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College Football Recruiting and the Correlation to Success

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College Football Recruiting and the Correlation to Success

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Recreation & Sport Management

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Abstract

This research paper will explore the recruiting aspect of college football and its importance regarding the overall success of the team. The introduction will inform the reader of the recruiting aspect of college football and the basics of the recruiting world. Following this will be a section discussing schools within the Power Five conferences (more specifically the Big Twelve, Pacific-12 Conference, and the Southeastern Conference) including their recruiting budgets that lead to fruitful results based on the talented recruits that they pull in. After an examination of these schools, the following section will discuss schools in the Group of Five conferences (more specifically the Mid-American Conference, the Mountain West, and the Sun Belt Conference) including their recruiting budgets and the caliber of recruits that they are able to obtain with fewer resources. To determine a team's success based around these recruits, win-loss records, individual statistics, and bowl success will be considered. In this paper there will also be a section dedicated to the monetary value of football recruits and the value that they bring to the school by committing. Recruiting violations will be discussed in this paper, as this has altered the world of college football over the years. The conclusion will review the paper and the main points of the research, reassuring the idea that college football recruiting is a mixed bag of results and has various results scattered across the various conferences and schools involved.

Introduction

The college football world is heavily driven by the players that fill the 120-plus positions open on each team. Regardless of the level of competition (Division I, Division II, Division III, or Junior College) or the sanctioning body that the team is involved with (NCAA, NJCAA, or NAIA), players are looking for the chance to continue both their academic and football career at the next level. For the 2018-2019 season, the NCAA carried out a study to determine the number of high school football players are in the United States, and what percentage of them will go on to play Division I, II, or III football. Of the 1,006,013 high school football players, just 7.3% of them will go on to play football at the NCAA level (NCAA, 2020). While there are millions of football players at the high school level, most of these players never make it to any of the college levels. Those that do advance to the collegiate ranks are typically recruited to the school that they choose to attend and are either a preferred walk on or a scholarship athlete.

Recruiting in college football has become a business that can cost universities a sizeable sum of money, but the return on investment can be far greater than the initial cost of recruiting the nation's top players. As the Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS) level has continued to advance, a split has occurred between the conferences based on perceived talent and ability within the college landscape. The Power Five which is made up of the Atlantic Coast Conference, Big Ten Conference, Big Twelve Conference, Pacific-12 Conference, and Southeastern Conference feature some of the most revered teams in the nation. These teams have larger revenue streams allowing these teams to spend more on recruiting. Meanwhile, the Group of Five, made up of the American Athletic Conference, Conference USA, Mid-American Conference, Mountain West Conference, and Sun Belt Conference feature smaller schools that are trying to gain their footing and become competitive amongst similar competition. These

schools typically have smaller revenue streams which results in less room in the budget for recruiting.

In only a decade, college football recruiting expenses expanded from an average of $526,000 in 2001 to an average over $750,000 for the 2009-2010 season (Lloyd, 2011). Schools in the Power Five conferences tend to spend far more on recruiting than the Group of Five schools, as they have the budget to do so, but also tend to have an advantage when it comes to recruiting the nation's top recruits. Whether it be the school's prestige, the location, the uniforms, the coaching staff, or any other factor, most recruits give preference to the Power Five schools if they offer them a spot on the team. Due to the large budgets given to these teams, they can cast a wide net when it comes to recruiting. The Group of Five schools tend to have a more modest recruiting budget which results in recruiting players that are within their realm of possibility.

Recruiting rankings drive the market when it comes to what recruits the various teams are looking into bringing into their program. There are three main sites that reliably rank these recruits, and most recruiters access to determine their own prospect boards. The sites entrusted with these rankings are 24/7 Sports, Rivals, and the ESPN 300. The sites break down recruits into star rankings (0-5 Stars) and typically give them a number grade symbolizing their current ability and potential to develop into a star athlete during their time in college. Five-star recruits are the players that are expected to come into a big school in a Power Five conference and contribute relatively soon. Two-star recruits are players that are expected to go to smaller schools in the Group of Five and eventually develop into a starting caliber player. Typically, four and five-star recruits flock to these Power Five schools while the Group of Five schools are usually left to pick up the two and three-star recruits that have been passed over by these more

prestigious schools. There have been four and five-star players to go against the grain and decide to attend a Group of Five school, but they are far and few between.

Success is the most important factor in the game of college football, and this hinges on winning records and bowl game appearances. A team's success greatly hinges on the talent that they obtain via the yearly recruiting cycles. Without serviceable players, and the budget to obtain these players, schools typically do not see the success that they expect of their main athletic program. Some schools find success despite the lack of funding and the lack of talent, which creates a wrinkle in the idea that a football team cannot succeed without an abundance of funding and talent. These various ideas will be explored by comparing various teams in the same conference, comparing the top teams from each conference, and comparing the conferences as a single entity.

Power Five Recruiting Budget

Southeastern Conference

Team	2018 Recruiting Budget
Univ. of Alabama	$3,349,654
Univ. of Georgia	$4,346,403
Auburn Univ.	$1,456,431
Texas A&M Univ.	$2,526,476
Louisiana State Univ.	$2,519,925
Univ. of Florida	$1,831,560
Univ. of Tennessee	$2,916,220
Univ. of South Carolina	$1,451,736
Univ. of Arkansas	$2,682,623
Mississippi State Univ.	$810,144
Univ. of Mississippi	$1,110,361
Univ. of Kentucky	$2,479,225
Univ. of Missouri	$1,311,996
Vanderbilt Univ.	$1,426,245

*2018 Recruiting Budgets from Fiscal Year 2018-2019 Equity in Athletics Data Analysis

Big Twelve Conference

Team	2018 Recruiting Budget
Univ. of Oklahoma	$2,183,853
Univ. of Texas	$2,092,681
Texas Christian Univ.	$1,434,935
Oklahoma State Univ.	$1,325,107
Baylor Univ.	$1,483,236
West Virginia Univ.	$1,350,587
Iowa State Univ.	$1,364,224
Texas Tech Univ.	$1,837,292
Kansas State Univ.	$1,406,317
Kansas Univ.	$1,713,511

