is directly related to the number and strength of the head impacts football players receive. Yet the NCAA, football conferences and universities are unified in their denial of these facts, ensuring another generation of football players will suffer. "This must change."



9. Full rides for everyone

"Ensure that every athlete who is part of an athletic program — whether student-athlete, or student manager or student support personnel — is able to graduate without a hint of college debt loans," proposes former Arcola and Illini softball standout **Taylor Edwards**, who served on the Big Ten's Student-Athlete Advisory Committee. "In a perfect world, I'd like to see every student with 'required' commitments to any athletic team receive full athletic aid scholarships in return for their efforts to the athletic program."



Grambling State University

LEFT: Doug Williams, the first Black quarterback to start and win a Super Bowl, stands beside a statue of his college coach, Grambling legend **Eddie Robinson**. **RIGHT: Renowned social activist and professor Harry Edwards** helped organize the Black Power protests at the 1968 Mexico City Olympics.



Dai Sugano/Bay Area News Group

5. Give more Black football coaches a chance

When the 2025 season kicked off, four Big Ten programs — Michigan, Maryland, Penn State and UCLA — were headed up by Black coaches.

A year later, that number is one — the **Mike Locksley**-led Terps.

That matches the Big 12's count (Colorado's Deion Sanders) and is one more than the SEC, whose members haven't hired a Black head football coach in a dozen years.

What in the name of Eddie Robinson is going on?

Four takes:
→ **NCAA strategic consultant Peter Roby, who led the Center for the Study of Sport in Society at Boston's Northeastern University**: "It's sad to still be having this discussion in 2026 when the majority of football athletes at the Power 4 level are Black but alas we are. The politics in our country don't help when high-profile hires of a person of color are categorized by many as affirmative action hires."
→ **Super Bowl-winning quarterback Doug Williams, who played for Robinson at Grambling, then succeeded him as coach**: "It's a very easy answer from my standpoint. Number 1: The money involved. Number 2: The climate in this country, as we speak ... they have taken DEI serious, and now have the green light. I am going to stop right there."
→ **Cal professor emeritus and civil rights icon Harry Edwards, author of "The Revolt of the Black Athlete"**: "As under-represented as Black head coaches in both the college and professional football ranks have been over past years, this dearth of representation shows every probability of getting worse. "They already have in the NFL, where 10 head coaching vacancies were filled at the end of the 2025-26 season — and *not a single one of those 10 hires* was Black in a league where 70 percent of the players are Black."



Kevin Richardson/Baltimore Sun/TNS

MINORITY REPORT

Of the 136 schools that field Football Bowl Subdivision teams, just 13 are led by Black head coaches:

Coach	School
Fran Brown	Syracuse
Tony Elliott	Virginia
James Franklin	Virginia Tech
Marcus Freeman	Notre Dame
Eddie George	Bowling Green
Charles Huff	Memphis
Mike Locksley	Maryland
Jerry Mack	Kennesaw State
Derek Mason	Middle Tenn.
Dell McGee	Georgia State
Deion Sanders	Colorado
JaMarcus Shephard	Oregon State
Willie Simmons	Florida Int'l

→ **16-year Cincinnati Bengals coach Marvin Lewis, whose road to the NFL included linebacker coaching stops at five colleges**: "With the state of NIL and all these collectives, I think the ADs and presidents are overrun by the financial supporters



of the programs. And so that makes it even harder and harder for any kind of minority coach to climb the ladder to be head coaches. Because they're not in the same rooms as those people."

That's what led Locksley to launch the National Coalition of Minority Football Coaches in 2020, a year into his second job leading a program of his own.

Its mission: to groom the next generation of minority coaches across all levels, "to counteract the narrative that there is a lack of qualified minority coaches to fill available positions and to bring parity to the hiring process in college football."

The program pairs 12 mentors (influential Division I athletic directors of all races) with a dozen mentees (up-and-coming minority assistants). Among the early success stories: **Marcus Freeman**, Notre Dame's history-making head coach, who says:



"I want to be a demonstration of what someone can do, and the level they can do it at, if they are given an opportunity. Because that's what's needed: opportunity."

Freeman has cashed in on his, going 43-12 in four seasons and

becoming the first Black head coach at the FBS level to lead a team to a national title game.

It's been a rockier road for Locksley, who's 37-49 in seven seasons in College Park, Md. He was Maryland's first Black head coaching hire in football — a milestone still not reached at eight other Big Ten universities (Indiana, Iowa, Minnesota, Nebraska, Ohio State, Rutgers, USC and Wisconsin).

Will Locksley's coalition help turn the tide for more minorities hoping for the shot he got?

Roby, for one, isn't so sure. "The only way it will change is if Black athletes decide they want more Black head coaches and boycott," he says. "Given the amount of money at stake, that's not likely."

COACH SPEAK

Across college football's top division, 33 head coaching positions changed hands last offseason. We asked one of the two Black hires from that group: Is the lack of diversity in your profession receiving the attention it deserves? Here's what **CHARLES HUFF**, who left Southern Miss for Memphis, had to say.

"I think it's a conversation that deserves attention because representation matters. Young people need to be able to see leaders who look like them in positions they aspire to reach.

"At the same time, I've always believed the focus has to be on creating opportunities and making sure qualified candidates have a fair chance to compete for those opportunities.

"There are a lot of talented coaches across this country, including many Black coaches, who have proven they can lead programs, develop young men, build staffs and win games. The challenge isn't a lack of talent. The challenge is making sure the pathways to those opportunities remain open and accessible.

"For me, the solution starts with intentional development and mentorship. We have to continue preparing the next generation of coaches, giving them meaningful responsibilities, helping them build relationships and exposing them to leadership opportunities.

"Decision-makers also have to be willing to look beyond the traditional circles and evaluate candidates based on their body of work and their ability to lead.

"I've been fortunate to have mentors who invested in me throughout my career, and I take that responsibility seriously with the coaches on my staff. The more we can develop talent and create opportunities for people to showcase their abilities, the better our profession will be.

"Ultimately, I believe leadership positions should go to the most qualified candidates. Our responsibility as an industry is to make sure the pool of candidates being considered is as broad, diverse and talented as possible."



Memphis athletics

FIXING COLLEGE SPORTS

10. Let high school football have Friday night back



Ed Zurga/Getty Images/TNS

Missouri's Border War football showdown with Kansas being moved to a Friday night next month drew the ire of high school football coaches in the Show-Me State.

"I wonder how colleges and universities would feel if the NFL decided to play on Saturdays," says **Gerald Cooke**, executive director of the Ohio High School Football Coaches Association. "This move showed a tremendous amount of disrespect by college and university administrators for high school football in America."

He's far from the only one who feels that way. The heads of similar organizations in **Delaware, Georgia, Illinois, Louisiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Missouri, New Jersey and South Carolina** all told The News-Gazette — and in some cases, college coaches in their states — that Friday nights should belong to preps. "The University of Missouri and the Universi-



ty of Kansas have scheduled their 'Border War' game for Friday night, September 11th this year. We have already expressed our great displeasure with (Mizzou) Coach (Eli) Drinkwitz about this," says **Brian Van Hauen**, president of the Missouri Football Coaches Association.

"We have had an issue twice in the past few years where our state finals have had to be adjusted to make room for Michigan State to play at Ford Field," says **Andrew Pratley**, executive director of the Michigan High School Football Coaches Association. "Sometimes,



non-coaches forget that high school football is the feeder for college and NFL teams."

In Big Ten country, Fox Sports has set eight fall Friday dates for nighttime conference clashes, including two in November involving Illinois (home against Nebraska on Nov. 6, at UCLA a week later).



Rochester's **Derek Leonard**, 2025 president of the Illinois High School Football Coaches Association, doesn't blame Bret Bielema for that.

"It is conferences and TV, all of their greed," he says. "It hasn't affected us much so far, but each year I think they will keep adding. If, say, Illinois is playing, it could affect us for sure and the crowd we get."

MY TURN

'College athletics should be about more than short-term financial gain'

Before becoming the Urbana school district's special-education administrator, National Softball Association Hall of Famer **JACQUELYN DOUGLAS** starred on the diamond at Illinois State.



If I could change one thing about college athletics, it would be the current structure of compensation, particularly the widening gap between mid-major programs and the power conferences.

Right now, the landscape is heavily driven by NIL opportunities, and while I believe student-athletes absolutely deserve to benefit from their name, image and likeness, the system has shifted the focus away from what used to matter most. Instead of recruiting being centered on best fit, coaching relationships, academic programs and long-term development, it often feels like the conversation starts with, "Who can offer the biggest deal?"

What I would love to see is a more balanced compensation model, one that gives mid-major programs a fair opportunity to compete. There are incredible institutions, coaches and developmental environments at that level that are now being overshadowed simply because they cannot match the financial packages of larger schools. That imbalance is changing the decision-making process for student-athletes in a way that doesn't always serve them long-term.

College athletics should be about more than short-term financial gain. It should be about finding the right environment where a student-athlete can grow academically, athletically and personally, and be set up for success well beyond their playing career. When compensation becomes the dominant factor, we risk losing that foundation.

If I had the opportunity to change something, it would be to create a system where compensation is more equitable across levels, allowing schools to recruit based on fit, development and opportunity, not just financial leverage. That shift would help restore balance and refocus college athletics on what truly matters — developing student-athletes for life after the game.

11. Address the agent issue

Short of getting rid of them altogether — which would be **Brock Spack's** preference — the Illinois State football coach would settle for "some type of registration process to eliminate the non-qualified agents."



A byproduct of the transfer portal and NIL has mutated into "a major problem," says former Illini cornerback and Trump administration Cabinet member **Scott Turner**, the U.S. Secretary of Housing and Urban Development. "Family members and those familiar to the player are carrying out predatory actions and taking advantage of the student-athletes."

"Too many unqualified, unaccountable individuals are giving athletes bad advice and costing athletes real money," adds **Blake Lawrence**, co-founder of Opendorse, the tech platform used by more than 200,000 athletes, 2,000 advertisers and 200 athletic departments to manage NIL deals and rev-share payments. "Athletes deserve better. So does the market."

Louisiana has done its part, becoming the first state to mandate by law that any agent representing any athlete in any sport in the Pelican State must register with the Athlete Agent Registration Portal that went live on July 1.

As part of the certification process, TCU men's basketball coach **Jamie Dixon** believes a standard contract — for agents and athletes alike — would be a welcome step.

Rice deputy athletic director **Eric George**, a member of the NCAA's Division I Football Rules Subcommittee, proposes "more stringent rules and enforcement" for anyone wishing to represent college athletes, given that "in today's world of NIL and the transfer portal, anyone can become an agent."



Wisconsin volleyball coach **Kelly Sheffield** would add a provision "that also includes what percentage of an athlete's contract they can receive" — say, something in the neighborhood of 5 percent, the cap proposed in the Senate's Protect College Sports Act.



12-15. Get creative in generating revenue



Arkansas athletics

Arkansas softball player **Ella McDowell** points to the new Tyson Foods logo patch coming to Razorbacks' uniforms.

Coming this fall to the uniforms of college sports teams across the land: sponsor patches — paid for by Bussey Bank (Illinois), Culver's (Wisconsin), Tyson Foods (Arkansas), FedEx (Memphis) and the Mescalero Apache Tribe-owned Inn of the Mountain Gods casino (New Mexico State), to name five.

We asked Ohio State grad **Matt Brown**, publisher of the one-of-a-kind college-sports-focused newsletter Extra Points, what other non-traditional ways he's heard of athletic departments turning for revenue.



His list:
1. Bringing more events to department-owned athletic facilities. "That could include concerts at football and basketball arenas, but also high school athletic competitions, turning parts of stadiums into co-working spaces and bringing events like international soccer, the rodeo or monster truck racing to stadiums."

2. Getting substantially more into licensing IP for consumables. "Think university-licensed beer, liquor, coffee, salsa, peanuts, etc. Things that super fans have to buy on a regular basis."

3. Changing concessions. "Coastal Carolina has moved to a free model; others, like BYU and Lafayette, are creating certain areas or products that are all-you-can-eat/drink."

16. Separate the haves from the have-not-as-muches



Why should non-Power 4 schools be a punching bag for Power 4 schools?" asks **Sujay Lama**, who has coached on both sides of the spending spectrum, leading women's tennis programs at Illinois, North Texas and now Arkansas State.

"This might be an unpopular opinion," Lama says, "but I believe the Power 4 schools and the rest should have their own national championships and national rankings."

Former Illini wide receiver **Dino Pollock**, the one-time associate director of the NCAA's Office of the Committees on Infractions, would



take it even further, proposing that schools outside the ACC, Big Ten, Big 12 and SEC break away from the Power 4 "professional minor-league model" and join members of NCAA's Division II and III in an organization of their own.

Once the sort of proposal that would have drawn funny looks at an NCAA cabinet meeting, it no longer seems extreme in these topsy-turvy times for college athletics.



"I would divide colleges between those that pay their athletes, and those that don't, and compete in different conferences, and national championships, based upon the compensation model," says former Harvard basketball team captain **Arne Duncan**, who spent seven years as Barack Obama's U.S. secretary of education and eight as co-chair of the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics.

