

How long should college athletes play?

The NCAA is about to answer that question

BY ERIC OLSON
AP COLLEGE FOOTBALL WRITER

The NCAA is on the cusp of extending Division I athlete eligibility from four years of competition to five and essentially setting an age limit, just the latest development on a topic that has been a point of contention in college athletics for decades.

None other than Walter Camp, the "Father of American Football," was three games into his seventh season — yes, seventh — when his playing career at Yale ended because of injury in 1882. Another football luminary, Amos Alonzo Stagg, was 27 when he wrapped up his fifth season at Yale in 1889.

Multisport great Jim Thorpe played football at Carlisle for the traditional four years, but he dropped out after his second season in 1908 to play minor league baseball and didn't come back for his third season of college football until 1911.

Michael Oriard, who has authored four books on the rise of college football and was a Notre Dame offensive lineman in the 1960s, said he was surprised when his research showed so many examples of men playing into their late 20s and early 30s in the sport's early years.

"When I was playing, it was really important that there not be physically more mature players out on the field beating the crap out of us younger guys," he said. "I don't know why a lot of them kept playing

in each individual case, but a lot of really famous players did. It was just part of the game."

The new age-based eligibility model, which could be approved by the NCAA Division I Council on Friday, would start the eligibility clock for a D-I athlete when they graduate from high school or turn 19, whichever comes first.

The change would address circumstances that led to the aging of rosters across all sports. First, the NCAA offered a one-time, one-year extension to athletes who had their 2020-21 season canceled or altered because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Unlimited transfers have incentivized coaches to replace departing athletes with older transfers instead of high school and junior college prospects. More recently, dozens of athletes have filed lawsuits seeking to extend their careers, often for financial reasons.

1855 HARVARD-YALE CONTROVERSY

It would be easy to write it off as another symptom of out-of-control modern college athletics. Really, it's nothing new.

Back in 1855, Yale protested when it discovered the coxswain on Harvard's rowing team was an alumnus rather than a currently enrolled undergraduate. It was the first known eligibility dispute in college sports history, and there was no NCAA to settle the matter in those days.

Neither was there a governing body in the early days of college football, and the sport was a veritable free-for-all.

Mercenaries, known as "tramp players," would show

up on campuses and never take a class, let alone enroll. They would get paid by alumni or student groups to play a game, or several games, and then move on to the next school. Some were well into their 30s.

According to Camp's biographer, Julie Des Jardins, it was Camp himself who, as Yale's player-coach, proposed in 1882 to limit eligibility to five years. Yes, this was the same Camp who played six-plus seasons.

HANDSHAKE AGREEMENT

The matter of eligibility got serious by the 1890s when Harvard, Yale and Princeton — the eastern powers that controlled the sport — decided something needed to be done and came up with a handshake agreement, loosely regulated, allowing four years of competition for undergraduates only.

The policy was formalized among the Big Three in 1906, Des Jardins wrote in "Walter Camp: Football and the Modern Man," after Yale graduates confirmed Harvard had a center who had played four years at a school in Indiana before he enrolled in Harvard's law school and joined the Crimson.

The organization that would become the NCAA also formed in 1906 and its immediate concern was to curb the violence, sometimes fatal, that had marred the sport. The 38 charter members agreed eligibility standards were necessary, but only insofar as they related to amateurism, not the number of years an athlete could play.

"What firm eligibility meant was whether or not the kid was a bonafide student and

not a longshoreman paid a couple hundred bucks to come fight for your alma mater," Oriard said.

WEINKE WON HEISMAN AT 28

In piecemeal fashion, four years of eligibility became standard among eastern schools and the Western Conference (now the Big Ten) in the 1910s. The concept of redshirting began when in 1961 the NCAA began allowing five years to complete four years of competition.

There have always been some exceptions to the conventional college career spanning the ages of 18 and 22. Florida State's Chris Weinke won the 2000 Heisman Trophy at 28, Brandon Weeden was 28 when he threw his last pass for Oklahoma State in 2012 and just last season Monte Harrison caught a pass for Arkansas at age 30.

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LEGAL NOTICE

PUBLIC NOTICE

Notice is hereby given that the City of Elizabethtown will receive sealed proposals for the design-build of property owned by the City of Elizabethtown located at 301 East Dixie Avenue. Any party desiring to submit a proposal must submit a sealed bid to the City Clerk, Elizabethtown City Hall, 200 West Dixie Avenue by 11:00 am EDT, 10:00 am CDT, on Wednesday, June 17, 2026 at which time they will be opened publicly. The full Request for Proposal (RFP) outlining submission requirements and including pertinent property information may be obtained from the City Clerk.

The City of Elizabethtown reserves the right to reject any and all proposals or to accept a proposal as a whole or for any part, and to waive any informalities or irregularities in the proposals received where the best interest of the City may be served.

/s/ Jeffrey H. Gregory, Mayor

Attest: Jessica J. Graham, City Clerk



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Notice is hereby given that the City of Elizabethtown will receive sealed bids for non-exclusive annual services for concrete installation at the office of the City Clerk, City Hall, 3rd floor, 200 West Dixie Avenue, P.O. Box 550, Elizabethtown, Kentucky 42702 until 10:00 AM EST (9:00 AM CST) on Wednesday, June 24th, 2026, at which time they will be publicly opened and read aloud. The successful bidder shall provide proof of insurance and licenses as specified. Bid forms and specifications may be obtained from the City's Engineering Department. (270-763-4218).

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