*2018 Recruiting Budgets from Fiscal Year 2018-2019 Equity in Athletics Data Analysis

Pacific-12 Conference

Team	2018 Recruiting Budget
Univ. of Oregon	$1,718,454
Univ. of Washington	$1,297,309
Univ. of Southern California	$1,564,719
Stanford Univ.	$1,246,104
Arizona State Univ.	$1,094,143
Univ. of Utah	$1,456,418
Univ. of California-Los Angeles	$1,258,255
Univ. of California-Berkeley	$1,139,241
Univ. of Colorado	$980,991
Univ. of Arizona	$1,272,275
Oregon State Univ.	$1,159,433
Washington State Univ.	$835,705

*2018 Recruiting Budgets from Fiscal Year 2018-2019 Equity in Athletics Data Analysis

Group of Five Recruiting Budget

Mountain West Conference

Team	2018 Recruiting Budget
Boise State Univ.	$646,643
Colorado State Univ.	$827,165
Fresno State Univ.	$430,030
Univ. Of Nevada	$558,874
San Diego State Univ.	$443,370
Utah State Univ.	$367,308
Univ of Nevada-Las Vegas	$795,582
Univ. of Wyoming	$733,691
Univ. of Hawai'i	$489,831
San Jose State Univ.	$328,016

Univ. of New Mexico	$516,210
Air Force Academy**	N/A

*2018 Recruiting Budgets from Fiscal Year 2018-2019 Equity in Athletics Data Analysis
**Air Force Academy is an entity of the US Military and is not required to file an EADA report.

Sun Belt Conference

Team	2018 Recruiting Budget
Troy Univ.	$257,096
Univ. of Louisiana-Lafayette	$459,872
Appalachian State Univ.	$343,809
Arkansas State Univ.	$391,457
Georgia State Univ.	$374,877
Univ. of Louisiana-Monroe	$124,638
Texas State Univ.	$341,947
Georgia Southern Univ.	$228,092
Coastal Carolina Univ.	$535,621
Univ. of South Alabama	$185,233

*2018 Recruiting Budgets from Fiscal Year 2018-2019 Equity in Athletics Data Analysis

Mid-American Conference

Team	2018 Recruiting Budget
Univ. of Toledo	$435,043
Western Michigan Univ.	$465,669
Ohio Univ.	$450,688
Northern Illinois Univ.	$186,845
Miami Univ. of Ohio	$935,520
Kent State Univ.	$510,381
Central Michigan Univ.	$423,406
Ball State Univ.	$256,651
Univ. of Buffalo	$456,765
Univ. of Akron	$510,652
Bowling Green State Univ.	$439,943
Eastern Michigan Univ.	$516,723

*2018 Recruiting Budgets from Fiscal Year 2018-2019 Equity in Athletics Data Analysis

Comparison of Recruiting Budgets

As a disclaimer, numerous schools in this study are private which protects them from having to publish their financial reports. Some schools also made it near impossible to find their NCAA financial report. As a result, these recruiting budgets are for the entirety of men's sports, and not just football. This created a much more comprehensive study, as the data is available for

each school, regardless of their status as public or private. The Air Force Academy, a member of the Mountain West, did not have any information available as the federal government prefers to keep the financial status of their military academy confidential.

Overall, most of the Power Five schools have recruiting budgets that dwarf the Group of Five schools. While there are a handful of the Power Five schools, including Mississippi State, Colorado, and Washington State have budgets that rank amongst the bottom of the Power Five conferences that were researched, these schools would have a top end budget amongst the Group of Five schools researched in this instance. While every school in the Power Five besides the aforementioned three have recruiting budgets that far exceed $1,000,000, only one of the recruiting budgets at the Group of Five level exceed $850,000 (US Department, 2021). This creates a sizable disparity between the two groups of conferences, as this limits what the smaller schools can do to combat the efforts put out by the larger schools.

These numbers give a decent look into the separation of Power Five and Group of Five schools regarding the overwhelming deficit that most smaller schools face when trying to compete with the bigger schools. Georgia's budget of $4,346,403 is nearly 25 times Northern Illinois budget of $186,845 (US Department, 2021). This disparity creates an imbalance of talent that is usually only seen in a realm like college football. With college football being a business, it is in the best interest of the NCAA to continue to allow the larger, more prestigious schools to continue dominating these smaller programs, as the bigger and more prestigious schools create far more revenue than the smaller schools. The recruiting budgets of these schools heavily rely on the revenue generated by the various athletic programs included at these schools, and the Power Five generates far more money than the Group of Five conferences. While the Power Five teams have access to larger revenue streams generated by television deals, ticket sales, and

conference shares, the Group of Five schools heavily rely on student fees and taxpayer funds to keep athletic programs running (Lavigne, 2016).

However, recruiting is the lone area that is a relative unknown regardless of how much money a program throws at recruiting. By the end of their careers, the two-star quarterback at a school like Wyoming could outshine the former five-star, blue chip that went to Louisiana State. The one-star walk on running back at Buffalo might have a far better career than the four-star running back that went to Oregon. Until these players step onto campus and play the game, there is no guaranteed way of knowing what these players might turn into. While a larger budget with the ability to pull in the better talent and bigger names, it has never fully guaranteed success and some of the schools that have been researched are proof of this. The University of Kansas, Vanderbilt University, and the University of Arizona have the recruiting budgets to compete in their respective conferences yet have become the bottom dwellers in these conferences (US Department, 2021).