Just as men's cross-country isn't men's basketball, Duquesne is not Duke.

Or, as North Carolina athletic director **Bubba Cunningham** puts it: "Not all 500,000 student athletes that compete at the NCAA level have to be treated the same."



17. Recruit the Land of Lincoln more, Lithiania less



"If I could change one thing, it would be to stop allowing guys that have played professionally overseas to be eligible to play here in our country," says Centennial Hall of Famer **Scott Nagy**, who's won 364 men's basketball games coaching at South Dakota State, Wright State and now Southern Illinois. "So many high school students are being denied opportunities that should be going to them."



FIXING COLLEGE SPORTS

18. Save college tennis



Illinois State athletics

This photo of an empty tennis complex accompanied the April 28 announcement that Illinois State was discontinuing its men’s program.

Eastern Illinois. Illinois State. Saint Louis. North Dakota. Radford. Gardner-Webb.

That’s just the short list of Division I athletic departments that have discontinued men’s and/or women’s varsity tennis the past two years, freeing up funds to pay athletes in higher-profile sports under the revenue-sharing system spawned from House v. NCAA.

“I read an article the other day that said on average, every 10 days, an NCAA tennis program is canceled (across NCAA divisions). The reason is almost always cited as lack of funding,” says **Emily Wang**, who played

tennis at Illinois and spent the last 10 years coaching it at New Mexico State.

While the sport has been spared at her Conference USA school, the financial impact of cuts elsewhere will be felt in Las Cruces.

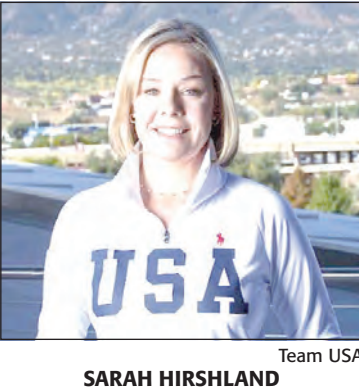
Texas-El Paso cutting women’s tennis means the nearest Division I school with a program is the University of New Mexico, 225 miles away, followed by Arizona (275 miles), Arizona State (380) and North-



ern Arizona (430).

“I used to work with the UTEP coaches to schedule other teams to come play us both during the same weekend. This has made it difficult for me to bring teams to play us as we are geographically so far away and need to get an additional team in town to play a neutral match against each other,” Wang says.

“In general, especially amongst other mid-major programs, tennis budgets are being decreased, which makes teams less inclined to travel (here) when they can drive a few hours to play a regional match in their area.”



Team USA

SARAH HIRSHLAND

19. Stop chopping Olympic sports — or be prepared to hear far fewer playings of ‘The Star-Spangled Banner’ during medal ceremonies

Iowa State pulled the plug on women’s gymnastics. Washington State kept its “track” but dropped its “field.” Stanford cut 11 varsity sports responsible for 25 Olympic gold medals; Minnesota said farewell to gymnastics, tennis and track; and Cal Poly dropped both men’s and women’s swimming.

Keep it up, U.S. Olympic and Paralympic Committee CEO **Sarah Hirshland** warned a room full of influencers at a “Saving College Sports” roundtable at the White House in March, and Team USA’s biennial gold rush will be history.

Nearly 70 percent of Team USA Olympians at the 2024 Paris Summer Games competed in college, Hirshland notes. At this year’s Milan Winter Games, athletes from 51 different U.S. universities wore red, white and blue.

“While the United States has topped the gold medal table in eight of the last 10 summer Games, the margin is narrowing,” Hirshland says. “Around the world, nations are investing aggressively in sport — building centralized training systems, expanding funding and prioritizing athlete development in new ways.

“And that growing global competition comes at a moment when U.S. colleges must increase their investments in football to be competitive. The economic pressures are unsustainable. Olympic sport programs are inevitably the first budgets to be impacted — and in some cases, women’s and men’s sports may be eliminated.

“When those investments are reduced, or disappear, the consequences have a significant ripple effect, ultimately hindering the future pipeline of Team USA and threatening the future health of

20. Instead of cutting athletic programs, cut athletic administrators

If an athletic department hired California wealth-management adviser **Adam Tirapelle**, that would be tip No. 1 from the 2001 NCAA wrestling champ and Illinois Athletics Hall of Famer.

“First, there would be a firm limit on the size of the athletic department in both head count and expense,” he says. “Big athletic departments lead to big, expensive drains on resources that lead to reduction of sports. Athletic departments themselves are the very definition of overhead or ‘non-revenue generating.’

“Secondly, athletic department success and compensation would be tied to the overall success of athletic programs with an emphasis on number of sports programs offered. Athletic departments with the minimum number of NCAA sports (14 programs) would only be eligible for minimum compensation levels.

“Those with 25 to 30 sports programs that found conference-level success and beyond would be compensated at a much higher level. Well-rounded sports programs are the foundation of college athletics, not administrative budgets.”



GO FIGURE

Here’s a breakdown of how compensation for athletic department staffers without “coach” in their titles has grown over the last decade among Big Ten public schools, according to the Knight-Newhouse College Athletic Database:

School	2015	2025
Ohio State	\$27.64 million	\$51.85 million
Michigan	\$30.52 million	\$47.64 million
Wisconsin	\$26.06 million	\$43.09 million
Penn State	\$19.62 million	\$41.15 million
Nebraska	\$20.47 million	\$35.93 million
Washington	\$18.75 million	\$35.05 million
Illinois	\$14.68 million	\$31.96 million
UCLA	\$17.33 million	\$31.82 million
Oregon	\$20.68 million	\$31.65 million
Rutgers	\$9.44 million	\$31.43 million
Michigan State	\$15.64 million	\$31.34 million
Minnesota	\$16.24 million	\$28.25 million
Purdue	\$13.64 million	\$27.20 million
Maryland	\$14.00 million	\$26.42 million
Iowa	\$17.27 million	\$25.84 million
Indiana	\$15.71 million	\$21.57 million

sport in our country.”

The Protect College Sports Act wouldn’t bring teams back but would make it harder to cut them going forward. The bill prohibits athletic departments that earn over \$80 million annually from discontinuing women’s or Olympic sports teams or trimming their rosters below 2024-25 levels.

21. Rather than slashing men’s or women’s teams, remake them as co-ed programs



Before you go rolling your eyes, hear **Don Hardin** out on this one.

“I could see a lot of financial motivation for universities to go to such a structure and have programs travel that way. It might not work for all sports right away but I think we’ll start seeing some of that,” says Hardin, who played on the men’s volleyball teams at Pitt and Ohio State and coached the women’s teams at Illinois and Louisville.

Tennis icon Billie Jean King has been “screaming at the top of her lungs for 30 years that that’s exactly what college tennis needs to do,” says one of her biggest fans, Illini men’s coach **Brad Dancer**. “She’s probably right on a lot of fronts.”

One reason more in the sport

haven’t fully embraced the idea: One co-ed team likely means one co-ed team coach and “maybe you’re taking away half of our jobs,” Dancer says.

22-25. Embrace a change of seasons

→ For wrestling, the NCAA’s national coordinator of officials favors making it a one-semester sport. “Competition would not start until after Christmas and our Division I championships could be later in the spring. That way, we would not have to compete with basketball for media coverage during our championship,” says **Mike McCormick**, a National Wrestling Hall of Fame official.

“I know wrestling is a very niche market, but I think we could attract more viewers if hoops were not on every channel, on every news outlet, on social media and on ESPN ‘SportsCenter’ constantly — while our pinnacle event is taking place.”

→ For softball, new Illini coach **Jenna Hall** proposes reducing the number of regular-season games.

“Fifty-six in less than three months is more than necessary. The way weather impacts our sport, budget restrictions and the



this also impacts the ability for coaches to rest kids when needed. Scaling back would be hugely beneficial for our sport.”

→ For baseball, Danville native and Eastern Illinois coach **Jason Anderson** suggests pushing back first pitch a few weeks “so we’re not attempting to rush players into a season starting in the middle of February.”



using 18 days of out-of-season workouts whenever they’d like between March and July.

This would piggyback on **Dabo**

overall expectations to get the games in forces most of our athletes to play hurt and sick a majority of our season. With the addition of roster limits,



→ For football, Clemson’s two-time national title-winning coach believes it’s time to reinvent spring practice as we know it, giving schools the option of

Swinney’s other scheduling suggestion — moving football’s transfer portal period from Jan. 2-16 to sometime in late February or early March, when the season’s long over.

As things stand now, he says, it’s “like meeting somebody in a bar and going across the street eight hours later and getting married in the Elvis wedding chapel. Crazy. A calendar change would create a cooling-off period for everyone.”

26. Make the refs pass a physical fitness test

The NBA does it. FIBA does it. And Division I college basketball would be better off if the NCAA followed suit, says **Rick Boyages**, the Big Ten’s former vice president for men’s basketball.

“Division I conferences are spending millions of dollars on officiating fees, and yet we continually observe referees that cannot run the floor and effectively cover the court,” says Boyages, who as executive director of the Collegiate Officiating Consortium directed men’s basketball officiating operations for 65 Division I schools in 22 states.

“The average age of NBA officials is 46 and FIBA/Olympics is 40. Many power-conference and NCAA tournament officials are 55-plus and, while highly valued for their experience, they should also have to meet a fitness requirement.”



Greg Fiume/Getty Images/TNS

JIM MORA JR.

27. Do patriotism like the pros

Former NFL head coach **Jim Mora Jr.**, about to begin his first year at Colorado State, proposes “having the teams on the field for the national anthem, as is tradition in our country for most other athletic events.”

FIXING COLLEGE SPORTS

28. Blow up the NCAA



Brian Cassella/Chicago Tribune/TNS

Former Illini lineman **Kam Buckner** turned his political science degree into a job as a Democratic state legislator, representing his hometown of Chicago.

2000s Illini football lineman-turned-Illinois state Rep. **Kam Buckner** has the floor:

"If I could change one thing about college athletics, I'd dismantle the NCAA as we know it. Not because college sports should exist without rules, but because the current structure has outlived its legitimacy.

"For too long, the NCAA has hidden behind the language of amateurism while overseeing a multibillion-dollar enterprise built on selective fairness, inconsistent enforcement and rules that almost always lag behind reality.

"At its core, college athletics may be the most obvious example of a lopsided — even bastardized — form of capitalism in American business and economics. Two of the most basic pillars of capitalism are compensation for labor and competition in the marketplace. For decades, the people doing the labor — the athletes — were

denied the right to be paid.

"And at the same time, there has never been real competition in governance. The NCAA has effectively been the only game in town.

"When one organization sits at the center of a multibillion-dollar industry with no real competitors and no meaningful pressure to evolve, you get exactly what we see today: an organization that behaves more like a cartel than a regulator. And cartels rarely reform themselves.

"That's how you end up with a system lurching from one workaround to another — an unwieldy transfer portal exploding overnight, NIL emerging through court decisions and piecemeal state legislation instead of thoughtful governance, and super-conferences stretching across the country in ways that barely resemble college sports as we once understood it.

"You've got athletes flying three time zones on a Tuesday night to play a conference game and still expected to show up to class Wednesday morning.

"These aren't signs of a healthy system adapting. They're symptoms of a governing structure that has lost control of the environment it was supposed to steward.

"What we need is not cosmetic reform. We need a new governance model, one that is transparent, legally coherent and built around the actual stakeholders: athletes, schools, conferences and fans. The NCAA has spent years trying to preserve a version of college sports that no longer exists.

"I wouldn't tweak the NCAA, I'd replace it. The model is broken, the hypocrisy is exhausted, and the future of college athletics deserves a governance structure that finally tells the truth about what the enterprise has become."



Texas Tech athletics

Kenyan cross-country star **Solomon Kipchoge** made headlines last year when he transferred from Texas Tech to Washington State for his sophomore year — at age 29.

onships — 29-year-old Solomon Kipchoge, competing for Washington State — wouldn't be eligible. Nor would fellow Kenyans who placed 11th (Dismus Lokira, a 27-year-old sophomore at Alabama) and 14th (Kelvin Cheruiyot, a 25-year-old freshman at Florida).

The new age cap would also impact track and field, where 26-year-old Kenyan Mercyline Kirwa, a freshman at Iowa State, won this year's women's 10,000 meters and 24-year-old Louisville sophomore Geoffrey Kirwa came out on top in the 3,000-meter men's steeplechase.

There are exceptions to the new rules — for military service, religious missions and pregnancies — making some coaches hesitant to predict a sudden seismic change.



"There is a broad assumption that collegiate distance running is over-run with older foreign-born athletes and that this rule change will immediately 'level the playing field.' The reality is more complicated," says **Brien Bell**, head coach of the track and cross-country programs at Syracuse.

"Athletes currently on campuses, including those arriving this upcoming semester, will be grandfathered in under existing eligibility rules. The first meaningful effects are realistically three to four years away minimum and potentially longer, given the guaranteed 5-for-5 eligibility structure and how those details play out.

"There are legitimate fairness concerns worth addressing. But I would caution against the expectation that this reshapes the competitive landscape overnight. The impact may be more modest than most assume until the 2030s."

