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# **“He’s an Asshole”: Power 5 College Football Athletes Navigating a “Shady” Coaching Transition**

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Stacey A. Forsythe, and Sarah Stokowski**

Head coaches play a crucial role in shaping both athletes’ athletic experiences and the complex team system. Consequently, coaching transitions have a tremendous effect on college athletes. Through the lens of transition theory, the purpose of this case study was to investigate the effect of multiple head coaching changes on NCAA Division I Power Five football athletes. Eight football athletes completed a 27-item open-ended questionnaire. Data analysis revealed three explicit, meaningful themes: support, achievement, and consistency. This study strives to assist athletic administrators and coaches in becoming increasingly aware of the potential impact that these abrupt coaching transitions can have on the athlete experience. Additionally, through the voices of the participants, this study attempts to assist college athletes in navigating a coaching transition.

**Keywords:** athletic leadership, athlete experience, transition theory, football, coaching transition, NCAA

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## Introduction

Between 2015 and 2019, a minimum of 20 head football coaches were replaced every season across the 128 Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) football programs (Bender, 2021a). Previous research has shown head coaches significantly impact college athletes' school selection (Andrew et al., 2016), decision-making and development (Becker, 2009), and emotional states (Shipherd et al., 2019), as well as the team's culture and dynamics (Shipherd et al., 2019). Thus, head coaches play a crucial role in shaping both athletes' athletic experiences and the complex team system. Consequently, their turnover has affected athletes in numerous ways (Eidelson, 1997; Gilson et al., 2013; Heller et al., 2016; Shipherd et al., 2019).

Less than two years into a six-year contract, an NCAA Division I Power Five institution fired their head football coach, Coach Y. The university initially hired Coach Y to replace Coach X, who was also terminated before his contract expired. Hence, athletes recruited under Coach X were forced to endure their second coaching transition. The university's decision to fire Coach Y after two seasons provided a unique opportunity to leverage athletes' prior experience with a coaching transition to explore their attitudes amidst a second coaching transition. Accordingly, the purpose of this case study was to investigate the effect of multiple coaching changes on NCAA Division I Power Five football athletes. This study set out to ascertain what challenges football athletes face during head coaching changes.

## Brief Literature Review

### Coaching Transitions

According to Grusky (1963), a coach's actions significantly influence their team's performance. Thus, when teams perform poorly, coaching changes become more probable, reflecting an inverse relationship between team performance and coach turnover. Similarly, Gamson and Scotch (1964) argued that coaching transitions help deter stakeholder anxiety stemming from a team's inadequate performance. It is, therefore, clear from a strategic perspective why athletic programs continue to fuel the so-called "coaching carousel" each year by hiring successful coaches away from other schools and firing unsuccessful coaches prior to the end of their contracts. In either instance, however, it is the athletes that are forced to acclimate to the potential turmoil resulting from the transition from one coach to another. This is particularly true when the incoming coach seeks to implement a different system or culture (Johnson et al., 2015). Given the influence of coaches' backgrounds, personalities, and leadership styles on team dynamics and overall program culture (Shipherd et al., 2019), where the replacement coach is hired from

can dictate the degree of turmoil resulting from the transition (Johnson et al., 2015). For example, an athletic department hiring from within might feel less impact and greater consistency than one hiring from outside the program. Additionally, an internal hire may be likelier to already have relationships with athletes in the program, which affects the initial strength of the coach-athlete dyad.

## Coach-Athlete Dyad

To illustrate aspects of the coach-athlete dyad, Jowett (2005, 2006, 2007) developed a conceptual model based on the interconnected constructs of closeness, commitment, complementarity, and co-orientation (i.e., the 4 Cs). Each construct explains emotions, thoughts, or behaviors attributed to either member of the coach-athlete dyad (Jowett, 2007). Closeness explains the intuitive ties between coaches and athletes like respect, trust, and appreciation. Commitment represents the emotional connection and long period of adjustment to one another. Complementarity indicates transaction behaviors such as cooperation, affiliation, and responsiveness between coaches and athletes. Finally, co-orientation illustrates how subjective experiences and perceptions are interrelated to both coaches and athletes.