Power Five Recruiting Ability

Southeastern Conference

Team	Class Grade	Five Star	Four Star
Univ. of Alabama	94.38	3	23
Univ. of Georgia	93.32	5	15
Auburn Univ.	91.10	2	13
Texas A&M Univ.	90.85	2	13
Louisiana State Univ.	90.75	3	11
Univ. of Florida	90.56	0	17
Univ. of Tennessee	90.46	2	10
Univ. of South Carolina	88.90	1	4
Univ. of Arkansas	88.54	0	11
Mississippi State Univ.	88.34	1	5
Univ. of Mississippi	87.66	1	7
Univ. of Kentucky	86.55	0	3
Univ. of Missouri	86.23	0	3
Vanderbilt University	84.51	0	0

*2019 Recruiting Class Rankings via 24/7 Sports

Big Twelve Conference

Team	Class Grade	Five Star	Four Star
Univ. of Oklahoma	91.20	3	13
Univ. of Texas	91.19	2	15
Texas Christian Univ.	86.53	0	4
Oklahoma State Univ.	86.01	0	3
Baylor Univ.	85.95	0	2
West Virginia Univ.	85.74	0	2
Iowa State Univ.	85.33	0	2
Texas Tech Univ.	84.26	0	0
Kansas State Univ.	83.97	0	0
Kansas Univ.	83.76	0	1

***2019 Recruiting Class Rankings via 24/7 Sports

Pacific-12 Conference

Team	Class Grade	Five Star	Four Star
Univ. of Oregon	90.60	1	11
Univ. of Washington	90.10	0	15
Univ. of Southern California	88.56	0	7
Stanford Univ.	88.16	0	8
Arizona State Univ.	86.75	0	5
Univ. of Utah	86.12	0	4
Univ. of California-Los Angeles	85.69	0	1
Univ. of California-Berkeley	85.64	0	1
Univ. of Colorado	84.91	0	1
Univ. of Arizona	84.77	0	1
Oregon State Univ.	84.55	0	1
Washington State Univ.	84.35	0	0

***2019 Recruiting Class Rankings via 24/7 Sports

Group of Five Recruiting Ability

Mountain West Conference

Team	2019 Recruiting Class Grade	Four Star	Three Star
Boise State Univ.	85.11	2	14
Colorado State Univ.	82.27	0	17
Fresno State Univ.	82.02	0	19
Univ. Of Nevada	81.83	0	14
San Diego State Univ.	81.49	0	17
Utah State Univ.	81.21	0	20
Univ of Nevada-Las Vegas	80.83	0	11
Univ. of Wyoming	80.34	0	12
Univ. of Hawai'i	80.15	0	13
San Jose State Univ.	80.01	0	10

| Univ. of New Mexico | 79.55 | 0 | 12 |
| Air Force Academy | 78.14 | 0 | 10 |

*2019 Recruiting Class Rankings via 24/7 Sports

Sun Belt Conference

Team	2019 Recruiting Class Grade	Four Star	Three Star
Troy Univ.	81.87	0	18
Univ. of Louisiana-Lafayette	81.81	0	22
Appalachian State Univ.	81.52	0	16
Arkansas State Univ.	80.58	0	16
Georgia State Univ.	80.49	0	13
Univ. of Louisiana-Monroe	79.74	0	10
Texas State Univ.	79.73	0	5
Georgia Southern Univ.	79.54	0	9
Coastal Carolina Univ.	78.62	0	8
Univ. of South Alabama	78.50	0	7

*2019 Recruiting Class Rankings via 24/7 Sports

Mid-American Conference

Team	2019 Recruiting Class Grade	Four Star	Three Star
Univ. of Toledo	82.87	0	19
Western Michigan Univ.	81.18	0	15
Ohio Univ.	81.03	0	13
Northern Illinois Univ.	80.79	0	12
Miami Univ. of Ohio	80.77	0	17
Kent State Univ.	80.15	0	14
Central Michigan Univ.	80.12	0	12
Ball State Univ.	80.03	0	10
Univ. of Buffalo	79.89	0	9
Univ. of Akron	79.23	0	9
Bowling Green State Univ.	78.89	0	7
Eastern Michigan Univ.	78.55	0	10

*2019 Recruiting Class Rankings Via 24/7 Sports

Comparison of Recruiting Classes

Overall, the Power Five teams that were examined signed a total of 232 four-star recruits and 26 of the available five-star recruits across the nation. In comparison, the Group of Five teams researched in this study only managed to sign two total four-star recruits and no five-star recruits (24/7 Sports, 2019). The last five-star recruit to attend a Group of Five school was Ed Oliver, a five-star defensive tackle that attended the University of Houston who is a member of

the American Athletic Conference. According to ESPN, since 2006 when they began compiling their ESPN 300 rankings, no five-star player had ever signed with a non-Power Five team until Oliver did so during the 2016 cycle (Khan Jr, 2016). These players tend to receive more attention from the Power Five schools, which results in the high-profile players preferring to sign with the more prestigious school. Instead, the smaller schools tend to focus more attention on the two and three-star players that will more realistically listen to their pitches and put further consideration into going to a smaller school. This led to the 440 total three-star recruits that chose to attend a Group of Five school to continue their football careers (24/7 Sports, 2019).

There is a stark contrast between the talent that the Power Five pulled in during 2019 as opposed to the talent that the Group of Five teams managed to obtain in the same recruiting cycle. Most of the teams in the Power Five conferences that were researched had more four-star recruits than the entirety of the Group of Five. Only ten schools in the Power Five conferences brought in one or fewer four-star recruits during the 2019 recruiting cycle, but as the later examination of win/loss record shows, these are also the schools that have had recent struggles with the success of their football team (24/7 Sports, 2019). The two teams that are most perplexing are the University of Kansas and Vanderbilt University. These two schools have poured millions into recruiting, yet both of these Power Five universities have an identical 3-18 record over the past two seasons. The 2020 season spared both Kansas and Vanderbilt from any further embarrassment as their seasons were reduced by their respective conferences due to Covid-19.

The Group of Five 2019 recruiting classes pale in comparison to the Power Five recruiting classes. However, the classes for the Group of Five schools are comparable to the other schools in the Group of Five. While they may not have the ability to pick up the highly

touted, blue chip recruits, these are the schools that brought in 440 total three-star recruits to develop behind the older players that are already on the roster (24/7 Sports, 2019). Certain players, like Boise State's Hank Bachmeier and Coastal Carolina's Grayson McCall have had an almost instant impact on their respective teams. While these two players have had successful careers early on in their time at these schools, many of the players from the 2019 class have seen very little to no playing time. This is commonplace in both the Power Five and Group of Five as more established players tend to hang onto their spot on the team, but there are plenty of instances where a freshman upstages the upperclassman to take their spot. Player development is a large part of the game, and this is key to getting the most out of recruits, regardless of their star rating coming out of high school.