35. Take a page from English soccer

"One idea that has always fascinated me is the relegation concept used by the Premier League," says Stony Brook athletic director **Shawn Heilbron**, who serves alongside Illinois' Josh Whitman in the NCAA Division I cabinet.

"Although I am a proponent of established conferences, I think schools that overperform in certain sports should have the opportunity to elevate their competitive opportunities.

"For example, we have a top-10 women's lacrosse team at Stony Brook that would 'move up' under this concept. This would create an entirely new level of excitement toward the end of each season and provide additional incentives for schools to invest in certain sports."



real-life collaboration between NFL coaches and on-field officials and college coaches and officials — find a way to get the best consolidated rule book that can be adhered to by both groups."

Longtime CBS lead analyst **Gary Danielson** would take it even further. "Since college sports has become more like professional, let's try to match up more of the rules," says the former Purdue quarterback. "Examples: hash marks, two feet in for completions and linemen one yard downfield for passes. Train them for their goals to make the NFL."



34. No more distance runners pushing 30 years old competing for NCAA cross-country championships

While not the target of the "5-for-5" eligibility model coming to Division I in 2027, Kenyan distance specialists could pay a heavier price than any athletes in any sport.

The change gives athletes a five-year window to complete five seasons, replacing the long-time five-years-for-four-seasons model. Their five-year clocks start either when they enroll full-time as students or at the beginning of the year after their 19th birthday, whichever comes first.

Under the new rules, the third-place finisher at the 2025 NCAA cross-country champi-



Eric Gay/AP

Genesis Bryant gets a hug from coach **Shauna Green** during the final seconds of the Illini's 65-48 loss to Texas in the 2025 NCAA tournament.

it's against us — than no atmosphere. I think it's vastly superior this way," says first-year Virginia coach **Aaron Roussell**. "I wish our game could sustain having big crowds at neutral sites but we're not there yet."

"Typically, host schools in the NCAA tourney draw really well, creating an exciting tournament environment," Iowa's **Jan Jensen** says. "The risk with neutral sites is that fan interest can wane if there is not



local interest. So, until we continue to grow our game, I think the decision to still utilize home sites in the women's tournament seems to be a wise one, as local interest and attendance increases excitement."

30-33. Make college football more like the NFL

For starters, says former Notre Dame-on-NBC analyst and Las Vegas Raiders GM **Mike Mayock**, "I would love a



29. Get rid of home games in the first two rounds of the NCAA women's tournament

Ideally, *after Shauna Green's* Illini get to experience what for now would be the biggest benefit of landing a top-four seed: tipping off the postseason at State Farm Center.

They've had about enough of being on the other end the last two seasons, drawing second-round assignments against Texas at Austin's Moody Center, where the Longhorns went 17-0 in 2024-25, and Vanderbilt at Nashville's Memorial Gymnasium, where the Commodores went 18-0 in 2025-26.

"I understand why we do it but I would love to see neutral sites, even in the first round, so you don't have to beat a 1, 2, 3 or 4 on their home court," Green says. "Now granted, if we're hosting, maybe I have a different feeling on that.

"But I still think that's why we're not seeing a ton of upsets. It's hard to go in and beat Texas on their home court or Vandy on their home court or UConn on their home court in order to get to that Sweet 16."

The downside to opening the women's tournament at 16 neutral sites, like the men do? Potentially paltry crowds, Green's peers are sad to report.

"I'd rather have atmosphere — even if



MY TURN

'It feels like we're trending in the wrong direction'

JOHN HOLECEK went from one of college football's top linebackers (1990-94 at Illinois) to one of high school football's top coaches (185-36 with three IHSA titles from 2006-22 at Wilmette's Loyola Academy, where he returns this fall).

What bothers me most about college football right now is the growing disconnect between what we say it is and what it actually is.

At the highest level, many players aren't really "student-athletes" anymore; they're essentially paid football employees of the university. Meanwhile, at lower levels, you still have true students competing without that kind of compensation or protection.

That gap is getting wider, and we keep pretending it's all the same system when it clearly isn't.

At some point, we should just call it what it is and move on from the outdated label. Yes, players can still earn meaningful degrees with extended timelines and

summer coursework, but how often is that truly the priority anymore? What percentage are really maximizing both the academic and athletic experience the way we used to celebrate? Are there still examples of guys like Mike Hopkins (Illinois '91), who did both at a high level and inspired others to follow that path?

It feels like we're trending in the wrong direction, but it's hard to fight because the money keeps driving everything forward. Can college football create a clearer structure, one that separates the top-tier, professionalized level from the more traditional student-based model, while still allowing movement between the two?



THREE WISHES: Women's basketball coaches



BRENDA FRESE

1. Reward refs who don't bungle calls

"Referees should be chosen for (NCAA women's tournament) games based on merit, how well they've performed all season. It should be similar criteria to what determines if teams advance. Nothing else needs to enter the equation. The teams that have worked so hard to get to the tournament deserve nothing less," says Maryland's **Brenda Frese**, who steered the Terps to the 2006 national title. "It's also clear that when tournament time comes, the game often becomes more physical. The more skilled players can be punished by that. When the most eyeballs are on our game, we should want to reward the skill."



KEVIN MCGUFF

2. Slice two ticks off the 10-second rule

"When women's basketball went to quarters, I think it was a terrific adjustment because we now have more end-of-quarter scenarios which add to the excitement. Same for when we instituted the ability to advance the ball at the end of games. It added strategy with end-of-game scenarios," says **Kevin McGuff**, who's coached Ohio State to four Big Ten titles. "The rule I would now change is going from 10 to eight seconds in the backcourt. I believe this would force more people to play 94 feet and add to the excitement of women's basketball."



VIC SCHAEFER

3. Switch to four NCAA regional sites

The current two-regional format for the NCAA women's tournament means having eight teams in one venue on the second weekend, which is "really problematic," Texas' **Vic Schaefer** says. "You don't get enough main court time, practice time, shootaround time. "I understand why they do it but I think we are now in a place where our game can stand on its own feet. We should have four regional sites, one in each quadrant of the country. Now, you've got some teams from the far east going all the way to Portland, Oregon, and teams from the west going to Connecticut. I've had to do both."

36-37. Move athletic trainers far, far away from athletic departments



Joe Hermit/PennLive

'Protections for college athletes are woeful,' says **Dr. Scott Lynch**, Penn State's former athletics team doctor.

Meddling in medical decisions about athletes' availability to play is strictly prohibited, as the fine print of most major college football coaches' contracts clearly spells out.

At Colorado, Deion Sanders must "at all times follow the directives of the medical staff regarding a student-athlete's fitness for practice and competition."

At Michigan State, it's a firable offense for Pat Fitzgerald to "not honor the authority of the team doctors, athletic trainers and the sports medicine staff."

The same is true at Illinois, where Bret Bielema and his staff are forbidden from taking action that "conflict(s) with restrictions or guidelines established by the medical or training staff."

Still, as former Penn State athletic team doctor **Scott Lynch** says he has observed first-hand, lines have been crossed without consequences.

In 2024, a Pennsylvania jury found in favor of the orthopedic surgeon, who alleged he was ousted as team doctor for complaining about then-coach James

Franklin interfering in medical decisions.

"The NCAA has instituted policies that are supposed to stop coaches and administrators from interfering with medical autonomy. However, despite many instances of known interference, including my legal verdict, no NCAA school has been punished for violations," says Lynch, who was awarded \$5.25 million in damages.

"Schools insert medical teams that will comply with the coach's directives. Even at Penn State, where my jury verdict clearly showed attempts by the head coach to interfere with medical autonomy, the recent coach hire was allowed to fire the entire football athletic training staff and insert his own athletic training staff.

"This is a clear conflict of interest. If the new staff does not comply with the coach's wishes, they are at risk of being fired. The situation is untenable."

Lynch's solution: turn over the entire sports medical care operation to an independent agency, similar to the arrangement the NCAA has with Missouri-based Drug Free Sport International, which

oversees its drug-testing program.

Short of that, two leading sports concussion researchers favor athletic trainers and sports medicine departments being housed within university medical schools, student health services departments or affiliated university health systems.

"This would allow them to make informed, timely and unpressured decisions on the status of an athlete without the fear of reprisal," says **Nicholas Murray**, director of the Neuromechanics Laboratory at Nevada-Reno's School of Public Health.



Adds **Steven Broglio**, director of the Michigan Concussion Center: "When sports medicine personnel report directly to an athletic department, the structural hierarchy creates inherent conflicts of interest."



Ohio State University
DR. KEVIN WEBER

38. Hire as many trainers as the budget will allow

The research is clear: The sooner an athlete who sustains a concussion is treated, the better the outcome, says **Dr. Kevin Weber**, a neurologist and director of Ohio State's Sports Concussion Clinic.

"In the ideal world," he says, "such a physician would be on the sideline for every athletic contest, at least in sports with high rates of concussion. Unfortunately, resources in college sports are more limited than in professional leagues such as the NFL, where independent neurologists are on the sidelines of every contest.

"Also, many concussions occur at practice or during training. A physician with training in sports concussion obviously cannot be present for every practice and training session.

"With that in mind, college sports should strive to have a neurologist or other physician with training in concussions on the sideline, at least for contests involving higher-risk sports for concussions. If that is not possible, at

the very least have access to such a physician within 24 to 48 hours of a suspected concussion."

39. Enforce Title IX



For starters, proposes noted sports attorney **Christine Brown**, any schools found to be out of compliance with the 54-year-old

federal law ought to be banned from postseason play.

Plus, adds **Donna Lopiano**, longtime CEO of the Women's Sports Foundation, submit to a third-party or peer assessment every three years, given that the federal Office of Civil Rights "is not enforcing the law and this would be a more sensible way to deal with deficiencies than individual athletes suing the school."

Among other things, Title IX requires schools to ensure that women have the same access as men to scholarships and resources, including equipment, facilities, fields and uniforms.



WHITESIDE

economist **Andrew Zimbalist**, whose 24 books include "Unwinding Madness: What Went Wrong With College Sports and How to Fix it"; and **Kelly White-**

side, the first woman inducted into the Football Writers Association of America Hall of Fame.

Says Whiteside: "Last year, the U.S. Department of Education said that Title IX does not apply to NIL deals, rescinding the Biden administration's guidance that schools must equitably distribute direct payments to male and female athletes. Now that the power conferences can provide (\$21.3 million) in direct payments to its athletes via NIL deals, the money shouldn't mostly go to football and men's basketball players.

"It should be shared equitably among men's and women's sports."

40-41. Make the men's basketball court bigger — and the baskets 6 inches higher

No joke, says UI grad, long-time basketball official and former Referee Magazine senior writer **David Simon**.

"As athletes have gotten bigger and stronger, particularly in the past 15 years, the court can no longer accommodate their size. It needs to be expanded. See how often players step out of bounds now by accident just because they're taller than they were when the court dimensions were first established.

"The rules must adjust. I would add 2 feet to each end and 2 feet on each sideline as extensions. I would also raise the basket to 10 feet, 6 inches — again, based on the increasing size and athleticism of athletes. They jump higher and have longer arms and are taller than when the dimensions were first established, so raising the rim would create more of a challenge."



42-43. Restructure NIL deals to leave a little something on the back end



"Right now, the conversation is dominated by what athletes are getting in the moment — the transfer, the deal, the payday, the immediate opportunity. And those things matter. But we spend far less time talking about what happens after the game is over," says Old Dominion deputy athletic director **Ron Moses**, a member of the NCAA Division I Committee on Academics.

"We celebrate movement and money, yet we lament the stories of athletes struggling financially, mentally and professionally once their playing days end.

"Would it really be the end of the world if we structured some of this differently, if a portion of what they earn was set aside and protected for them to access when they graduate or finish their eligibility so they can truly start their lives with a foundation?"

It would take an act of Congress "to stop the lawyers from suing," but Iowa volleyball coach **Jim Barnes** proposes a series of incentive-to-graduate payments, with the first one coming at the end of an athlete's freshman year.

"At the end, they collect a bonus ... when they walk across the stage and start their professional life. This would also give incentive to stay at the school they signed with and build the relationships that will pay off for a lifetime."



FIXING COLLEGE SPORTS

44. Athletes get one free ride on the transfer portal before entering the penalty phase

Under the rule change preferred by many coaches, chancellors and commissioners, Ole Miss transfer Luke Altmeyer still gets to spend three years running Bret Bielema's Illini offense, a former Cal quarterback and 13 ex-James Madison Dukes still steer Indiana football to unimaginable heights and Michigan men's basketball still makes history with the first all-transfer starting five to cut down the nets in April.

But Michigan State Spartan-turned-East Carolina Pirate Katin Houser isn't under center for Bielema's team this fall, Stanford Cardinal-turned-Cal Bear Andrej Stojakovic isn't helping Brad Underwood's Illini reach the Final Four last spring and Adam Miller's basketball odyssey — from Illinois to LSU to Arizona State to Gonzaga — ends two stops short, in Baton Rouge, La.

The most popular proposal by panelists was a return to the pre-portal days, when a second transfer came with a stiff penalty — sitting out a full year.

Among the common complaints that emerged:

The portal has created a generation of quitters.



"If a player doesn't like how a coach is using him or how he corrects him, he can just pack up and leave and go to another school," says Basketball Hall of Famer and former Michigan All-American **Rudy Tomjanovich**. "I believe that it carries

over into the NBA, where more players are making demands to be traded."