Together, the 4 Cs coalesce into two perspectives that drive how coaches and athletes perceive their relationship to one another (Jowett, 2006). First is the direct perspective, which drives personal feelings, behaviors, and thoughts toward the other member of the dyad—in other words, the degree to which one member of the dyad likes the other. Second is the meta perspective, which indicates how one thinks the relationship feels, behaves within the relationship, and perceives the other party within the relationship—in other words, to what extent one member of the dyad thinks the other likes them. The more aligned each member's direct and meta perspectives are to the other, the better the relationship between them (Jowett, 2009). Thus, it is important to take into consideration the relationship between a new coach and athletes returning to the program.

Accordingly, Sievert (2011) indicated that one of the decisions athletes face from coaching changes is deciding whether to stay or enter the transfer portal. When a coaching change occurs, athletes must choose whether to honor their existing agreement with their institution or re-engage in the recruitment process to find either better playing conditions or a better athlete-coach fit. It is worth noting that the impact of such decisions has been reduced by recent changes in NCAA policy that allow athletes immediate eligibility following their decision to transfer (Hosick, 2021). Pate et al. (2011) found that establishing trust with new coaches, understanding expectations, and concern about their future were primary concerns for athletes faced with coaching transitions. Consequently, the authors suggested that new coaches engage in one-on-one meetings with returning

athletes to build trust and foster deeper relationships to, in effect, (re)recruit those players back into the program. This approach may also assist incoming coaches with better understanding how their athletes deal with transition.

## Theoretical Framework

Ideally, coaches should provide a thread of consistency throughout an athlete's time on campus. Given the commercial and competitive emphases in college sport, particularly in Power Five Division I revenue-generating programs, there is a higher likelihood that coaching changes will occur because of termination for poor on-field production or coaches looking to advance their careers (Hersch, 2012). Consequently, college athletes are forced to deal with a resulting period of transition where one coach—who was likely a factor in their initial desire to attend that university—transitions out and another transitions in.

Transition is defined as “any event, or non-event, [which] results in changed relationships, routines, assumptions, and roles” (Anderson et al., 2011, p. 39). The transition process can be viewed in three phases: moving in, moving through, and moving out (Anderson et al., 2011). When individuals move into a period of transition they conduct a primary appraisal, to determine whether the transition is likely to be positive, negative, or neutral, and a secondary appraisal, to determine access to resources that will aid in coping with the transition. As they move through, these appraisals may change as more information becomes available and the impact of the transition period becomes clearer. Individuals move out of a transition period as they begin to reach a new equilibrium and develop the necessary mechanisms to deal with the changes they experience. There are four factors, commonly referred to as the 4 S's, that are said to influence an individual's ability to cope with transition: *situation, self, support, and strategies* (Anderson et al., 2011).

Situation outlines the type of transition and the context in which an individual is dealing with a transition period. Transitions can either be *anticipated* (e.g., college enrollment), *unanticipated* (e.g., unexpected coaching change), or *non-events* (Anderson et al., 2011). Non-events occur when a desired outcome does not materialize (e.g., anticipating a promotion that does not come). Each type of transition can be positive, negative, or somewhere in between depending on the individual's relationship (i.e., proximal or distal) to the transition and its implications. Beyond the type of transition, the context in which the transition takes place is also important for determining the transition's potential impact (i.e., extent to which day-to-day life is disrupted). Context includes what initially triggered the transition, the timing of the transition in relation to other life events, duration of the transition, perceived control over the transition, extent to which

the transition requires role changes, previous experience with a similar transition, and concurrent stressors.

Self is primarily concerned with two areas directly related to how individuals internally view and approach transition: *personal and demographic characteristics* and *psychological resources* (Anderson et al., 2011). Characteristics encompass aspects such as socioeconomic status, gender, physical health, and race/ethnicity, while psychological resources refer to things like outlook, mental health, religious affiliation, and spirituality. The combination of the two forms a complex interplay that undergird one's ability to recognize and deal with transition periods (Goodson & Anderson, 2012).