Power Five Teams Rate of Success

Southeastern Conference

Team	2019 Win/Loss Record	2020 Win/Loss Record
Univ. of Alabama	11-2	13-0
Univ. of Georgia	12-2	8-2
Auburn Univ.	9-4	6-5
Texas A&M Univ.	8-5	9-1
Louisiana State Univ.	15-0	5-5
Univ. of Florida	11-2	8-4
Univ. of Tennessee	8-5	3-7
Univ. of South Carolina	4-8	2-8
Univ. of Arkansas	2-10	3-7
Mississippi State Univ.	6-7	4-7
Univ. of Mississippi	4-8	5-5
Univ. of Kentucky	8-5	5-6
Univ. of Missouri	6-6	5-5
Vanderbilt Univ.	3-9	0-9

*2019 and 2020 Win/Loss Records from Sports Reference College Football

Big Twelve Conference

Team	2019 Win/Loss Record	2020 Win/Loss Record
Univ. of Oklahoma	12-2	9-2
Univ. of Texas	8-5	7-3

Texas Christian Univ.	5-7	6-4
Oklahoma State Univ.	8-5	8-3
Baylor Univ.	11-3	2-7
West Virginia Univ.	5-7	6-4
Iowa State Univ.	7-6	9-3
Texas Tech Univ.	4-8	4-6
Kansas State Univ.	8-5	4-6
Kansas Univ.	3-9	0-9

*2019 and 2020 Win/Loss Records from Sports Reference College Football

Pacific-12 Conference

Team	2019 Win/Loss Record	2020 Win/Loss Record
Univ. of Oregon	12-2	4-3
Univ. of Washington	8-5	3-1
Univ. of Southern California	8-5	5-1
Stanford Univ.	4-8	4-2
Arizona State Univ.	8-5	2-2
Univ. of Utah	11-3	3-2
Univ. of California-Los Angeles	4-8	3-4
Univ. of California-Berkeley	8-5	1-3
Univ. of Colorado	5-7	4-2
Univ. of Arizona	4-8	0-5
Oregon State Univ.	5-7	2-5
Washington State Univ.	6-7	1-3

*2019 and 2020 Win/Loss Records from Sports Reference College Football

Group of Five Teams Rate of Success

Mountain West Conference

Team	2019 Win/Loss Record	2020 Win/Loss Record
Boise State Univ.	12-2	5-2
Colorado State Univ.	4-8	1-3
Fresno State Univ.	4-8	3-3
Univ. Of Nevada	7-6	7-2
San Diego State Univ.	10-3	4-4
Utah State Univ.	7-6	1-5
Univ of Nevada-Las Vegas	4-8	0-6
Univ. of Wyoming	8-5	2-4
Univ. of Hawai'i	10-5	5-4
San Jose State Univ.	5-7	7-1
Univ. of New Mexico	2-10	2-5
Air Force Academy	11-2	3-3

*2019 and 2020 Win/Loss Records from Sports Reference College Football

Sun Belt Conference

Team	2019 Win/Loss Record	2020 Win/Loss Record
Troy Univ.	5-7	5-6
Univ. of Louisiana-Lafayette	11-3	10-1
Appalachian State Univ.	13-1	9-3
Arkansas State Univ.	8-5	4-7
Georgia State Univ.	7-6	6-4
Univ. of Louisiana-Monroe	5-7	0-10
Texas State Univ.	3-9	2-10
Georgia Southern Univ.	7-6	8-5
Coastal Carolina Univ.	5-7	11-1
Univ. of South Alabama	2-10	4-7

*2019 and 2020 Win/Loss Records from Sports Reference College Football

Mid-American Conference

Team	2019 Win/Loss Record	2020 Win/Loss Record
Univ. of Toledo	6-6	4-2
Western Michigan Univ.	7-6	4-2
Ohio Univ.	7-6	2-1
Northern Illinois Univ.	5-7	0-6
Miami Univ. of Ohio	8-6	2-1
Kent State Univ.	7-6	3-1
Central Michigan Univ.	8-6	3-3
Ball State Univ.	5-7	7-1
Univ. of Buffalo	8-5	6-1
Univ. of Akron	0-12	1-5
Bowling Green State Univ.	3-9	0-5
Eastern Michigan Univ.	6-7	2-4

*2019 and 2020 Win/Loss Records from Sports Reference College Football

Analysis of Power Five Budgets, Recruiting Classes, & Win/Loss Records

As expected, every conference has their good teams, their average teams, and their bad teams. Some of these teams lack success due to or despite the money they spend, others lack success despite the talent they collect, and a select few lack success regardless of how much they spend and how much talent they bring in. On the other hand, there are the teams that spend their money wisely, get the recruits, and see the success that is expected of them. The disparity between the top team of each conference and the bottom team is what creates intrigue in this

study. To be in the same conference, it would be sensible that these teams have similar budgets and the ability to attract similar talent, yet that is far from the case based on the research carried out in this study.

For the SEC, Alabama collected a 24-3 record in two seasons, 26 four and five-star recruits, and had a $3,349,654 recruiting budget (SRCFB, 2020 & 2021; 24/7 Sports, 2019; US Department, 2021) This absolutely blows Vanderbilt away as the team managed a 3-18 record, 0 four and five-star recruits, yet still spent $1,426,245 in recruiting (SRCFB, 2020 & 2021; 24/7 Sports, 2019; US Department, 2021). The most noticeable difference between Alabama and Vanderbilt is the large gap in talent. Alabama is always recruiting and signing the top talent across the nation, while Vanderbilt settles for the lower-level talent. Both schools have a sizeable recruiting budget, but with nearly $2,000,000 more to spend, Alabama has the resources needed to attract the high-level recruits. This is a rather large disparity, but this can be seen in the other two Power Five conferences that were researched.

At the top of the Big 12 is the University of Oklahoma who maintained a 21-4 record, signed 16 four and five-star recruits in 2019, while spending $2,183,853 in recruiting (SRCFB, 2020 & 2021; 24/7 Sports, 2019; US Department, 2021). The Big 12 bottom dweller in Kansas has an abysmal 3-18 record, with 1 four-star recruit, but spent $1,713,511 in recruiting (SRCFB, 2020 & 2021; 24/7 Sports, 2019; US Department, 2021). This is far more perplexing than the SEC teams, obviously talent is an issue, but budget is far from the issue. Kansas spends under $500,000 less than Oklahoma on recruiting yet is only capable of pulling 1 four-star recruit in an entire recruiting cycle, while Oklahoma brings in 16 top-ranked recruits. The Big 12 was the lone conference in the Power Five where every recruiting budget was more than $1,000,000 regardless of the school.