"The valuable lesson from athletics in the past was that perseverance and tenacity would pay off in the long run," says Nebraska's three-time national championship-winning football coach, **Tom Osborne**. "Current rules encourage moving on if things aren't going your way."

Few respondents expressed a desire to return to the system that prohibited athletes from being compensated for their name, image and likeness. It's the leaving one school after another (and



another ...) for a better payday that many take issue with.

"Are we making athletes better humans? Or just chasing money and wins?" asks **Jenna Smith**, Illinois women's basketball's all-time leading scorer.

If their pro sports careers don't pan out — and for the vast majority, they won't — many athletes won't have a degree to fall back on.

"I think we need to remember that getting a degree matters and that should be our priority as an industry," says **Rick George**, who retired in July after 13 years as Colorado's athletic director. "I know that I wouldn't have had the career that I have had if it wasn't for my degree from the University of Illinois."



Robin Scholz/The News-Gazette

The transfer portal has giveth and taketh from **Brad Underwood's** Illini, including all five players pictured here in January 2023. From left: **Matthew Mayer** (transferred from Baylor to Illinois), **Jayden Epps** (Illinois to Georgetown to Mississippi State), **Dain Dainja** (Baylor to Illinois to Memphis), **RJ Melendez** (Illinois to Georgia to Mississippi State) and **Ty Rodgers** (Illinois to Boise State).

GO FIGURE

The transfer portal gets more and more crowded by the year. Here's a three-year look at how many total Division I entrants have transferred to another NCAA school, plus the figures for football and men's and women's basketball:

Year	Entrants	Football	Men's BB	Women's BB
2023	14,205	2,472	1,411	925
2024	15,950	3,021	1,629	1,112
2025	18,421	3,671	1,812	1,215

It's made year-to-year roster management a bear.

"Right now," says ESPN college football insider **Paul Finebaum**, "the inability to retain rosters has made the game totally chaotic and unmanageable."

"There's something very special about a team that stays together for three or four years and works for a championship and handles all the adversity that comes with it," says former Illini football coach **Ron Turner**.

"It's a relationship that stays with them for a lifetime."



"I'm all for them making money. They deserve it, but they have to understand that they have to make a commitment to do so. It's not fair to the universities with so many one-and-done athletes."



"It is unrealistic to expect that student-athletes can successfully navigate multiple transfer experiences and graduate in four or five years," adds Eastern Illinois President **Jay Gatrell**.

On average, the University of Texas rejects about half of a transfer's academic credit hours, Longhorns football coach football Steve Sarkisian revealed to USA Today in May. The studies



Len Elmore has seen are closer to the 10 to 20 percent range, which is bad enough.

"For far too many, the current transfer rule slows the graduation rate and may ultimately reduce graduation numbers altogether in the near future," says Elmore, a former Maryland basketball star and Harvard-educated attorney.



That's **Bill Self's** biggest fear, as well: "We could look up 10 or 15 years from now and the student-athletes who aren't professionals could be in the workplace without degrees."

45. Make the resource-rich athletic departments pay for ravaging mid-major rosters

Long before transferring from one school to another was in vogue, 1997 Indiana Mr. Basketball **Luke Recker** made the unusual jump from Bob Knight's home state Hoosiers to Steve Alford's Iowa Hawkeyes.

His take on transferring of today? "There should be repercussions," Recker says. "Similar to professional or coaching contracts, a buyout fee should be included with each athlete's NIL package. If a player transfers from a MAC school to a Big Ten school, perhaps the MAC school receives a buyout."

"This could help fund the conferences with less TV revenue, and it wouldn't penalize them for locating and developing talent. All of this would be contingent upon each athlete having multi-year 'contracts' with their institutions."

What do mid-major athletic directors make of this idea? We asked a dozen of them.

→ Amen to that. Being the Power 4's farm team is getting old.



"What an incredibly great system for the Power 4 programs, where someone else takes all the risks, invests money in recruiting and develops the individual physically

and mentally through strength and conditioning, nutrition, academic support and mental health counseling," says East Tennessee State's **Richard Sander**.

"College athletics is strongest when programs at all levels have the opportunity to develop, retain and compete for talent in a sustainable way," Indiana State's **Nathan Christensen** says.



Kull, who agrees on the need for "recognition of the investment made by the programs that identified, recruited and developed that talent in the first place."

Adds Northern Illinois' **Sean Frazier**: "I talked about a transfer fee or developmental fee last year. My feelings haven't changed one bit."

→ The lawyers would have a field day.

Says Old Dominion's **Wood Selig**: "We all know when we, the NCAA, attempt to institute



legislation that harms, real or perceived, student-athletes and their families or institutions in general, the lawyers circle like vultures over their next pending litigation and subsequent payday."

→ The bonus revenue would be welcome but the system won't allow it.

"I believe it should happen but until we have some type of collective bargaining mechanisms agreed upon, I doubt it will happen," says Eastern Kentucky's **Kyle Moats**. "It would need to be mandated or agreed upon; if not, it's a disadvantage to the school who is recruiting the student-athlete."

→ Here's an even better idea: limit the number of transfers schools can take in.

"Buyout fees feel like taxing the symptom rather than treating the cause," says UC-San Diego's **Andy Fee**. "If we really want to protect mid-majors, put hard caps on how many portal transfers Power 4 programs can add in a given cycle, because that actually changes behavior at the top instead of just charging them a toll to keep doing it."

→ Mid-majors were losing talent long before the rules changed. "Talent always has and always



will flow to where the money is," Montana's **Kent Haslam** says. "We have seen it for decades when it comes to coaches; now, we are seeing it with players."

→ The transfer portal flows both ways.



Point's **Dan Hauser**, whose men's basketball team has benefited from players leaving UConn, Mississippi State and elsewhere for his Big South Conference school.

46-47. Allow a third (but not fourth) spin on the transfer portal on one condition

→ Proposal No. 1, from Bernadette McGlade, who retired last month after 18 years as Atlantic 10 commissioner: Any three-time transfer would be required to have "a year in residency" at their third stop before being eligible to compete.



→ Proposal No. 2, from Louisville board of trustees chair Larry Benz: Athletes must have already earned

their bachelor's degree and have just one year of eligibility left.

"It wasn't that long ago that you couldn't transfer to another school unless the new school offered a different major than your current school," Benz says. "My, has that changed. When's the last time you've heard of a student-athlete being declared ineligible?"

48. Make athletes commit contractually to more than one year on campus

"Firm, enforceable, multi-year contracts" are the answer to the portal problem, says Pepperdine law professor **Mau-reen Weston**, who sits on the NCAA's Division I Committee on Infractions. "The constant player movement is eroding fan and donor interest."



"We need to have some type of buffer that encourages athletes to stay longer than one season at a school," says **Debbie Yow**, a former basketball coach at Florida, Kentucky and Oral Roberts and AD at Maryland, N.C. State and Saint Louis. "People say coaches get to leave whenever they wish, but that is not exactly correct. They get to leave without penalty if they or their new school pays the buyout in the coach's contract."



FIXING COLLEGE SPORTS

49-50. Come up with a new way to choose the teams selected for the College Football Playoff



Matias J. Ocner/Miami Herald/TNS

The College Football Playoff selection committee got the No. 1 team right last season: **Curt Cignetti's** undefeated Indiana Hoosiers beat Miami in the Hurricanes' own backyard to claim the Big Ten's first national title in football.

At the moment, "we do not have a fair way for all schools to compete for a national championship," Big Ten Network studio analyst **Gerry DiNardo** says. "We have a committee that is not qualified to rank the top teams. We have automatic qualifiers that are clearly not among the best 12 teams in the country taking the place of more qualified teams."



One solution, courtesy DiNardo, the former head coach at Indiana, LSU and Vanderbilt: "Put together a committee that can study game tape and pick the top 12 or whatever number it is. Pay them hundreds of thousands of dollars and make them full-time employees. What other billion-dollar business in this country is run by volunteers? None."

Option No. 2: Remove the human element from the CFP equation altogether and let the computers decide who's in and who's out.

Two math whizzes whose formulas were used during college football's BCS days believe it's a far superior option than what's in place now.

"People do appreciate the drama of a committee with a weekly standings reveal. However, I think that a rules/algorithmic process would ultimately be simpler and fairer," says



Carson-Newman business analytics professor **Kenneth Massey**, whose Massey Ratings were part of the BCS formula for 15 years.

"With a combination of selection criteria, open-source rankings and tiebreakers, the field and seeds could be set automatically and easily checked by anyone. "College football structure is more complex than, say, the NFL, where no committee seeds the playoffs. Therefore, an algorithmic process needs to be carefully designed, and proven through back-testing and hypothetical scenarios."

Jeff Anderson is convinced it could be done — and would be an improvement on "a committee that emerges from a smoke-filled room and issues its decrees."

After his beloved Washington Huskies were denied the national championship in 1991, Anderson and roommate Chris Hester co-created the Anderson & Hester computer rankings, one of six mathematical systems used to determine the sport's national cham-



pionship matchups from 1998 to 2013.

His biggest beef with the 13-person selection committee, a mix of former coaches and players, media and athletic directors: It "pretends to be objective by using bad or meaningless measures to try to substantiate its subjective preferences."

"Among these inapt measures are a poor strength-of-schedule rating that punishes teams that play below-average FBS teams but not those that play (lower-level) FCS patsies — like most of the SEC does — and 'game control,' which measures nothing that relates to the object of the game and therefore operates at the expense of the actual object of the game: winning."

"Then-SEC commissioner Roy Kramer knew what he was doing when he set up the BCS formula. After some growing pains during its early years, it proved to be the best selection system college football has ever had. It's time to go back to it and ditch the committee."

"College football isn't diving or gymnastics. It doesn't need a group of 'experts' to judge every move that every participant makes. Nor does it need to substitute analytics for what really matters. Instead, it needs to reward teams for what they have accomplished in terms of winning games, and avoiding losses, against worthwhile competition — full stop."

THREE WISHES: ESPN analyst and retired football official Matt Austin



1. Move to a national assigning model

"Each conference officiating coordinator has his own take on both fouls and mechanics. Some of these are very subtle and go unnoticed by most fans. But some create problems when teams play out-of-conference games and take their officials with them."

"I think the time has come to consider a move to national assigning — having a single coordinator of officials who oversees all college football officials and has the final say on how fouls are to be called. "This would eliminate any suggestion of conference bias and comments like: 'That's not how the Big Ten or the ACC call it.'"

2. All 15-yard penalties are subject to challenges

"There are too many fouls that go uncalled. So I would suggest that fouls that carry a 15-yard penalty, but are not flagged by the on-field officials, become reviewable by way of a coaches challenge."

"Too many times, a face mask or obvious defensive pass interference foul goes uncalled when everyone in the stadium or at home can see that the action warranted a flag. With each conference having some type of collaborative replay, these decisions could be made very quickly and obvious errors corrected."

"In the end, all officials just want to get it right. Let's help them."

3. Enforce the dress code

"Many of today's players look like they're trying out for the track team," ignoring the section of the rulebook that states they must wear pants that cover the knee."

Short pants-favoring football players did, however, catch a break this offseason, when the Division I Football Rules Subcommittee's recommendation to approve a rule requiring "leg coverings from the top of their shoes to the bottom of their pants" did not pass.

It would have forced violators to leave the game for one play for the first offense, resulted in a 5-yard penalty for a second offense and led to a 15-yard penalty each time after that.

51. Figure out which bowls stay and which ones go

It seems all but certain that early-December conference championship games and a 12-team playoff will soon be things of the past.

But what about the other piece of college football's postseason picture — the Boca Raton Bowl, the Wasabi Fenway Bowl, the Union Home Mortgage Gasparilla Bowl and the 32 other mostly low-rated matchups set for late December 2026 and early January 2027?

"As much as I love it and have been a part of it, it's probably gotten to a point where it's just so many that it will get restricted a little bit. I could see it getting cut by maybe 50 percent and just having ones that matter" once the College Football Playoff field is expanded, Illini coach **Bret Bielema** says.



First-year Utah coach **Morgan Scalley** is among the endorers of an altogether different idea — moving whatever bowl games make the cut from the end of the season to the very beginning, when players are less likely to opt out for risk of being injured. "I'm a big fan of that," he says.

52. Double the size of the College Football Playoff field

Since the inception of the CFP in 2014, 27 different schools have received invites to the knockout tournament.

Had a 24-team format been in place from the start, that figure would be 80, including Illinois, Big Ten chief operating officer Kerry Kenny concluded after crunching the numbers.

"The more expansive that opportunity gets," Bielema says, "the more engaged college football,



Chris Coduto/Getty Images/TNS

Will there be a place for the Snoop Dogg Arizona Bowl in college football's postseason of the future?

TV viewing and everything will be further into the year."

What was a four-team event from 2014-23 grew to 12 teams in 2024 and will almost assuredly grow again, as soon as the 2027 season.

The only question is whether the field will increase by four, as the SEC prefers, or double in size, the preference of the Big Ten, the ACC, the Big 12, Bielema, the American Football Coaches Association and every panelist willing to opine on the record on what's become a sensitive subject.