Support refers to external factors available to individuals as they progress through the transition process. Supports can vary in type, function, and stability (Anderson et al., 2011). Types of support include relationships with significant others or family members, peer networks, or belonging to certain institutions or communities (e.g., religious institutions, athletic department, team). When athletes arrive on campus, previous sources of support may diminish to some degree while relationships with coaches might gain more prominence (Barclay, 2017; Harry & Weight, 2021; Park et al., 2012). As Harry and Weight (2021) noted, “[c]oaches establish relationships with athletes to share knowledge and experience, while athletes create relationships with coaches to learn skills and compete at high levels” (p. 5). Thus, the athlete-coach dyad becomes an important source of support, particularly in athletic spaces that sometimes insulate and isolate athletes (Hatteberg, 2018; Rubin & Moses, 2017).

Strategies are defense mechanisms that allow an individual to respond to, or protect themselves during, a transition period. Schlossberg (2008) outlined four possible strategies one might employ: 1) modify the situation, 2) modify the meaning attached to the situation, 3) managing reactions to stress, 4) inaction. Each approach addresses problems that might arise from transition in slightly different ways except for the fourth, where an individual deliberately chooses to take no action in response to their transition either because they are unable or unwilling. Grounding these concepts in the context of the current study, a pair of students might struggle initially with the incoming coaching staff. In response, one might modify their situation by seeking out the new coach and actively working to develop a relationship with them, while the other might choose to wait and see if things begin to improve on their own.

## Method

Case study research has allowed researchers to gather in-depth descriptions and analyses of specific cases within real-life settings to provide comprehensive

understandings of the particular case or concern (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The current study applied the single instrumental case study approach, which utilizes one case to illustrate an overarching issue or concern. The case examined a specific group of football athletes enduring their second head coaching transition at an NCAA Division I Power Five institution. As such, athletes from the freshman cohort recruited by Coach X, or those who redshirted their freshman season, encountered three separate head coaches within four years. While this case is less common, head coaching changes remain prevalent within the FBS. As such, understanding this case may help this university, along with similar institutions, understand the potential thoughts, feelings, and emotional responses of a specific population, who Wilkerson et al. (2020) found often mask suffering and adversity to render a “tough” disposition.

Participants

A questionnaire was distributed to a convenience sample of eight athletes, representing just under 7% of the team. Convenience sampling allowed for richer data collection given previously established rapport with participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Participants consisted of one sophomore, six seniors, and one graduate student and were evenly dispersed between offense and defense. The average age of participants was 22 years old. Six participants identified as Black, one as White, and one as mixed race. All participants were recruited to the university by Coach X and subsequently required to play for Coach Y, who replaced Coach X. The researchers selected pseudonyms for participants from the top eight most common baby names in the 1990s, the decade participants would have been born (Social Security, n.d.).

Table 1. Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Age	Year in School	Race	Unit
Michael	23	5th Year Senior	Mixed	Offense
Christopher	22	Senior	Black	Defense
Matthew	22	Graduate Student	Black	Offense
Joshua	23	Senior	Black	Defense
Jacob	23	Senior	Black	Defense
Nicholas	21	Senior	Black	Offense
Andrew	21	Sophomore	White	Offense
Daniel	22	Senior	Black	Defense

## Data Collection

Data was collected through a voluntary 27-item, open-ended questionnaire. The questionnaire was distributed to participants in person. Participants then completed and returned to the researchers for analysis. Questions were informed by previous work in this area (e.g., Pate et al., 2011; Shipherd et al., 2019) and focused on participants' experiences under each coach, trust, expectations, dealing with the transition, communication, and outside perceptions. Participants were also prompted to provide any additional information they felt was relevant to their experience. The research team engaged in observational research to obtain information about football athletes based on their explicit behavior (Creswell & Poth, 2018). While this data was primarily utilized to describe the specific events surrounding the case, it also supported the interpretation of participant responses to the open-ended questionnaires (Maxwell, 2013).