Oregon is the school that has become the top of the Pac-12 with a 16-5 record, 12 four and five-star recruits in the 2019 cycle, with a $1,718,454 budget (SRCFB, 2020 & 2021; 24/7 Sports, 2019; US Department, 2021). Arizona is the worst team in the Pac-12 with a 4-13 record, with 1 four-star recruit, and a modest $1,272,275 budget (SRCFB, 2020 & 2021; 24/7 Sports, 2019; US Department, 2021). Like the Big 12, these schools have recruiting budgets that are separated by less than $500,000 but what separates them is the talent. Oregon has signed infinitely more talent than Arizona. This is what separates these two schools from being at the same level.

Overall, ten Power Five School that had one or fewer four-star recruits had an average winning percentage of 35.6% between the 2019 and 2020 seasons (SRCFB, 2020 & 2021). For a comparison, the Mountain West had an average winning percentage of 52.5% in 2019 and 2020, a 52.1% average winning percentage for the Sun Belt, and 47.5% average winning percentage for the Mid-American Conference (SRCFB, 2020 & 2021). This suggests that while the larger schools might have far bigger budgets, that does not make them more successful than the Group of Five schools that have far better average win percentages than low-level Power Five schools. Instead, the players that are recruited by the Power Five schools in question do not amount to the players recruited to the Group of Five schools. However, the Power Five schools typically have a higher strength of schedule, which also explains their low average winning percentage compared to the Group of Five schools that have talent of the same caliber and produce a higher average winning percentage.

Analysis of Group of Five Budgets, Recruiting Classes, & Win/Loss Records

Overall, the Group of Five teams have modest recruiting budgets that are still able to net them recruits that are vital to their success. While only one team, Boise State, had any four-star

recruits, every team in the Group of Five had numerous three-star recruits that contribute to their success. The budgets of these schools varied wildly, but none of the schools that were researched had a budget over $1,000,000 to create a somewhat level playing field. The only concerns that arose from the recruiting budgets were Northern Illinois, South Alabama, and Louisiana-Monroe, as their recruiting budgets did not exceed $200,000 which was reflected by their recruiting classes and records over the past two seasons (US Department, 2021).

Boise State is the school atop the Mountain West, as they have been one of the top Group of Five teams over the past decade-plus. The team had a combined record of 17-4, signed a combined 16 three and four-star recruits, and had a $646,643 recruiting budget for the 2019 cycle (SRCFB, 2020 & 2021; 24/7 Sports, 2019; US Department, 2021). New Mexico is on the opposite end of the spectrum with a combined record of 4-15, 12 total three-star recruits, and $516,210 to spend in recruiting (SRCFB, 2020 & 2021; 24/7 Sports, 2019; US Department, 2021). Boise State and New Mexico have similar budgets and recruiting classes, yet Boise State has four times as many wins as New Mexico has managed. This creates an interesting situation, but Boise State has far more prestige after their past successes, namely defeating Oklahoma, TCU, and Arizona in three separate Fiesta Bowl victories (NCAA, 2019). This could explain the disparity between these two teams despite the similarities that the teams share.

The Sun Belt features Appalachian State at the top of the mountain and Texas State at the bottom. Appalachian State had a combined record of 22-4 over the past two seasons, brought in 16 three-star recruits in the 2019 cycle, and a $343,809 recruiting budget for that class (SRCFB, 2020 & 2021; 24/7 Sports, 2019; US Department, 2021). Texas State finished the past two seasons with a combined record of 5-19, but only managed 5 three-star recruits on a $341,947 budget for the 2019 cycle (SRCFB, 2020 & 2021; 24/7 Sports, 2019; US Department, 2021). The

budgets are nearly identical, yet the talent that Appalachian State signed far outweighs the players than Texas State signed from the same class. This is a great separation of talent despite the very little separation in the two budgets, which is inexplicable given the amount of talent in the state of Texas that Texas State has easy access to. Appalachian State has a similar reputation to Boise State, as they have become one of the schools in the upper echelon of Group of Five teams.

The Mid-American Conference has a logjam near the top of the conference, but the top team is Buffalo, while the bottom dweller is undoubtedly the University of Akron. Buffalo has achieved a record of 14-6 over the past two seasons, with 9 three-star recruits in the 2019 class, and a $456,765 recruiting budget for the 2019 cycle (SRCFB, 2020 & 2021; 24/7 Sports, 2019; US Department, 2021). Akron on the other hand has the worst record of any of the teams researched with a 1-17 record in the 2019 and 2020 seasons (SRCFB, 2020 & 2021). The football program also signed 9 three-stars, same as Buffalo, and had a higher recruiting budget than Buffalo at $510,652 for the 2019 class (24/7 Sports, 2019; US Department, 2021). This is the most interesting case as the top team has similar talent to the worst team, and even has a smaller recruiting budget, but still manages to hold a record that is far better than Akron. This proves that there are certain instances in the college football landscape where the team that spends the most does not always have the most success. The recruiting classes being similar creates an even larger paradox, considering it would be expected that the team that spends more money could sign more talent. Instead, there are numerous factors that influences an athlete to sign with a school outside of the amount of money they use to recruit players.

Comparison of Power Five & Group of Five Budgets, Recruiting Classes, & Win/Loss

Records

Overall, the Southeastern Conference had an average winning percentage of 55.9% between the 14 teams over the 2019 and 2020 seasons. This was the best percentage of the three Power Five conferences that were researched (SRCFB, 2020 & 2021). The SEC absolutely dominated the other two conferences when it comes to recruiting as the conference signed a total of 20 five-star and 135 four-star recruits (24/7 Sports, 2019). Massive recruiting budgets, among several other advantages of the SEC, are key to the number of top recruits that the conference can recruit to their teams. In the SEC, the average recruiting budget per team comes out to $2,158,499 which is ahead of both the Big 12 and Pac-12 by a wide margin (US Department, 2021). While this number is relatively high, it is skewed towards the higher end due to the amount that Georgia and Alabama spend on recruiting. However, this explains the separation of the SEC from the other conferences in terms of average winning percentage, as they have the talent and budget to stay atop the college football landscape as time goes on.

