

12-30-2025

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Recommended Citation

Corr, Chris (2025) "Relationships Win: Human Connection Outperforms Data in Collegiate Athletics," *Journal of Applied Sport Management*: Vol. 17 : Iss. 4.

<https://doi.org/10.7290/jasm17i4UV>

Available at: <https://trace.tennessee.edu/jasm/vol17/iss4/3>

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Relationships Win: Human Connection Outperforms Data in Collegiate Athletics

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Abstract

Advanced analytics and artificial intelligence (AI) occupy an increasing position and function within the institutional setting of collegiate athletics. At both the departmental and programmatic levels, collegiate athletic stakeholders have consistently increased their reliance on AI and data within decision-making processes and strategic development. Given its importance to competitive success, AI interfaces such as machine-based learning, predictive analysis, and natural language processing has been increasingly integrated within the recruiting process of prospective and transfer athletes. However, while such reliance on data-driven strategies and predictive analytics hold competitive value within the talent identification and evaluation process, the relational role of the recruitment of prospective athletes remains foundational to successful recruiting in collegiate athletics. This manuscript operationalizes the formation of recruiting within this setting and discusses the limited performative value of AI within the traditional college athlete recruiting process.

Keywords: NCAA, coach-athlete relationship, collegiate athletics, artificial intelligence

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In the middle of the 2025 college football season, Louisiana State University (LSU) announced they were parting ways with head football coach Brian Kelly. While the coaching profession in collegiate athletics is notoriously fickle, Kelly's dismissal was significant on several fronts. Although LSU had lured Kelly away from the storied University of Notre Dame football program just three years prior under a 10-year contract worth \$95 million dollars, a coalescence of underperformance, administrative instability, and political intervention culminated in the decision for both sides to part ways. In the days subsequent Kelly's dismissal, football staffers and administrators began to discuss the events that ultimately led to Kelly's precipitous downfall at LSU. Notably, multiple staffers discussed the transactional nature of Kelly's relationships with LSU football players throughout his tenure as head coach. The contention among these staffers was that although the shifting economics of collegiate athletics have introduced transactional components within the coach-athlete relationship (i.e., name, image, and likeness contracts, revenue sharing agreements), the role and importance of cultivating genuine, authentic relationships with players is more vital than ever. As one LSU football staffer put it, "Guys that are really getting paid money, they have to want to play for you. Or else it'll be transactional to them. And that matters when it comes to coming together as a team" (Feldman et al., 2025, para. 65).

Brian Kelly's dismissal at LSU in the Fall of 2025 underscores the necessity of relationship building within the shifting institutional field of collegiate athletics in the United States. Although name, image, and likeness (NIL) and revenue sharing agreements increasingly define the operational landscape of college sports, the path to competitive success in college football is reliant on the ability to cultivate genuine and authentic relationships with prospective athletes (i.e., high school recruits), transfer athletes, and organizational personnel. While Kelly's dismissal from LSU underscores the consequential nature of failing to cultivate genuine relationships, University of Georgia (Georgia) head football coach Kirby Smart exemplifies the vital nature of relationships to competitive success. Since 2017, Georgia has won three Southeastern Conference (SEC) titles, two College Football Playoff (CFP) national championships, and won more football games than any other program competing in Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) college football. Foundational to such competitive success is successful recruiting.

Georgia has finished with a top five ranked recruiting class each of the past 10-years. In fact, since Kirby Smart became head football coach in 2016, Georgia has finished with a recruiting class ranked outside the top five just once: Georgia's 2016 signing class finished ranked sixth in the country – Smart had been the head coach at Georgia for just two months. The dynastic success Georgia has experienced under Smart can be attributed to a programmatic relentlessness in recruiting. Known for his maniacal recruiting efforts, Smart has regularly indicated throughout his tenure at Georgia that successful recruiting begins with cultivating meaningful and impactful relationships with prospective athletes, family members, and individuals that are influential in a recruit's life. Since the widespread pervasiveness of NIL took hold of college football in 2021 – and to a further extent, revenue sharing in the Summer of 2025 – Smart has steadily continued to emphasize the importance of genuine relationships to competitive success:

We sell relationships over transactions. We think the relationship still wins out because the relationship allows you to push people and demand excellence...when you're transactional, you

cannot accomplish whatever your ultimate goal is, whatever your greatest reach is. Whatever the ceiling is for every player and every team we have, you don't reach that without relationships. (May, 2025, para. 4)

Although the institutional field has and continues to shift tremendously, success in collegiate athletics from a competitive, recruiting, and athlete development standpoint continues to rely on the formation of genuine and authentic relationships with competing college athletes.

Coinciding with the drastic structural changes to the economic landscape of collegiate athletics has been the incorporation of artificial intelligence (AI) within and throughout college sports. Within the evolving landscape of collegiate athletics, athletic administrators and coaches have increasingly invested in and relied upon advanced data analytics and AI technologies to inform operational decision-making and strategic development. At National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) member institutions, athletic administrators have sought to hire personnel dedicated specifically to the departmental integration of AI (Johnson, 2025). While athletic departments are increasingly utilizing AI for strategic decision-making purposes, AI and data-driven processes have also pervaded collegiate athletics at the programmatic level.