## Open-Ended Questionnaire

The questionnaire included one screening question to ensure all participants were recruited by the same coach and thus endured multiple coaching transitions. Next, the questionnaire requested general demographic information, such as age, race, year in school, and football position. The questionnaire's main section included 14 primary questions with eight additional follow-up questions. Moreover, it focused on the participants' feelings about, perceptions of, and experiences during the transitions surrounding coaching changes.

## Establishing Trustworthiness

Complete documentation of the data collection process exhibited trustworthiness and data credibility. Data were portrayed without distortion through descriptive validity, peer debriefing, and triangulation (Maxwell, 2013). Data collection involving multiple data sources provided one element of triangulation. The second triangulation component, known as analytical theoretical triangulation, examined the interaction between data sources such as transition theory, prior research, and the questionnaire and observational data gathered (Ravitch & Mittenfelner-Carl, 2016). Additionally, the researchers engaged in discussions regarding the data and case while preserving the amenity required with peers outside the research team.

## Data Analysis

Data analysis began with data organization (Ravitch & Mittenfelner-Carl, 2016). Coding, the process used to demonstrate the meaning that emerged from the data (Ravitch & Mittenfelner-Carl, 2016), initiated with categorizing data based



on similarity. Next, interconnected codes were united to develop meaningful themes. Maxwell (2013) recommended moving from one coding strategy to the next, as expressed above, to enrich the research findings. Deductive coding allowed the research team to use prior research and experience when examining the data to look for potential outcomes specifically related to this case (Ravitch & Mittenfelner-Carl, 2016).

## Findings

Driven by the research question, which asked what challenges are faced by football athletes enduring head coaching changes, findings emerged into three explicit, meaningful themes: support, achievement, and consistency.

### Support

The athletes in this study discussed support in terms of the support they received from their first coach (Coach X) and the lack of support they received from their second coach (Coach Y). The discussions about support included Coach X knowing the participants, their families, and feelings of having a real relationship (see Table 2). The lack of support from Coach Y was noted when participants stated he did not care or know anything about them as people (see Table 3).

**Table 2. Support from Coach X**

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"[Coach X] knew my family by name [and] treated players like family." (Michael)
"A lot of the old staff [Coach X's staff] I still am in contact [with] today. I could talk to them about anything, even not about football." (Matthew)
"It felt like home with the first staff." (Nicholas)
"I chose this school because it felt like home." (Andrew)

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**Table 3. Lack of Support from Coach Y**

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"[Coach Y and staff] didn't care. They saw us as nothing at all but practice body." (Joshua)
"They don't know me." (Jacob)
"[Coach Y] was an asshole . . . he was terrible. I learned nothing, and he didn't interact with his players." (Daniel)

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Achievement

The participants also discussed the achievements they believed they had accomplished while at their university, but also stated the areas they felt they missed out on after the coaching change occurred. The one area that many participants felt was their biggest achievement revolved around academics, specifically graduating, or receiving multiple degrees (see Table 4). In contrast, several athletes felt as though they had not excelled as they had hoped on the playing field. They attributed this to failures by Coach Y and his staff (see Table 5).

Table 4. Academic Achievement

"I've learned a lot, matured, [and I'm] leaving with two degrees." (Michael)
"I graduate this month." (Christopher)
"[I learned to] use the university like they used me . . . I'll leave here with two degrees." (Matthew)
"Leaving debt free with a college degree." (Nicholas)

Table 5. Missing Out on Athletic Achievement

"I didn't feel I was given a shot." (Andrew)
"[Coach Y and staff] did not develop me on and off the field to prepare [me for] when I leave." (Nicholas)
"It was almost impossible to play with [Coach Y]. We are losing and not getting treated right." (Jacob)
"Very, very, very shitty. My last two years of eligibility was wasted by a coach who shouldn't have been here." (Joshua)

Consistency

The athletes wanted consistency during their time at their university; however, they did not feel that happened because of the coaching change. They discussed the distrust that existed between players that were recruited by the previous coach (Coach X) and Coach Y (see Table 6). The players also articulated that the coaching change interrupted any progress they had been making on the football field. When the new coaches arrived, this resulted in players having to start over in a variety of areas. This was difficult because they had become accustomed to how the previous coach ran his program, his expectations, and coaching system (see Table 7).