The Big 12 had a slightly lower average winning percentage and was in the middle of the Power Five pack with an average of 54.8% between 10 teams over the 2019 and 2020 seasons (SRCFB, 2020 & 2021). In recruiting, the Big 12 had the edge over the Pac-12 with 5 five-star recruits but had fewer four-star recruits than the Pac-12 with 42 total four-star recruits. This is an interesting divide, but it is understandable given the Big 12 has two fewer teams (24/7 Sports, 2019). The average recruiting budget across the conference is $1,619,174 which is a rather accurate average as all 10 teams spent between $1.3 million and $2.2 million in recruiting for the 2019 cycle (US Department, 2021). Overall, this puts the Big 12 in the middle of the road in college football, which could change with an influx of talented recruits to the correct teams.

At the bottom of the college hierarchy is the Pac-12 with an average winning percentage of 52.8% over the past two seasons (SRCFB, 2020 & 2021). While this is admirable, it is significantly lower in the grand scheme of college football. The area of recruiting is also a concern for the Pac-12 as the conference brought in just 1 five-star recruit, but teams did sign 55 four-star recruits in the 2019 cycle. This puts them on a somewhat level playing field with the Big 12, but the conference is still far behind the SEC in recruiting (24/7 Sports, 2019). For the 2019 recruiting cycle the average budget in the Pac-12 was $1,251,920 per team. Akin to the Big 12 this is a great average as each team had a budget between $825,000 and $1,750,000 in the 2019 recruiting cycle (US Department, 2021). According to this information, the Pac-12 has a long way to go to catch up with the rest of the pack.

In the Group of Five, there is a much tighter race for the top of the mountain, but the Mountain West has the best winning percentage of the three conferences that are included in this study. The Mountain West had an average winning percentage of 52.5% during the 2019 and 2020 seasons (SRCFB, 2020 & 2021). In the recruiting realm, the Mountain West was the only Group of Five school to sign any players above a three-star recruit. The 2019 cycle brought 2 four-star recruits and 169 three-star recruits, which is the most in the Group of Five (24/7 Sports, 2019). As for recruiting budgets, the average in the Mountain West was $557,883 across the 11 teams that had financial information available (Air Force did not disclose recruiting expenses). This average was also the highest amongst the Group of Five conferences, making the Mountain West the upper echelon of the Group of Five (US Department, 2021).

In the middle of the pack is the Sun Belt Conference, but the overall statistics are closer to the Mountain West than expected. The average winning percentage in the conference was 52.1% over the past two seasons. With this result the Sun Belt and Mountain West are only

separated by 0.4% in average winning percentage (SRCFB, 2020 & 2021). The 2019 recruiting class brought 124 new three-star prospects into the Sun Belt, which is the lowest amount of the three conferences, but the Sun Belt also has the fewest members with 10 schools (24/7 Sports, 2019). As for the average recruiting budget in the 2019 Sun Belt season, the conference also comes in behind the Mountain West and Mid-American Conference with an average of $324,264 in the 2019 cycle (US Department, 2021). This comes as a surprise considering this is the only example where the conference with the fewest recruits and the lowest average budget has a better average winning percentage than the bottom conference.

The Mid-American Conference is by far the worst conference in terms of average winning percentage from the past two seasons. With a 47.5% average winning percentage, this is the lowest across all six of the conferences involved in the study (SRCFB, 2020 & 2021). Despite this, the MAC signed 147 three-star recruits during the 2019 recruiting cycle (24/7 Sports, 2019). MAC schools also had an average recruiting budget of $465,690 which is over $100,000 more than the average budget of the Sun Belt teams (US Department, 2021). This has created an interesting issue, as the Sun Belt has a better winning percentage, but the MAC brings in more recruits and dedicates more money to spend on these recruits. Regardless of the recruiting budgets and talent, the MAC seemingly cannot put it together to create an overly successful conference like the Mountain West and Sun Belt have done.

Overall, the Power Five is significantly better based on every single category researched in this study. The Power Five schools all have higher average winning percentages, but the Sun Belt and Mountain West are close to catching the Pac-12 in this statistic (SRCFB, 2020 & 2021). Recruiting in the Power Five cannot be matched, as was previously mentioned, only 10 schools in the Power Five had less four-star recruits than the entirety of the Group of Five (24/7 Sports,

2019). As for the average recruiting budgets, once again the Power Five dominates the Group of Five with the average budgets of the Group of Five being almost $1,000,000 less than the average budgets of the Power Five conferences (US Department, 2021). This is what has created such a disparity between the top and bottom of college football, and there have been no signs of the domination slowing down.

Bowl Records by Conference

One of the biggest pieces to consider when talking about success is whether teams can convert successful regular seasons into bowl wins. Getting to a bowl is difficult enough given the necessary requirements to make a bowl game. Even if a team fulfills these requirements, they may be left out of the bowl schedule. This happened recently, as the 2019 Toledo team went 6-6 in the regular season and met all other requirements but did not get invited to a bowl game (Buckey, 2019). While this has been a rare occurrence, it is not impossible to miss a bowl despite being eligible. This is a fate that Group of Five teams face, as the Power Five teams will almost always take precedent over the Group of Five teams. For teams that do make bowl games, it is key to their success to win these games to cap off an already successful season.

The 2019 bowl season is the most recent representation of a typical bowl season, as the 2020 season was a peculiar one due to the Covid-19 pandemic. During the 2019 season the SEC had the best bowl record of the Power Five teams researched with an 8-2 record, and LSU winning the national championship. The Big 12, who is supposed second best conference based off average winning percentage, had a dismal record of 1-5 in 2019 bowl games. The conference's lone victory came as Texas beat Utah in the Alamo Bowl. The Pac-12 fared much better in the bowl season with a conference record of 4-3 with the best win being Oregon's win over Wisconsin in the Rose Bowl. The 13-10 record of these Power Five conferences also

includes two losses to Group of Five teams with Kansas State losing to Navy and Washington State losing to Air Force (Pekale, 2020).