"Access is what provides relevancy for schools," says N.C. State's **Dave Doeren**, who's unabashedly in Club 24.

Joining him: Michigan's **Kyle Whittingham**, Ohio State's **Ryan Day**, Maryland's **Mike Locksley**, Florida State's



Mike Norvell and, assuming the non-Power 4 schools are guaranteed two of the 24 slots, Navy's **Brian Newberry** and Temple's **K.C. Keeler**.

53. Compensate women's soccer programs when players are plucked by the pros



Because the National Women's Soccer League doesn't hold a draft, college players are "free agents 24/7, 365," says **Brian Pensky**, who coached

Florida State to national championships in 2023 and '25.

"So my change would be that professional teams would have to pay us a transfer fee, just like they do in professional soccer around the world, if they want to sign one of our underclasswomen."

54-55. More air time for more sports

Before arriving at Cal on a gymnastics scholarship three years ago, **Tucker Yasunaga** had never seen a second of a collegiate water polo match.

Now, the former Judah Christian standout can't get enough of that sport. Or crew. Or beach volleyball.

"I would change the focus of television broadcasts to include more of a variety of sports on larger scales," says Yasunaga, repeating a wish also expressed by Illini women's soccer coach **Katie Hultin**. "I would make the change to focus on Olympics sports, as well as including more women's sports on the higher stage."

"There needs to be more coverage of all sports, and if not that, at least an easier and cheaper way to view all of them."

If former Illini Olympic swimmer **Justin Spring** had a say, the NCAA would put on a series of national Olympic sports festivals, which might help the sales pitch to networks.

"I think it's a great idea what the NCAA and NIT did this year with their basketball tournaments, having them all in one location. I would encourage the NCAA to do the same with Olympic sports," Spring says.

"I've often heard from the media the desire to not make the Olympics an every-four-years excitement. Here's an opportunity for you to have sports like swimming, wrestling, gymnastics, hockey, etc., all be live in one site and create an event that people will want to tune into."

"Fall, winter and spring all offer unique opportunities like this and could create different audiences for all sports."



FIXING COLLEGE SPORTS

56. Remember: The term is 'student-athlete,' not 'athlete-student'

'Have you noticed how no one is talking about a college education anymore?' asks Illinois State athletic director **JERI MULLINS BEGGS**. We heard about it over and over from panelists, with only the transfer portal a more talked-about topic. Here's just a sampling of some of their fears and fixes:



LARRY D. BOONE

Georgia Southern defensive lineman-turned-Urbana police chief, part of back-to-back football national champions in 1985-86

"A rising tide lifts all boats. That's the principle I believe should guide college athletics.

"When I think about how the system could be transformed, I think about my own experience playing Division I-AA football at Georgia Southern. Like many of my teammates, I gave everything to the game, but I knew even then that most of us would never make it to the NFL. What drove me was my own internal determination to excel — not just on the field, but in life beyond football.

"That drive pushed me to focus on academics, personal growth and preparing myself for a career after athletics, ultimately leading me to serve as a police chief.

"Too many athletes — especially Black athletes, who make up a large share of revenue-generating sports — leave college with injuries or little preparation for the real world because programs prioritize wins and media exposure over education and long-term development.

"That's why I believe athletics revenue should be redistributed based on graduation rates, GPA and post-college outcomes. Programs that invest in their athletes' futures, not just trophies or TV ratings, should thrive. Programs that fail to meet clear standards — graduation minimums, post-college career placement metrics or demonstrated academic support — should face financial penalties, reduced postseason eligibility or limits on scholarships and recruiting opportunities.

"This isn't about diminishing competition; it's about making college athletics truly lift every athlete it touches, giving them the tools to succeed on the field and in life. When schools are rewarded for developing people, not just players, everyone benefits — the athletes, the programs and the broader community."



CONDOLEEZZA RICE

66th Secretary of State and director of Stanford University's Hoover Institution

"It would be nice if someone emphasized the 'student' in student-athlete.

"The overwhelming number of these young people will not play professional sports. I once saw a poll among D-I basketball players that

59 percent thought they were going to the NBA. The real number is around 1.5 percent.

"So college athletes need a Plan B — it is called a college degree."



JOHN DONAHOE

Former Nike CEO now athletic director at Stanford

"Not surprisingly, I agree with Condi Rice. With all the changes occurring in college athletics, we need to remember why college athletics exists and continue to put the student-athlete at the center."



WARDE MANUEL

Michigan athletic director

"I would change the focus back to the educational opportunities that athletics provides to 200,000-plus young people on an annual basis. Ultimately, the education and degrees they receive will benefit them far more throughout their lives than any resources we can provide.

"I am glad we are doing revenue sharing and supporting student-athletes to make money off of their NIL but ultimately I want them to earn a degree that will help them earn money in roles that they enjoy for the rest of their lives."



TRICIA TALIAFERRO

Former women's soccer coach at Illinois and Miami

"The fact that we have to ask what single thing should be changed is, in itself, the issue and it reflects a system that has drifted from a clear and unified purpose.

"Until college athletics defines, with integrity, whether it exists primarily for education or commercial entertainment, the tension between mission and money will continue to shape every outcome."



BRET BIELEMA

Illini football coach

"Our program will always prioritize academics — and we are proud of our program-record six consecutive semesters over a 3.0 GPA — but I worry that the same emphasis is not happening around the country and today's student-athletes will face the consequences.

"Our current system is creating a structure with the unintended byproduct of fewer student-athletes graduating. Student-athletes all over the nation are losing credits, partly due to multiple years of transferring, and thus falling behind academically.

"We must work towards a solution that takes all of the positive outcomes tied with today's new college athletics environment, including NIL and rev-share opportunities and the freedom to transfer, while also rewarding academic progress, incentivizing graduation and providing financial literacy education."



JERI MULLINS BEGGS

Illinois State athletic director

"In 2002, the NCAA started an Academic Performance Program to improve the graduation rate. It proved to be wildly successful.

"Since 2002, an additional 54,000-plus student-athletes earned a degree compared to what the number would have been if the graduation rate had stayed the same.

"It's disappointing that the value of a college education is rarely mentioned in the college athletics conversation."



JOSHUA GORDON

Oregon faculty athletics representative serves on NCAA Committee on Infractions

"The single-most important thing we could do is recommit to the academic opportunity as the foundational differentiator of college athletics — and then redesign our governance structures to match that commitment.

"Lawsuits and legislative threats have been effective at breaking the old model, but adversarial processes don't build new ones. What builds is getting the right stakeholders — athletes, faculty, administrators — to the table, not as advisory voices but as real parties engaged in genuine, interest-based negotiation.

"We need to move past parliamentary rulemaking and toward the kind of stakeholder governance frameworks we already see working in other areas of sport, where the people most affected have a meaningful role in shaping the agreements they live under."

MY TURN

'The focus on building durable programs with unbreakable culture has become the exception, not the rule'

Former Illinois Wesleyan student-athlete and Meyer Capel attorney **RANDALL GREEN** is an adjunct professor at the University of Illinois College of Law who serves on the UI Athletic Board.



If I could change one thing, it would be to restore the culture of team over celebrity in college athletics.

The most admired college programs in history weren't built on NIL budgets or recruiting social media posts; they were built in locker rooms, where upperclassmen learned to lead by holding freshmen accountable to a program's culture.

Those are lessons student-athletes carry with them for life, long after their playing days are over. With constant coaching changes, the transfer portal and facility arms races, the focus on building durable programs with unbreakable culture has become the exception, not the rule.

There is one thing all greats — coaches and players alike — loathe: taking the "easy route." And right now, it has become too easy for programs and players to take the "easy route" in search of success in college athletics.

I was fortunate to sit behind a section of former players during this year's Final Four run. I watched Illini greats like Kendall Gill, Deron Williams, Dee Brown, Brandon Paul, Meyers Leonard and many others celebrate a program that each one of them helped build.

I worry that the lifelong bonds formed through navigating the peaks and valleys of competition alongside your teammates will become rarer in the current state of college athletics.

But I take comfort in the fact that we have some of the very best leaders throughout Illini athletics to help navigate these challenging times.

57. Make faculty athletic representatives more than figureheads



"Forgive this for sounding self-serving," says Villanova sociology professor **Rick Eckstein**, "but university faculty might be the last best hope to save college sports

from itself.

"Every NCAA school must have a faculty athletic representative. Outside of a few designated signatures, it is largely up to individual schools to decide how its FAR is selected and what it will do.

"According to recent research,

the vast majority of schools have, ironically, minimal faculty input into the selection of its FAR and generally expect the person to be a puppet for athletics rather than providing genuine and unfettered oversight.

"The shenanigans often associated with college sports, a list too long to provide, could be addressed by a FAR independently selected by faculty governance and bestowed with actual oversight power," adds Eckstein, author of "How College Athletics are Hurting Girls' Sports: the Pay to Play Pipeline."

"The current system pretends these current shenanigans do not exist, largely to the detriment of both college athletes and non-athletes."

58. Get the big bosses more involved

When chancellors and presidents are in the room, **Matt Barany** has noticed, "the focus stays on where it belongs — on education, health and the long view, not just money or quick wins," says Richmond's 2026 Atlantic 10 swimming coach of the year, a member of the NCAA's Competitive Safeguards and Medical Aspects of Sports Committee.

"When presidents lead, college athletics looks a lot more like higher education and a lot less like a business drifting away from its purpose."



59. Allow teams to go over the cap to retain players



In the name of keeping graduation rates from plummeting, UCLA men's basketball coach **Mick Cronin** proposes allowing schools to exceed the current compensation cap —

\$21.3 million — to prevent their own athletes from skeddaddling.

Should the Protect College Sports Act become law, he'll get his wish — and then some. It would allow schools to spend up to \$22.5 million for athlete retention in addition to the \$21.3 million, plus another \$5 million for Olympic sports.

FIXING COLLEGE SPORTS

61. Establish a minimum wage

This isn't exactly the outcome the "House" in House v. NCAA had in mind when he filed what would become the most transformative lawsuit in the history of college athletics.

Grant House was a swimmer at Arizona State. Heard of any nine-figure NIL deals for fantastic freestylers? "Schools should be required to allocate a transparent percentage of their revenue to athlete compensation, with minimum guarantees that ensure every sport receives some level of funding each year, not just the highest-revenue programs," House says.

"In addition, there should be a nationally regulated minimum amount for athlete compensation that is publicly disclosed so athletes, schools and fans understand the baseline value of participation in college athletics.

"The biggest challenge in the current era isn't that athletes are being compensated, it's that the system lacks structure and transparency."

62-63. Come up with a new payment plan



So advises one of college athletics' leading voices — ESPN basketball analyst and former Duke big man **Jay Bilas**.

His top wish is that "the NCAA would allow the member schools to pay athletes directly, instead of the current NIL and revenue-sharing system.

"Schools could sign players to multi-year contracts, which would lessen the impact of the transfer portal — which was created and implemented by the NCAA — and bring more stability."

Bilas, a North Carolina attorney, also would have preferred that the NCAA and college athletics administrators had spent the past year asking Congress for "help building a path to collective bargaining," not lobbying for an antitrust exemption.

He's not alone. "Collective bargaining would require athletes in the relevant sports to be employees and, while some people in college athletics are still hesitant to take that step, support is growing for this," says Kansas City-based attorney **Mit Winter**, who specializes in NIL-related cases.

"It wouldn't be easy to move to a model with collective bargaining, but I think it's necessary and would be the model that's most fair to the athletes. It would also bring the stability and certainty that people are looking for."

64-68. Just make athletes employees already

It's time, says retired sports media professor **Ellen Staurowsky**, co-author of "College Athletes for Hire."

Her plan: **→ STEP ONE:** "Recognize that athletes who work 40 to 60 hours per week and serve their institutions are workers who warrant employee status and the protections that flow from that status. As a fundamental right, workers deserve to be paid for their labor.

"Colleges and universities violate their own principles by denying college athletes their rightful status and create an environment where athletes feel they have to apologize for simply having their work valued appropriately.

"Being paid for the value of your labor is not a crime or something to apologize for."

→ STEP TWO: "Call out college sport leaders and politicians who disingenuously seek to get the federal government to award an antitrust exemption to an industry that has violated federal antitrust law with impunity."

→ STEP THREE: "Hold anyone to account who claims that recognizing college athletes as employees undermines the educational mission of colleges and universities and the interests of college athletes.

"NASPA, the leading association representing the student affairs professionals in higher education, reports that 70 to 80 percent of students are employed and earn a paycheck.



student financial stability and persistence toward a degree, improve learning and increase career readiness.

"What threatens college athlete educational interests is their inability to negotiate a model that works best for them."

→ STEP FOUR: "Support a path to athlete collective bargaining that is anchored in an employee model and reject 'non-employee' collective bargaining.

"There is no good faith negotiating between labor and management if labor is not at the table."

→ STEP FIVE: "Recognize that athletes are not members of the NCAA and conferences. Those entities represent colleges and universities, not athletes."



Robin Scholz/The News-Gazette

Illini volleyball coach **Chris Tamas** says he 'can live with the human error of calls for better flow of play.'