**Table 6. Lack of Trust and Communication**

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“[Coach Y’s] words didn’t match his actions [and] seemed afraid to tell it like it is.” (Michael)
“[Coach Y and staff] didn’t talk to you.” (Christopher)
“They were very shady with their actions [and] their actions didn’t match their words.” (Matthew)
“They lied to us the whole time and they turned players against each other. [Coach Y] is not a big-time Power 5 coach.” (Joshua)

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**Table 7. Starting Over**

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“Proving myself again.” (Michael)
“You get to have a fresh start, but you have to adapt [and] change to all new styles ... Having to completely forget the whole philosophy, technique, [and] plays of old staff.” (Matthew)
“It’s a business. But if coaches are able to go anywhere they want at any time, so should players instead of having to sit out.” (Andrew)
“Coaching changes can fuck you up. They will move you around to benefit them and not yourself. So do what’s best for you. If they didn’t recruit you in high school consider transferring to someone who did.” (Daniel)

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**Discussion**

It is evident that coaching transitions will continue to be a yearly occurrence that NCAA Division I Power Five institutions will have to contend with, whether because their coach was hired away from the program, or they feel it is time for the program to move in a different direction (Bender, 2021b). Thus, it is important that athletic administrators and coaches be aware of the potential impact these abrupt transitions can have on the athlete experience, particularly if their goal is to rekindle or maintain previous success. Transition theory (Anderson et al., 2011; Goodson & Anderson, 2012; Schlossberg, 2008) provides a framework with which to examine these issues and navigate these transitions in an intentional way.

Ultimately, support through the relationship between a coach and their players is integral to on-field success (Pate et al., 2011; Shipherd et al., 2019). Findings from this study support this notion as many of the athletes communicated a perceived lack of support from Coach Y stemming from his lack of interest in getting to know them as individuals or showing interest in them outside of what they could provide on the field. This reinforces the call by Pate et al. (2011) for coaches to engage in one-on-one conversations to foster more authentic connections with players. This approach from Coach Y also seems to have eroded

support from teammates through the program's culture, further demonstrating the coach's role in shaping these environments (Shipherd et al., 2019).

Additionally, there were aspects of their situation that athletes felt they had control of and others they did not (Anderson et al., 2011). Several athletes communicated that they had retained a sense of control over their academic accomplishments, while others expressed a loss of control over on field issues. Other participants placed the blame for their lack of individual success, and for the lack of team success, on Coach Y and his approach to coaching the team. Athletes communicated incongruence between Coach Y's words and actions and felt that he was not fit to coach a Division I Power Five program.

Further, there were athletes that acknowledged transferring out of the program as a potential strategy for dealing with these transitions, aligning with Sievert's (2011) past work. It is worth noting that when the transition central to this study was taking place, the NCAA transfer rules looked drastically different than they do today. Now, students have much more agency in the transfer process because they are no longer obligated to consider losing a year of eligibility if they decide to go elsewhere to complete their athletic career (Hosick, 2021). Thus, athletes now have the same type of freedom to move around as their coaches have always enjoyed. Others noted the strategies necessary in transitioning from one coach to another given the need to completely forget what they knew in the previous system and learn a totally new lexicon and approach to the game.

## Implications for Coaches and Administrators

While this study's findings may not be generalizable, there are certainly implications for policy and praxis that can apply to institutions dealing with coaching transitions across the Division I Power Five football landscape. This is particularly true when we apply Anderson et al.'s (2011) moving in–moving through–moving out framework to look at both collective and individual actions to be taken at each step. Building from the support theme identified in our findings, when athletic administrators make the decision to initiate a coaching transition, their top priority should be athlete support. More specifically, athletic departments should consider establishing a specific administrative position that specializes in change management to effectively manage the transition process. Given the relative frequency with which coaching changes occur (Bender, 2021a), either due to poaching, termination, retirement, or other factors, this would be a fruitful investment for ensuring that new hires maximize their chances to positively transition into the program and see more immediate success.