The AI Takeover of Collegiate Athletics

The traditional orientation of each of the recruiting, evaluation, and personnel processes in collegiate athletics has been increasingly outsourced to AI technologies. To this, University of Oregon head football coach Dan Lanning stated in the Fall of 2025, "AI is something that's going to continue to grow. It'll continue to be a part of the game; probably as much as anything, from a scouting standpoint" (Brice, 2025, para. 6). Given the increasing utilization and reliance on AI in collegiate athletics – and more specifically, FBS college football – the emphasis on relational development has perhaps shifted among coaches. In the Summer of 2023, Brian Kelly enthusiastically declared the LSU football program had increasingly incorporated AI into its recruiting and player development processes:

We spend a lot of time on profiles, recruiting profiles and the intangibles or the traits that we're looking for particular players. I think AI has an opportunity maybe to create that kind of model for us relative to who is that kind of player out there all over the country, without making a mistake. (Nettuno, 2023, para. 4)

While college football programs across the country rely on AI in a growing number of capacities, Kelly's indication of the utilization of AI to identify intangibles and traits among prospective LSU football players is indeed notable.

Although AI can evaluate distinctly human characteristics, its effectiveness relies wholly on data inputted. Accordingly, AI is only effective at evaluating human characteristics within an environment where data sources are rich and thoroughly developed. While scouting and evaluation may be an area in which AI can accurately measure an athletes' physical ability, AI remains inadequate in its ability to measure an athletes' intangible characteristics (e.g., work ethic, mental and physical toughness, energy, passion) given the difficulty of inputting data to depict and describe these traits. After all, such traits are defined as intangibles given the challenge to accurately quantifying them.

Toughness, for instance, has been lauded by college football coaches as an indicator for performance

success. Seven-time national champion Nick Saban defined toughness as pushing beyond one's breaking point during a team meeting while serving as the head football coach at the University of Alabama (Ross, 2018). Regarding AI, there is no measure of capacity in which a machine can operationalize an individual's breaking point to subsequently codify their toughness. However, the importance of identifying intangibles such as toughness are undeniable within the scouting and evaluation process for coaches seeking to field team's able to compete consistently at the highest levels.

Regardless of their deficiencies in evaluating distinctly human characteristics, coaches and administrators are increasingly turning to personnel with AI expertise (Driscoll, 2020; Hall, 2025). Accordingly, advanced analytics, natural language processing, and machine-based learning have been largely integrated to assist in formulating strategies surrounding resource allocation, schematic decision-making, and talent acquisition. While fans and programmatic outsiders may hear coaches discuss advanced analytics regarding strategic decision-making within games (e.g., attempting a fourth down conversion, opting for an onside kick), the integration of data analytics and AI within collegiate athletics has pervaded nearly every aspect of programmatic decision-making.

While the integration of these advanced computing technologies and machine-based learning within collegiate athletics are, seemingly, omnipresent, their incorporation within the process of recruiting exemplifies the broader reliance on AI within programmatic decision-making. The NCAA describes the process of recruiting as the "lifeblood of college sports" (NCAA, n.d., para. 1) and, in alignment with Kirby Smart's comments stated above, the process of successful recruiting often separates great college sport programs from their competitors. Such depiction of the value of successful recruiting is exceedingly apt considering the established direct positive relationship between recruiting success and competitive success (i.e., winning; Caro, 2012; Mankin et al., 2021). Within the hyper-commercialized institutional setting of collegiate athletics, in which revenue generation is pursued as an utmost operational priority (Corr & Paule-Koba, 2025; Corr et al., 2020, 2023), the emphasis on the successful recruitment of prospective and transfer athletes is at an even increased premium. Such premium within this setting is indicative of the relationship between winning in college football and men's basketball and institutional revenue generation – both within the athletic department and the broader university itself. Within a setting that prioritizes revenue generation at the highest possible level, the process and overt necessitation of the successful recruitment of prospective and transfer athletes cannot be marginalized in any capacity.

However, the utilization of AI and data-driven decision-making exist somewhat antithetically to the traditional model of prospective college athlete recruitment. While such a model revolves around effective talent identification and evaluation, the process of successfully influencing a prospective recruit's enrollment decision is inherently relational in nature. Accordingly, the use and implementation of machine-based learning, natural language processing, and – broadly – data-driven decision-making is not wholly effective in improving programmatic recruiting outcomes. Based on both the historical foundation of successful recruitment in collegiate athletics and the modern structural nature of collegiate athletics, the role and influence of AI and advanced analytics are exceedingly limited in scope within the process of recruiting.

Conclusion

Although quantitative measures and machine-based learning have become an increasing part of the collegiate athletics landscape, the most fundamental component to field a competitive athletics team remains relationally focused. While collegiate athletics stakeholders adapt to the increasing pervasiveness of economic factors, the role and function of coaches and recruiters remains relationally centric (Parietti & Dahlin, 2025). During an October 2025 interview, University of Arkansas head men's basketball coach, John Calipari, summated the role and function of coaches even amid the increasing professionalized nature of collegiate athletics:

I want to help 25 to 30 more families. The only way you do that is you're transformational as a coach. You're not transactional. If I become transactional – I'm going to pay you this to do this and that – then I won't do this anymore. (Bahns, 2025, para. 3)

Although financial considerations are undoubtedly of increasing prevalence within the institutional setting of collegiate athletics, the role and function of an effective recruiter and successful program continues to occupy an utmost position. While AI and advanced analytics may provide informative data for coaches and player personnel to utilize during an initial identification and evaluative process, the process of recruiting in collegiate athletics continues to be defined by the relational nature of athlete recruitment.

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