69. Rethink instant replay in volleyball

"If I could wave my magic wand, I would go back to a very-little-to-no replay system" in volleyball, says Illini coach **Chris Tamas**. "Everyone wants for the call to be right but it also causes huge stoppages in time and interrupts the flow of the game.

"Unless it's something like the (speedy) Hawk-Eye system" used in tennis, among other sports, "I can live with the human error of calls for better flow of play.

"Anything egregious can be turned in — as it is now, by coaches — and the umps/refs can be fined for those bad calls. I think you'd see much better refereeing because of it as opposed to just resorting to the replay system."

Anything to pick up the pace is worth it to Ohio State volleyball coach **Jen Flynn Oldenburg**:

"Shorter timeouts. A serving clock. Replay challenges that take longer than two minutes automatically revert to being inconclusive. This would increase the fan experience as well as allow for a better TV experience."

70. Free healthcare for athletes beyond their last day in uniform

That would be a good start, says former Illini running back **Kevin Jackson**, now a research scientist at Thermo Fisher, a Boston-based life-sciences company.

He'd also like to see college athletics implement "baseline and longitudinal health monitoring for every athlete — using tools like MR, mental health screening and cognitive testing — when they arrive on campus, when they leave and even years later."

"That kind of data," Jackson says, "would not only improve how we diagnose and manage injuries like concussions in real time, but also help us better understand the long-term impact of the game. Protecting athletes shouldn't stop at eligibility — it should extend into their lives well after football ends."

The authors of the Senate's Protect College Sports Act agree, adding a provision that calls for extending post-eligibility coverage by universities for five years for injuries incurred on the field, court or track.

71. Like FIFA in soccer, move toward a federated model, starting with basketball



director **Lee Reed**. "Basketball has a unique economic model and should have sport-specific governance, revenue sharing and competitive structures, including the ability to align in basketball-specific conferences or frameworks.

"At the same time, this preserves institutional mission and autonomy, allowing schools to support other sports in ways that align with their values, rather than forcing a one-size-fits-all system that no longer works."

60. Implement a team salary cap on athlete compensation



The Associated Press

Buckeyes legend **Jack Nicklaus** salutes the crowd at Ohio Stadium after dotting the 'i' in 'Ohio State' during the band's halftime performance.

In **Jack Nicklaus'** day at Ohio State, the letters N-I-L spelled *nil* — as in what college athletes were permitted to be paid for their name, image or likeness.

So the early-married two-time U.S. Amateur champ and 1961 NCAA medalist picked up shifts at his father's pharmacy and got licensed to sell insurance in hope of convincing his fraternity brothers of signing up — the only way he could afford to take his young bride on dates.

"I think the college athlete should have been compensated long ago," he says now. "Not to a large level, simply compensated so they could live a college life, go home, don't have to have a job, take a girl out on a date.

"A stipend," he says. Not a salary. "NIL has produced better football teams and better competition," Nicklaus says, "but this is college; it's not supposed to be semi-pro."

The Buckeyes legend was among a host of panelists who repeated what Indiana Hoosiers super donor **Mark Cuban** told us was the fix college athletics needed most — "a salary cap."

If the Senate's Protect College Sports Act becomes the law of the land, they'll get it. The legislation would allow schools to share up to \$48.8 million in revenue with their athletes — the \$21.3 million already allowed, another \$22.5 million retention pool and \$5 million for Olympic sports.

Reports that Texas, Miami, Ohio State, LSU and Oregon could all field \$40 million-plus football teams this fall have only increased the number of calls for a cap.

"We need something to stabilize player salaries," says former Illini assistant **Alex Golesh**, the

first-year football coach at Auburn of the SEC, home to three of those five programs.

"I think it's great college athletes are getting paid for their name, image and likeness, but there needs to be a cap or some other formula because things are getting way out of hand," says **Dara Torres**, who swam to four Olympic gold medals and now coaches the sport at Boston College.

"Unfortunately, our organization is more worried about being sued than fixing the complete disaster that has become college athletics," says **Mike Matoso**, the athletic director at Saint Mary's of California. "And you created a cap with the House settlement which is just being worked around and schools are still spending \$50 to \$60 million a year.

"Put an actual cap on schools and have contracts that go both ways for institutions. We have made a mockery of higher education."

It's the trickle-down effect that most worries Indiana Basketball Hall of Famer **Beth Brooke**.

"We need to preserve opportunities to play for as many student-athletes as possible. To do so, I would institute salary caps and cost controls," says the first woman to be awarded a basketball scholarship at Purdue, who now serves on the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics.

"Under the current system, whether you win or lose, you are incented to spend more, which ultimately leads to a reduction in opportunities across the system of collegiate sports."



FIXING COLLEGE SPORTS

72. Invest more — *much* more — in women's sports



Charles Fox/The Philadelphia Inquirer/TNS



Vanda Bidwell/The News Gazette

LEFT: South Carolina's **Dawn Staley** is the only person to win the Naismith Award as both a player and a coach. **RIGHT:** On **Janet Rayfield's** watch, Illinois received 10 invites to the NCAA women's soccer tournament.

And not just by providing the same NCAA tournament hotel accommodations that the men get, **Dawn Staley** says.

The commitment to equity must be "from top to bottom in terms of the resources provided to teams," says South Carolina's three-time NCAA champion women's basketball coach.

There's no time like the present to close the gender gap, adds former Illini women's soccer coach **Janet Rayfield**, given all the transition already under way in college athletics.

"Women's sports could be a positive contributor if the investment in marketing and fan experience matched the investment in the men's side," says Rayfield,

who'd start with the sports that have the "fan base, sponsorship power and ability to produce revenue."

There's plenty of ground to make up — for women's programs, coaches and NIL deal-seeking athletes alike.

→ **Fact:** The top spender on men's basketball in 2025-26 was Indiana, at just over \$32 million. The biggest budget in women's basketball belonged to LSU, at just under \$12 million.

→ **Fact:** Even after receiving a new contract for delivering the Bruins' first national championship in women's basketball, Cori Close is still set to earn \$2.75 million less than UCLA men's coach Mick Cronin in 2026-27.

→ **Fact:** UCLA's gap in guaranteed pay ranks 11th of the 15 Big Ten schools that make contracts available via open records request (Northwestern, Penn State and USC do not).

On average, the difference in pre-bonus pay among the 15 is \$3.2 million, with the widest gulfs at Michigan State (Tom Izzo is due \$5.92 million more than \$1 million-a-year Robyn Fralick), Purdue (\$4.4 million) and Nebraska (\$4 million).

→ **Fact:** In its 2026 annual report, leading NIL deal broker Opendorse estimates that men's tennis players average \$2,700 to women's \$1,100 on the commercial market and that elite

baseball pitchers are worth \$127,200, a bundle more than top softball pitchers' \$36,400.

"The opportunity is still uneven," says former WNBA president **Donna Orender**. "Women's sports continue to receive a fraction of the resources, media coverage and institutional support compared to men's programs."

"That gap limits not just participation — but the long-term leadership pipeline that sports help create."



75-77. Don't change too much too soon

That goes for:

→ The WNBA's draft eligibility rules, which mandate that U.S.-born players must be four years removed from college or turn 22 that year.

"In my humble opinion," says Washington Mystics coach **Sydney Johnson**, "the requirement has greatly enhanced the skills and readiness of draft-eligible American players."

→ Having half the teams that exist in the NBA and no developmental league akin to the G-League, the W isn't positioned like college basketball is to ensure vast opportunities for young U.S. players to grow and develop in the game before reaching the highest level. Even more, NIL money and collectives allow players to be deservedly compensated while they grow and get better in college."

→ The size of football rosters, now capped at 105.



"The best chance to protect a player's whole health relates to the roster size," says **Jonny Lifshitz**, a neuroscientist at the University of Michigan Concussion Center.

"A mindset change to limit the number of consecutive plays — similar to a baseball pitch count — could expand the game to more players and change the risk profile. However, practices distributed over more players may not prepare athletes for the game."

→ The NCAA men's basketball tournament, which will add eight teams to the bracket starting in March 2027.

Just make sure a fair share of them hail from mid-major conferences, pleads **John Giannini**, an Illinois grad and former small-school head coach (Maine, LaSalle). "Please keep March Madness and don't have a power-conference-only tournament," Giannini says.



78. Get everyone operating from the same playbook

"There need to be rules that are implemented and actually regulated," says Iowa men's basketball coach **Ben McCollum**.

"We need structure and clarity in hopes that we could create an environment where we all operate by the same set of rules," adds Hawkeyes football coach **Kirk Ferentz**.



Up to now, that's been far easier said than done, Illinois athletic director **Josh Whitman** noted during his annual June media roundtable, responding to a question about whether college athletics even

73-74. Give athletes both a voice and a vote

Conspicuously absent from a March "Saving College Sports" roundtable of 50 at the White House: any current college athletes.

Not a one was on a guest list that included athletic directors, coaches, media executives, commissioners from pro leagues and college conferences, four members of Congress, the governor of Florida, Tiger Woods, a Russian-American political strategist and the former president of the New York Islanders.

"If I could change one thing about college athletics, it would be ensuring that student-athletes' voices aren't just heard, but truly acted upon," says **Rhiannon Davies**, an Eastern Washington track star who serves on the NCAA's Student-Athlete Advisory Committee. "While our collective voice has grown within the new NCAA Division I governance structure, that progress means little if our input is ultimately overlooked."

It's glaring omissions like March's that led former UCLA



Anna Moneymaker/Getty Images/TNS

President **Donald Trump** speaks during March's roundtable on college sports in the East Room of the White House.



football player **Ramogi Huma** to launch the National College Players Association, a nonprofit that advocates on athletes' behalf.

"Athletes should have power over the decisions that shape their physical safety, economic rights and academic futures," he says. "For revenue-generating athletes, a real seat at the

table could mean forming a union and negotiating for fair treatment, just like pro athletes.

"This is about more than money. It is about enforceable standards to prevent serious injuries, sexual abuse and even death. It's also about coaches running athletes off teams and into transfer portals, scholarship loss and academic exploitation."

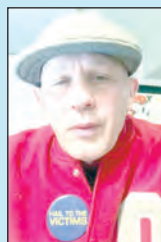
Had Huma's vision been in place at Ohio State, **Michael DiSabato** says, college sports might have been spared one of its biggest scandals.

DiSabato was the first of nearly 300 Buckeye male athletes from the 1970s, '80s and '90s who accused former team doctor Richard Strauss of sexual abuse and mistreatment.

In June, Ohio State agreed to pay about \$100 million to settle every legal claim filed involving Strauss, who died in 2005.

"What allowed Richard Strauss to operate at The Ohio State University was a system that treated athletes like commodities instead of partners," DiSabato says. "When young men and women are viewed as assets to protect a brand, their voices get minimized and abuse can hide in plain sight."

"College athletics must move away from that model and toward one where athletes are true stakeholders — with independent medical oversight, real reporting power and a seat at the table. When athletes are treated as partners in the enterprise, not property of it, the conditions that allowed Strauss to thrive no longer exist."



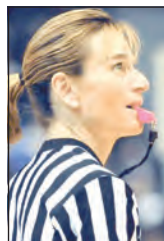
79. Create a second transfer portal



Only this one wouldn't be for the players, says **Zack Lassiter**, athletic director at Texas' Abilene Christian and a member of the NCAA Division I Men's Basketball Committee.

"I think we should consider creating staggered transfer windows for head coaches and student-athletes that align beginning one week after the national championship game in that sport," he says. "The first transfer window would be for head coach movement, followed closely by the student-athlete transfer window. Within the NCAA framework, this approach could help restore a clearer boundary between competition and roster movement, reduce in-season disruption and support more thoughtful decision-making for both coaches and players."

80. Come up with a new system for recruiting basketball refs



Dee Kantner hasn't quite figured out what that would look like, but the ESPN rules analyst who officiated 26 women's Final Fours knows this much: The system in place now isn't cutting it.

"In college basketball, the only real path to being hired in a conference is to attend a sum-

mer camp that the conference coordinator conducts," she says. "This can be extremely cost-prohibitive for the young, aspiring official — airfare, rental car, hotel, camp fee, food, etc. — and sometimes there is not even any instruction or teaching done at these camps."

"We have got to come up with a better system that will 'afford' more the opportunity to experience the wonderfulness of an officiating career."

81. One ball used by all

Topping Georgia men's coach **Mike White's** wish list: "a universal basketball that's the same in every gym and in every game."

Unlike the NBA, where every contest is played with a Wilson, the brand of 22-ounce college balls vary from school to school.

Like the shoes on players' feet, Nike dominates the market — its balls are used for home games at Illinois, Arizona, Arkansas, Duke, Florida, Iowa, Kentucky, Michigan, Michigan State, Minnesota, North Carolina, Ohio State, Penn State, Purdue, Rutgers, Texas, USC and Villanova, among others.

Other manufacturers with a presence in men's basketball: Adidas (Indiana, Nebraska, Tennessee, Texas Tech, Washington) and Wilson (Cincinnati, Maryland, Northwestern, St. John's, UCLA, Wisconsin).

Worth noting: Michigan and other programs keep a stash of every brand on hand to practice with in the days leading up to road games against non-Nike schools.