As for the Group of Five, the Mountain West collected a record of 4-3 for the 2019 bowl season. The best win in this instance was Air Force's win over Kansas State for a win over a Power Five team with what is supposed to be better players and what is assumed to be a larger recruiting budget due to Air Force not publishing finances. The Sun Belt had a similar record of 3-2 throughout the bowl season. Both Appalachian State and Louisiana had impressive wins over the University of Alabama-Birmingham and the University of Miami-Ohio, respectively. The MAC may have had a losing record of 3-4 during bowl season but had more bowl eligible teams than the Mountain West due to Toledo being bowl eligible but not receiving an invite to a bowl game. The best bowl performance from the MAC was Kent State's impressive 51-41 win against Utah State and future NFL first-round pick Jordan Love (Pekale, 2020). This was also Kent State's first ever bowl victory making it that much more impressive.

While the 2020 bowl season was not a normal bowl season by any means, it did provide a better look into what the Group of Five teams are able to do when given a chance. Namely with the Cincinnati Bearcats performance against the Georgia Bulldogs. Cincinnati was competitive with Georgia though the end of the game, and the Bearcats had the opportunity to take the lead late in the game but could not get into the endzone. Numerous bowl games were cancelled due to venues refusing to host due to Covid-19 issues. Other teams were forced to drop out of bowl games due to Covid-19 issues within the program. This created numerous issues, and this also caused the numbers and win/loss records to become far lower than a normal season.

In the 2020 bowl season the SEC continued their usual dominance with a 6-2 record, and Alabama winning the national championship. The Big 12 righted the ship with a perfect 5-0 bowl

season, highlighted by the University of Oklahoma destroying SEC school Florida in the Cotton Bowl. The Pac-12 had only two teams make the postseason due to numerous reasons. As the Pac-12 only played a six-game season, most teams did not do well enough to make a bowl game, plus most teams cancelled regular season games causing them to only play 3-5 games. Regardless, both Oregon and Colorado lost their bowl games to Big 12 opponents Iowa State and Texas respectively (Palm, 2021).

This was the year for the Group of Five to shine on the postseason stage, as some of the teams played a lengthier season than most Power Five teams. This led to some issues as there were discussions about whether the NCAA would still favor Power Five teams over Group of Five teams but considering a team like 2-8 South Carolina was given a bowl invitation that question was answered with a resounding yes. The Mountain West had a shorter season, akin to the Pac-12, but the conference still had three teams make a bowl and finished with a 2-1 record. The best win from the Mountain West came from Hawai'i who defeated Houston as a 14-point underdog. The Sun Belt picked up a 4-1 bowl record, showing slight improvement over the 2019 bowl season. The best win came from Appalachian State running through North Texas in the inaugural Myrtle Beach Bowl. The MAC only sent the two teams that participated in their short season's conference championship game. This resulted in a perfect 2-0 record with Ball State's victory over previously undefeated San Jose State being the highlight of the two bowl games that the MAC participated in (Palm, 2021).

Perceived Value of Recruits

In a study done by the Ohio State University economics program, Stephan Bergman and Trevon Logan determined the perceived value of three, four, and five-star recruits and put this into a dollar amount. This study is believed to be one of the first to determine this value, and it

could be helpful in defending the argument that players deserve to be compensated for what they do for their respective schools and the NCAA as well. In this study, the two researchers used recruit rankings from Rivals.com to determine their star rating. Recruit rankings are key to the study as the groupings are broken into star ratings to ensure uniformity. Determining the value of the recruit groupings required numerous calculations and used various values assigned to certain achievements including wins, bowl appearances, BCS appearances (the previous bowl system, used prior to the current College Football Playoff system), and premier bowl appearances (usually deemed the New Year's Six, includes the Cotton, Fiesta, Orange, Peach, Rose, and Sugar Bowls).

Based on these criteria, it was determined that a five-star recruit holds an average value of about $650,000 per year. The number is rather substantial given these players that contribute this much value to a team do not see a dime of the money that they help to generate. A four-star recruit was valued at an average of $350,000 for their contributions to the team. Three-star recruits, while not being the most desirable players, add an average of $150,000 in value to the team. This study also included two-star recruits in the study, which yielded a somewhat interesting result. The study found that a two-star recruit detracts value from a team, with two-star players reducing the revenue by $13,000 per year on average (Bergman & Logan, 2020). This is interesting given the number of two-star recruits that are signed each year, mainly by the Group of Five teams that require their service to round out the roster.

While this study is not an exact look at what a recruit may be worth to a university, it does provide an interesting talking point. With the numerous laws being passed in various states and the current United States Supreme Court case against the NCAA, this could point to a base for the importance of recruits to a team. Without these players, teams have no way to compete

which in turn leads to an inability to generate precious revenue. This study may not have been done to assist the movement for college athletes to earn a share of the revenue, but it may be pivotal in the long run as this movement continues. These values might not be completely accurate for each school, but it does prove that players are far more valuable to a university than one might expect. Only time will tell if players will be compensated for their services, but the schools themselves certainly reap the rewards that the student-athletes bring to their respective institutions.

Recruiting Violations

Recruiting violations are a rather important piece of the puzzle when it comes to what a school can do to better their teams. While the NCAA has restrictions on what schools can and cannot do when it comes to recruiting players, some schools attempt to try and work outside of the rulebook to get players to commit to and sign with their respective university. There have been a few notable examples of schools that broke the NCAA rules to recruiting. The first school that comes to mind is Southern Methodist University (SMU), who is responsible for what is known today as the "death penalty." SMU never received the full death penalty, but the school is the reason that it is a threat that looms over teams to avoid compensating players for their services (Sun Sentinel, 1987). Other schools to violate recruiting guidelines in recent memory include the University of Miami and the University of Tennessee. Each of these examples mainly revolve around the payment of players, which is illegal due to the amateurism label that is given to the student-athletes that participate in NCAA sanctioned events. According to the NCAA, any payment acquired by an athlete in any athletic competition before or during their time in college makes them a professional athlete and therefore ineligible to participate in an NCAA sanctioned event (NCAA Eligibility Center, 2019).