For example, this individual could ensure that athletes are properly notified of the anticipated change and not left to learn of a coaching change through

social media or sport media outlets. They could also ensure that athletic support personnel (e.g., scholastic supervisors, student development specialists, athletic career counselors) are informed of the change and prepared to effectively support athletes throughout the process. Further, this individual could be tasked with notifying current athletes' family members, just as they would during the initial recruitment process, to provide an additional support for athletes navigating these transitions. Implementing a change manager would also aid in further incorporating consistency throughout this process.

As the athletic department begins to move through the transition process and assess potential candidates, they need to consider athletes' role in the process. Having a specific administrator tasked with cultivating a space where athletes can express their thoughts, anxieties, and opinions on the potential coaching hire would ensure that students have input as a stakeholder group. Their input should be earnestly considered as part of the hiring process. Moreover, this individual can explore ways to include athletes in the hiring process, much like their non-athlete peers participate in academic and administrative hires in other areas of the university (e.g., student affairs, faculty). In other words, given its direct impact, athletes need to be given agency in the hiring process so that they are not forced into a spectator role. Lastly, decision makers need to evaluate a prospective coach's previous production beyond commercial and athletic success. In the current case, Coach Y had success at his previous institution that he failed to replicate because of the lack of compatibility. Instead, decision makers should consider a coach's holistic impact on athletes' educational and athletic experiences given that they are the individuals most affected by this change.

Once a decision is made and the hiring process is finalized, the new coach, athletic director, and athletes should work together, under the guidance and direction of the change manager, to determine the best outcome for all parties involved to move out of the transition period. Given that many of the participants in this study indicated a lack of communication between existing players and incoming coaches, the new coach should immediately engage in (re)recruiting the athletes they inherit in their new role by building rapport, trust, and transparency (Pate et al., 2011). For example, coaches should be upfront and honest about whether a player no longer fits, or would need to make substantial alterations to fit, their planned offensive or defensive scheme. Athletic directors and change managers should closely monitor the transition process when their new hire is brought to campus to ensure a productive transition that benefits both the athletes and the institution.

Finally, while coaching changes are typically likened to professional sport, college athletes are, by rule, not professional athletes. Thus, if athletes determine

that their best option is to transfer, they should receive nothing but support from athletic administrators and the new coach given the change in circumstances that they did not ask for and had very little, if any, control over. For example, the new coach should utilize their network to help athletes land in a favorable situation. Not doing so would limit athletes' abilities to achieve success both athletically and academically, as many participants indicated.

## Implications for Athlete Empowerment

It is important for athletes to understand and realize that they have agency in this process and are not simply relegated to a spectator role. Given the services they provide to their athletic department and institution, they wield a certain degree of power as both individuals and a collective. Thus, athletes can use that power to demand a role in the hiring process when coaching transitions arise. As the transition process unfolds, athletes should wait to see who the new hire is before deciding whether to stay or enter the transfer portal. The transfer portal is not a guarantee and, for all they know, the new hire might put them in a more advantageous position on and off the field. Athletes should also consider both their athletic and academic careers before making the decision to enter the transfer portal or to follow through with transferring. Those athletes that ultimately choose to stay with their program should engage in self-advocacy to ensure that they are both seen and heard, and are actively engaged in the transition process.

## Conclusion

Coaching changes will continue to be part of the Power Five Division I landscape, particularly as revenue sports continue to gain prominence and a greater foothold in popular culture and media. Additionally, changes to the transfer policies provide athletes with greater mobility, which in many ways will affect how coaching transitions play out. This study extends the literature by providing first-hand insight from athletes into issues that arise during coaching transitions. Further, the findings from this study are useful to both the intercollegiate athletic community and to academics by demonstrating the challenges associated with each step of the coaching transition and recommendations for how to better navigate those processes.

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