FIXING COLLEGE SPORTS

THREE WISHES: Morality check

It's not any reform or rule change that several panelists put atop their fix-it list but rather a value they'd like to see make a comeback.

INTEGRITY



"College athletics does not suffer from a lack of resources; it suffers from a lack of personal and professional integrity," says Arkansas athletic director **Hunter Yurchek**. "This issue exists both directly within college athletics and among those tied to it but operating outside of the industry."

HONESTY



"I'd change the narrative around college athletics and get it back to the truth," says Grand Canyon AD **Jamie Boggs**. "Too much of it is shaped by attorneys, agents and parts of the media pushing an 'us versus them' story with our student-athletes. That's not the reality we live every day on campus. We've always been student-athlete advocates."

SPORTSMANSHIP



"One thing that needs additional attention in all sports is the trash talking and unsportsmanlike behavior directed at opponents," says former ump **Randy Bruns**, now the NCAA's secretary/rules editor for baseball. "This is a cultural issue in our society. An athlete can compete to win without overt language and in-your-face types of behavior meant to intimidate or put down the opponents or draw undue attention to themselves."

82. Think safety first in college baseball

A rule change designed to reduce collisions between runners and fielders — placing two bags side by side at first base — just wrapped up Year 2 in Division I.

The standard white bag, in fair territory, is used exclusively by the fielder on initial plays at first.

The "safety bag," colored green or orange in foul territory, is used by baserunners on those same plays.

From there, the rules vary: If a wild throw pulls the first baseman off the bag, either the runner or the fielder can use either portion of either bag; on extra-base hits, the runner is allowed to use the white bag when rounding first; once the runner safely reaches first, he then can only use the white bag; and so on.

The reviews, as you might imagine, have been mixed.

"In some cases, you can touch either bag and not be punished. Yet, if at any point you are standing on the wrong base, according to the rules, you are out, even though that base was used to benefit you just seconds earlier," says Toledo slugger **Troy Sudbrook**, an athlete representative on the Division I Baseball Oversight Committee that put the rule in place.

"Overall, I believe this rule has caused a great amount of confusion for baseball players who have gone their whole life without using a safety base, and although it removes the chances of one or two collisions a year, the impact is not worth the change of mindset, rules and how the history of the game has played out."

Of the 32 Division I baseball coaches who responded to our "keep it or lose it" survey, 21 voted for sticking with the safety bag; 10 would dump it, mostly in favor of the "pizza box" base enlarged from 15 to 18 inches by Major League Baseball in 2023; and one (Missouri's **Kerrick Johnson**) was indifferent.

Here's a rundown of respondents' rationale for voting the way they did:

It has made the sport safer, which was the intent all along.



"I have seen some ugly collisions and injuries at first base," says Illinois' **Dan Hartleb**, who among other things likes that the change "allows more room for the runner and defender on throws that take the first baseman into the baseline."

"The best player I've ever coached had his career ended on a collision at first base that would've been avoided with a safety base," Indiana's **Jeff Mercer** says. "I understand the hassle it can cause at times, but it's worth it to prevent catastrophic injuries."

Expressing similar sentiments: the head coaches at **Ball State, Belmont, Central Michigan, Delaware, Grand Canyon, Iona, Maryland, Ohio State, Ole Miss, San Diego State,**



Southeast Missouri, St. John's, Texas, UCLA, UConn, UNC-Wilmington and Wake Forest.

College baseball ought to resemble the majors in as many ways as possible.

"Get rid of the safety base!" says 14-year big-leaguer **Willie Bloomquist**, now the coach at Arizona State. "Make it one larger base, maybe twice the size." "I'm in favor of synchronizing this rule with Major League Baseball,"



says Bradley's **Justin Dedman**. "We want the pizza boxes!"

"Big bags for all," says Maine's **Nick Derba**, another fan of one 18-inch first base, like his coaching peers at **Air Force, Dallas Baptist, Florida State, Kansas, Milwaukee, Penn State and Southern Miss.**



Switching now would come at a cost.

That's not the only reason rules committee chair **Billy O'Connor** of Xavier is for sticking with it, but it's a factor, for sure.

"When we instituted the mandatory visible pitch clock a few years ago, there was incredible pushback about costs associated, especially from lower levels, to the point that Division III went to great lengths to not implement it. And realistically, you could have a pitch clock for less than \$1,000," he says.

"To change to the 18-inch MLB base would necessitate the repositioning of three base pegs. This wouldn't be a huge deal on a dirt field, but on a turf field, you're looking at a cost between \$5,000 and \$10,000, and the majority of college fields are turf at this point."

"All for three additional inches on the base."



83. Don't make college football's finest wait three years before going pro



One of **J Leman's** big ideas would require the blessing of the NFL, but it's worth another shot, says a former agent who tried two decades ago.

The requirement that prospects be three years removed from high school before declaring for the NFL Draft is "a relic from bygone eras, and I'm not even sure how it is even enforceable in this era," says Leman, a former All-American linebacker at Illinois.

Leman points to Jeremiah Smith, the all-everything wide receiver about enter his junior season at Ohio State, as someone who ought to be playing on Sundays, not Saturdays. That would have the added benefit of freeing up who-knows-how-many-millions in the Buckeyes' bloated NIL budget for others.

It was another Ohio State playmaker — Maurice Clarett — who unsuccessfully challenged the draft rules 22 years ago, which his agent insists all these years later was a grave injustice.

Here's why, says **Josh Luchs**:

1. If an athlete is physically and mentally ready, there's no justifiable reason to block their ability to earn a living in their chosen profession.

"No other major industry has a collectively imposed waiting period like this. The league already has extensive medical, psychological and performance evaluation systems that can determine readiness far better than a blanket age or class rule," says Luchs, who's no longer in the agent business after confessing to Sports Illustrated in 2010 that he'd paid college players, a no-no at the time.

2. The player-safety justification doesn't hold up under scrutiny.

"The NFL's interest in maintaining the three-year rule has more to do with preserving the NCAA as its de facto — and cost-free — developmental pipeline than it does with genuine concern for athletes. History shows that elite prospects like Adrian Peterson, Leonard Fournette or Jadeveon Clowney were physically NFL-ready well before their third college season."

3. NIL may complicate, but not cure, the inequity.

"While NIL deals give athletes more financial flexibility in college, they don't substitute for the right to pursue full professional earnings — or for the bargaining power and benefits that come with being an employee rather than an amateur under NCAA rules."



JOSH LUCHS

84. Load up coaching contracts with more incentives, fewer guarantees

One way to avoid eight-figure buyouts like the ones that caused a stir this offseason — \$54 million for Brian Kelly from LSU, \$33 million for Jonathan Smith from Michigan State, etc. — is to keep coaches' guaranteed pay as low as possible.

It's all gotten more than a little "absurd," says 1961 UI alum **Bob Berdahl**, the former chancellor at Cal and president of Texas.

"It may be OK to pay a coach \$8 million to \$10 million per year,

but to bind the university to multiple-year contracts requiring buyouts of five times that much is truly obscene," Berdahl says.

"I think a proper incentive program might be advisable, with a base pay of X dollars for winning five or six games, and larger incentives for wins beyond that, so that the buyout, if there is to be a multiple-year contract, would be based on a more modest base pay."

"I assume that if a coach wins 10 games, they will earn quite a bit, but if they are only winning half of their games, I can't see a huge guarantee and a multiple-year buyout."



GO FIGURE

A look at how much public-school members of Power 4 conferences spent collectively last year on severance pay for coaches relieved of duty before their contracts were up, according to the Knight-Newhouse College Athletics Database:

Conf.	Total	Most	Least
SEC	\$30.28 million	Texas A&M (\$8.1M)	Bama, UGA, Tenn. (\$0)
Big 12	\$26.86 million	Oklahoma St. (\$6.3M)	Arizona, Iowa St. (\$0)
Big Ten	\$26.14 million	Indiana (\$8.5M)	Washington (\$0)
ACC	\$21.73 million	Ga. Tech (\$4.9M)	Cal, Va. Tech (\$880,000)

85. Crack down on roster tamperers



It's "rampant in every sport," but contributing to turning volleyball in particular into "a free-agent market each year and disrupting the season for competing athletes," says

former Illini coach **Kevin Hambly**, who steered Stanford to back-to-back national titles in 2018-19.

"How," Hambly asks, "can you be committed to winning at the highest levels when you are looking for another place to play at the same time? I would want to take away scholarships, issue fines — hit the coaches where it matters — and ban teams from postseason competition for proven tampering."

One encouraging sign that the NCAA's infractions division is taking coaches' concerns seriously: In April, the Division I cabinet gave its blessing to a penalty process for schools that add "ghost transfers" to their rosters.

That's what it's called when schools circumvent the rules, luring a transfer who didn't enter the portal and signing them to a revenue-sharing agreement or permitting them to practice or compete.

The penalties are stiff: a suspension of the head coach for half of the season and a fine equivalent to 20 percent of the sport's annual budget. And if a school fails to self-impose those penalties, another 10 percent would be tacked onto the coach's suspension and 5 percent would be added to the fine.



Provided

FIXING COLLEGE SPORTS

86. Convince one of college football's biggest brands to give up its independence



Michael Reaves/Getty Images/TNS

During a recent joint TV appearance, Auburn football coach-turned-Alabama U.S. senator Tommy Tuberville tried to convince former NFL MVP **Joe Theismann** that it was time for his alma mater to join a conference, once and for all.

Like Notre Dame, Theismann wasn't having it — not yet, at least.

"Once a superconference is created — and I think it will be, with approximately 32 teams — then I think it's a viable conversation," says Theismann, one of 55 Fighting Irish greats in the College Football Hall of Fame.

"Like I told (Tuberville), it wouldn't be advantageous for Notre Dame football to join a conference now because what's that conversation going to look like a few years from now?"

Calls for the Irish to become a full-fledged, football-playing conference member — whether that's in the ACC, which they belong to in every other sport, or the Big Ten, with which they had exploratory talks in 1999 — have only grown louder at a time when seemingly everything about college sports as we know it is on the table.

The familiar response from Touchdown Jesus' team:



Why would Notre Dame give up the sweetheart deal it has now:

→ A new, unique-to-Notre-Dame guarantee that, as long as the Irish finish in the top 12 of the final regular-season College Football Playoff rankings, they will make the field, after being left out last season.

→ A longstanding TV deal with NBC, which pays a reported \$50 million annually to broadcast Notre Dame games.

"Joining a conference obviously means they share revenue," Irish legend **Joe Montana** says. "If there are other members of a conference that have similar types of revenue that Notre Dame brings in, it might be a possibility."

(There aren't, as was proven again last week, when SoFi Technologies

agreed to the richest uniform patch deal in Division I athletics history — a reported \$18 million to \$20 million annually for its logo to appear on Irish uniforms).

"Notre Dame is one of the biggest brands in sports," says the school's most famous walk-on, **Daniel "Rudy" Ruettiger**. "They have to protect that."



The contract with NBC is due to expire after the 2029 season. Maybe then the Irish will go conference shopping? Fat chance, say two insiders.



"The only way Notre Dame joins a conference is by force — if FBS presidents vote to eliminate Notre Dame's road to the playoff, or if they decide they won't schedule Notre Dame unless it is part of a conference," USA Today's **Matt Hayes** says.

"There is a less than 1 percent chance — basically if the entire current system falls apart and it somehow

forced Notre Dame to join a conference as a football member, then it'll happen," ESPN's **Dan Wetzel** says.

"Other than that, there is no motivation — competitively, financially or culturally. I think there are higher odds, although still low, by 2030, that more schools become independent. Ohio State, Michigan and Penn State, among others, would benefit financially, at least in athletics, for leaving the Big Ten and going independent and setting up a scheduling partnership with each other — and maybe Notre Dame."



87. Ban prop bets on college sports

On the mid-January day that the Department of Justice announced it had filed charges against 17 college basketball players for their role in alleged game fixing, NCAA President Charlie Baker wrote to the gaming commissions of every state that allowed so-called prop bets, pleading with them to stop.

One state he didn't have to worry about was Vermont, whose sports-wagering regulator banned bets on individual player performances — like how many points a star would score that night — a year earlier, two months after on-line sports betting was legalized in the Green Mountain State.

"Why? Integrity," says **Wendy Knight**, commissioner of Vermont's Department of Liquor and Lottery.

"Hearing about college student-athletes being bullied, harassed and threatened by their fellow students was repulsive to me."

Louisiana, Maryland and Ohio took similar action, Baker noted in his letter to states that hadn't done their part "to better protect student-athletes, game officials and the integrity of NCAA competitions."

For now, nine states have no restrictions on prop bets — Arkansas, Kansas, Kentucky, Michigan, Missouri, Nevada, North Carolina, North Dakota and Wyoming.

Illinois is among eight where prop bets are permitted, but not on any team or player based in its state.



form of a long-term annuity that contributes to financial support in the distant future."



The Associated Press

89. Push back Heisman voting until after the College Football Playoff

→ **For it:** Ohio State coach **Ryan Day**, 1997 finalist **Ryan Leaf** and half of the 20 official Heisman state coordinators who responded to our survey, representing **Illinois** (our **Bob Asmussen**), **Indiana**, **Kansas**, **New Jersey**, **North Carolina**, **North Dakota**, **South Carolina**, **Vermont**, **Washington** and **Wyoming**.