During the 1980s, SMU developed into a college football powerhouse that had taken the college landscape by storm. These teams featured future NFL stars, namely future hall of fame running back Eric Dickerson, as well as numerous stars during their time in the college ranks. Previously, SMU struggled to climb what was, at the time, the Southwest Conference due to blue bloods like Texas and Arkansas and up and coming teams like Houston. During the 1979 recruiting cycle, SMU was an afterthought to Eric Dickerson, the top recruit in Texas and possibly the nation, but before signing day he suddenly had a change of heart and flipped his commitment from Texas A&M to SMU. This is what most consider to be the beginning of the scandalous decade that was the 1980s for the SMU football program (Time Mag).

While landing Dickerson was the beginning of SMU's rise to the top of college football, the recruiting class did not end with Dickerson. The second ranked recruit in Texas, running back Craig James, had also committed to SMU to create the perfect duo with Eric Dickerson. As their play styles complemented each other perfectly, James the workhorse power back and Dickerson the elusive speed back. As both freshman running backs went on to develop, the duo would go on to be dubbed the "Pony Express," as a play on the SMU Mustangs name (Dodds, 2015). SMU saw a minor improvement in 1979 as the duo of Dickerson and James led the team to a 5-6 record. While the team only managed one more win than the previous season, this was only the beginning for the SMU football program (Sports Reference, 2021).

As the SMU football team continued to improve in the early 1980s, they were carried to an undefeated season and national championship under coach Bobby Collins in 1982. This was both their best season, but also the beginning of the end for the SMU football program and their massive success (Dodds, 2015). In the 1982 recruiting cycle, the team brought in promising freshman offensive tackle Sean Stopperich from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. SMU football

boosters had paid Stopperich to commit to the university. This deal also included the boosters covering the costs to move the family from Pennsylvania to Texas. Before Stopperich's career ever got off the ground, he was forced out of football due to a knee injury sustained in high school. Eventually, the media gained access to Stopperich who was willing to out the program for compensating recruits or purchasing lavish gifts in return for their commitment to the university and the football program (Matula, 2010).

After this, SMU received smaller penalties, but did not heed the warnings from the NCAA when it came to what was referred to as the "death penalty." This term refers to a penalty handed down to programs that break major rules, like SMU's compensation of recruits, multiple times in a five-year period. After the 1982 season, SMU boosters planned to continue to pay the remaining athletes who remained on the team. Once again, a former player, David Stanley, eventually turned to the media to inform the world that the SMU football program had been paying people after being warned of the death penalty (Matula, 2010). This led the NCAA to enact the death penalty on the SMU program, resulting in the program being shut down for one season, only allowed seven games the following season (all of which were required to be away games), and having all scholarships stripped over the next two seasons. While the team managed to avoid a complete program shutdown over two consecutive seasons, which is the highest penalty the NCAA could hand down, the penalty that the received affected the program for years to come. The verdict and punishments were handed down from the NCAA in 1987 which put the team on athletic probation through the 1990 season (Fox-4, 2014).

Since the 1987 SMU death penalty, the NCAA has not enforced the death penalty on any school. The University of Miami was busted in 2011 due to a "rogue booster" who was compensating players on various athletic teams (ESPN, 2011). This past season saw Tennessee

fire head coach, Jeremy Pruitt, after word of recruits receiving money in McDonald's brown paper bags surfaced (Brassil, 2021). Numerous NCAA basketball programs were also connected to a scandal involving Adidas paying top recruits to commit to Adidas schools (Associate Press, 2019). Recently, this has become a much bigger issue as the issue of paying players has begun to gain traction across the country. Several states have recently passed bills into law that would allow for athletes to profit from their name, image, and likeness. Soon, the NCAA may find themselves in need of altering their rules to suit the laws that have been cropping up in these states, especially with this issue making its way to the United States Supreme Court.

Conclusion

Overall, the world of college football revolves around recruiting and the ability of those recruits during their time at the university. These teams spend hundreds of thousands, or in some cases, millions of dollars in recruiting to ensure the future of their team is as successful as possible. The Power Five schools have the edge when it comes to talent, budget, and average winning percentage. Meanwhile the Group of Five schools can compete amongst themselves, but they tend to struggle with being on or staying at the same level as the Power Five schools. Besides a few anomalies like the two four-star recruits that Boise State signed, the budget of the school typically correlates with the amount of talent that the school signs during a recruiting cycle. While the four and five-star recruits might be signing with the bigger schools, the smaller schools are signing several three-star recruits that are typically undervalued or passed over by the bigger schools. This leads to the disparity that we see between the Power Five and Group of Five as most schools understand their place and spend and recruit accordingly.

Success in college football hinges on what a team does in the regular season and the postseason. While a team can bring in as many recruits as possible and spend all the money in

the world on recruiting, it is all for not if it does not lead to success on the field. Both Power Five and Group of Five conferences have seen success in the regular season and more importantly in the bowl season. Regular season records became skewed due to the oddity that was the 2020 season, but the bowl records from the past two seasons show that both groups of conferences can compete amongst themselves. While there are numerous games each season that put a Group of Five team against a Power Five team, some games end it what most would consider the expected result, but other games end with the underdog beating the prestigious Power Five school to create a name for themselves in that season. Regardless of recruiting, money, and schedule, there is a chance for any team to knock off another team any given week.

The value that recruits add to a program can put the program ahead for years to come, as the study from Ohio State performed in the past year. College football teams are some of the most valuable industries in this country due to how much revenue they generate and how much money they spend in a year. The players are what generate the revenue, because without them there are no teams to play the game. This leads to the argument of whether players should be compensated for what they do on the field, and if they should be compensated for what they do off the field. This will further dilute the recruiting world as bigger schools will maintain a large advantage over smaller schools due to their revenue streams being much bigger. Due to this, it may lead to some schools breaking the rules to sign recruits causing more penalties to be handed down to schools. Only time will tell what the future landscape of college football recruiting will look like, but it will always be an industry fueled by money, high school talent, and the universities vying for their services as athletes.

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