→ **Against it:** The Nebraska quarterback who 25 years ago won the sport's most prestigious individual honor. Says **Eric Crouch**: "I understand what Coach Day is trying to say here, but the Heisman Trophy must remain available to all Division I college football players, not just the teams and players that make the playoff."

→ **For it:** 1988 Heisman finalist **Steve Walsh**, who quarterbacked Miami to a national title a year earlier.

"The entire college schedule

needs to be revamped" once the playoff field expands, "so why not move everything back to early February?" Adds Walsh: "Having the Heisman Trophy winner named after the playoff would eliminate the so-called Heisman jinx, but Fernando Mendoza has already defeated that one."

→ **Against it:** Syracuse 1987 Heisman runner-up **Don McPherson** and the state coordinators for **Delaware**, **Georgia**, **Louisiana**, **Missouri**, **Montana**, **New York**, **Ohio**, **South Dakota**, **Texas** and **Michigan**. The latter is longtime East Lansing media personality **Jack Ebling**, who says: "I'd favor leaving the Heisman as is and having a second award, like the Bill Russell or the Conn Smythe awards, to honor the top performer in the playoffs. Just don't call it the Loren Tate Award."

90. Outlaw endorsement deals with businesses that could be hazardous to one's health

In 2024, the USC Trojans made history by becoming the first athletic department to add a cannabis company as an official sponsor — Cookies, founded by a Bay Area rapper.

A year later, Louisville's athletics department struck what was touted as a "landmark partnership" with Cornbread Hemp, the first THC beverage sponsorship in Division I athletics.

At Tennessee, Ole Smoky Distillery is the "exclusive moonshine of the Vols" — just as Teeling Whiskey's Notre Dame football, Eric LeGrand Whiskey is the official hard alcohol drink of the Rutgers Scarlet Knights and fans at Ohio Stadium can celebrate big plays with a shot of Buckeye Vodka.

Enough's enough, says **Jim Lange**, executive director of Ohio State's Higher Education Center for Alcohol and Drug Misuse



Prevention and Recovery.

"There should be a ban on college athletics departments entering into an endorsement relationship with companies that could be detrimental to the student-athletes and more generally the campus as a whole," Lange says. "I would include alcohol, cannabis, tobacco and betting, inclusive of prediction market platforms."

"The reason for this is both apparent and also strategic. The business model for athletics programs includes using the student-athletes as the hook for the eyes of the advertisers. But each of these products are actively causing harms to students on every campus."

"Every campus must, by law, have a prevention program to mitigate the harm of alcohol and other drugs. So while one part of a campus, athletics, is profiting from these products, another part is often given few resources to attempt to keep students more safe from these products."

91. Stop jacking up ticket prices to pay the bills



Already, says College Football Playoff selection committee member **Ivan Maisel**, the sport he covered for ESPN has "priced itself out of the range of the

middle-class family, and I wonder what that means for the cultivation of the next generation of fans."

"The memories of games I attended in my childhood are a lot stronger than those of hundreds of games I covered over four decades as a working journalist," Maisel says. "The magic of a college football stadium on an autumn Saturday is as intoxicating as ever, give or take a few TV timeouts."

"College football is fighting the ubiquity of Xboxes and iPhones for the attention of kids today."

"Today's wide-eyed kid just might be tomorrow's donor."

92. Like Omaha in baseball and Oklahoma City in softball, give the Division I golf championships a permanent home

Two-time national-title-winning Texas men's coach **John Fields** knows just the place: southern California's North Course at Omni LaCosta, which just wrapped up Year 3 of a five-year arrangement.



93. Form a separate association — not the NCAA — to administer major-college football



It's time for big-boy football and the rest of college athletics to go their separate ways, says **Scott Hirko**, a sports management professor and analytics guru who co-created the Knight-Newhouse College Athletics Database.

"The horse has already left the barn: America is crazy-insane about football," says Hirko, who believes an association other than the NCAA should administer football for the 65 programs that generate revenue from the sport.

"This new association can impact both Title IX and remove the NCAA's stupid commitment to spend money defending big-time football in the courts, when it gets no money from football," Hirko says.

"I had dinner with Dr. John DiBaggio, former Michigan State University president, about 15 years ago. I told him what was needed in the NCAA was for 'a president to fall on their sword' to change the system."

"His response: 'I did, and look what happened to me.'"

FIXING COLLEGE SPORTS

96. Rewrite the replay rules in women's basketball



The duration of the average game is creeping closer to the two-hour mark, says **Jon Levinson**, who'd know as the NCAA's secretary/rules editor for women's basketball. His solution for shortening the lengths of games? Enact a rule that most replay reviews must be initiated by the head coach's appeal or challenge.

"While our rules committees have done a tremendous job of adopting rules to maintain the flow and pace of play, replay reviews interrupt this flow, often for a significant amount of time due to issues with the replay system or the time it takes to find the definitive angle for a play — if one exists," he says.

"Allowing officials to use replay on their own — such as for the severity of a foul or for an unobserved flagrant foul — slow down the game. If an official believes that the foul they ruled should be a flagrant foul, then make the ruling at that moment and leave it to the head coach to appeal if they disagree with the severity of the foul — and vice versa.

"Aside from fighting situations, replay reviews conducted at a media timeout or those involving scoring, for which I would not adjust the current rule, let the head coach decide whether to initiate a replay review."

97. Return to the (really) old days of college athletics

On the short list for the most-unlikely-to-pass proposal we heard is this one, from University of Illinois athletic board member **Christopher Kempf**.



Says the former four-year varsity runner at Ohio's John Carroll University, now a UI associate professor of English: "College athletics should go back to the intramural and recreation model of the 19th century, when sports were viewed as one component in students' holistic liberal education," he says.

"The modern athletic department has very little to do with the educational ambitions of the university, despite its frequent protestations to the contrary. Rather, athletics siphons off major donors who are paying not for top-tier faculty and educational resources — we cannot even print in color in the English Department — but for transfer athletes who are already semi-professionals elsewhere."



Duke athletics

Former Duke quarterback **Darian Mensah** is reported to have landed one of the richest NIL deals of the transfer-portal era.

98. Open the books

Was basketball All-American Yaxel Lendeborg really offered upwards of \$9 million by Kentucky before settling on Michigan?

Is Duke transfer Darian Mensah really getting \$10 million to finish out his college career at quarterback for Miami?

Did Texas football really spend \$23 million to lure 13 transfer-portal targets to Austin?

We wish we knew. But NIL deals remain off-limits under public records laws in every state.



Should they be? Chicago-based sports investigative reporter **Daniel Libit**, who's written about the topic for Sportico, thinks not.

A case could be made that "privately negotiated NIL deals

between players and third parties were not the public's business," he says, "but that argument collapsed with the House v. NCAA settlement.

"Once public universities began making direct payments to athletes, those payments — and the contracts governing them — became government business. That is precisely the kind of activity public records laws exist to illuminate. Yet many public universities in Illinois and around the country have responded by claiming that these contracts should remain secret because disclosure would put them in a competitive disadvantage in recruiting."

That's not a winning argument, says Libit, who has filed a number of open records lawsuits against athletic departments, including one challenging his own alma mater, Wisconsin.

"The government should not get to operate in the dark simply because transparency makes it more difficult," he says. "Competitive disadvantage has never been a blanket exemption from open records laws, and it should not become one here. Where else would we tolerate this logic? Should cities start withholding all vendor contracts because a neighboring municipality might outbid it? Should state agencies conceal all employee salaries because that information could complicate recruitment or retention? Of course not.

"So what makes college athletics different? More to the point, what makes college athletics more deserving of secrecy than every other function of government?"

99. Appoint a college football czar

"Someone who has no conference affiliation, a person who will make decisions to grow the game," says former Big Ten crew chief **Jerry McGinn**, now a rules analyst for ESPN.

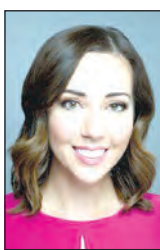


"The name that has been tossed around is Nick Saban. Whoever takes on this role must have total authority to make tough decisions and the power to implement repercussions on individuals and institutions."

Some of college athletics' most plugged-in insiders remain skeptical that this will ever come to be — "None of the commissioners are going to anoint another individual to 'be their boss,'" On3's **Brett McMurphy** says — but

four of them nominated candidates nevertheless:

→ **Stewart Mandel (The Athletic)** picks ... a recently retired coach, like Wake Forest's Dave Clawson. "Someone who has the boots-on-the-ground knowledge that commissioners don't, but also understands the business side of things."



→ **Nicole Auerbach (NBC Sports)** picks ... former TD Ameritrade CEO and Coastal Carolina coach Joe Moglia. "His experience in both business and coaching makes him uniquely qualified

for the role. He would hold both coaches and players accountable to their contracts, and he believes in changing the way college football media rights are structured. He's visionary and very smart."

→ **Ralph Russo (The Athletic)** picks ... United Athletic Conference commissioner Oliver Luck. "He has worked in a wide range of professional and college sports positions. Maybe not him, but somebody with his resume, I think, would be best for this hypothetical position."



→ **McMurphy picks** ... American Conference commissioner Tim Perneti or NFL executive VP Peter O'Reilly. "I think those two guys would crush it."

100. Hold a college football player draft, a la the NFL



This isn't just the kooky proposal of one of academia's loudest voices for college sports reform — former Indiana professor and noted Bob Knight antagonist **Murray Sperber**.

The idea of a college sports draft has also piqued the interest of one of football's winningest coaches.

"It's not too far-fetched for me to think there's a way that you could actually have a draft and build it like the NFL," says Ohio State's **Ryan Day**, who's quick to add: "I know that seems a little out there."



How Sperber's version would work: "Using the Major League Baseball model, schools in the top conferences would draft from the large pool of players eligible to be college freshmen. How college sports works out the details will be fascinating: possibly by conference with the team that finished last going first or bottom to top for all schools in Division I football.

"The same for other sports, probably for all college sports with pro athletes.

"I see two immediate results: the media would love it and devote an ocean of coverage throughout the year, and many smaller and/or more academic schools would opt out of the pro model and have cost-efficient athletic programs."

94-95. Let men's golf teams play more three-day tournaments but keep the women's format as is



Illinois athletics photos

Count 12-time Big Ten Coach of the Year **Mike Small** among those in favor of adding more days of competition for Division I men's golf teams.

For nearly as long as **Mike Small** has been coaching the sport at Illinois, one issue has been a source of debate and discussion throughout men's golf: How many tournaments and days should Division I teams be allowed to compete in any one season?

As it reads now, the NCAA rulebook limits both men's and women's teams to 24 dates of regular-season competition and no more than 10 events, which 12 of the 17 men's coaches who responded to our survey said they'd like to see changed.

It's not the 10-tournament limit they oppose. It's the cramming-them-into-24-days part, which often leads to teams forgoing popular three-day events for two-day ones: 36 holes one day, 18 the next.

So against the current rule is **Mike Wilson** that Wisconsin's men's coach wrote a paper about it, which he shipped off to the NCAA golf committee and shared with us.

"We talk about student-athlete welfare all the time, yet we ask kids to get up at 5 a.m. Go play 36 holes. Get back to the hotel at 9. Study for an exam. Get back up at 5 and then play 18 more holes at 8 a.m., and then maybe drive seven hours or get on a plane to get home.

"We played a tournament in Arizona last March. It was 105 degrees and we asked our guys to play 36 holes after playing an 18-hole practice round the day before in 105-degree heat. Then finish the final round in 105. Then jump on a plane.

"Back in the day, the two-day events made sense, especially if they're on a Saturday-Sunday to not miss school. Now, with the ability to do some online schoolwork and keep up with your studies on the road, I'd prefer three-day events."



So would former Small Illini assistant **Dave Pezzino**, now the head coach at UConn, and his peers at **Arizona, Arizona State, Oklahoma, Purdue, San Jose State, UNLV and Virginia**.

Small favors a system with nine three-day events, excluding the exempt Big Ten championships.

"This would eliminate the 12-hour-long, 36-hole days and allow the players to consistently experience college golf tournaments in the same format as other respected golf competitions," he says.

Ball State women's coach **Cameron Andry** seconds that, saying the "36-hole days are brutal for all involved — student-athletes, coaches, fans, tournament staff and volunteers."



HOSCH



UM-HOLMES

Among women's golf coaches who responded to our survey, Andry is in the minority. Ten of 12 favor keeping the format as is, with Cal State Fullerton's **Kathryn Hosch** saying "my budget and time can't afford more days," Notre Dame's **Breanna Jenco** noting the difficulty of reserving courses for "three-day events all the time" and UCLA's **Alicia Um-Holmes** a fan of the "flexibility in scheduling" the 24-day cap brings.

Sharing that sentiment: the women's coaches at **Arizona, Colorado, East Carolina, Eastern Michigan, Florida International, LSU and Northwestern** and the men's coaches at **Duke, Nevada, Pepperdine, Stanford and Washington**.



Illinois women's golf coach **Renee Slone** holds up the 2023 Big Ten championship trophy her program won on a Sunday morning in Pittsburgh while exiting the jet that brought them back to Willard Airport later that evening in Savoy.