NCAA Men’s Basketball Transfer Portal Analysis

Cal Davis, Zain Hoda

In October of 2018, the NCAA (the governing body of college athletics) launched a tool for student-athletes called the “Transfer Portal”. The transfer portal is an “application, database, and compliance tool… [used] to manage and facilitate the process for student athletes seeing to transfer between member institutions” [1]. Prior to the initiation of the transfer portal, it was more difficult for student-athletes to transfer from institution to institution. There would be a laborious process of the student-athlete seeking permission to leave going to the coach, athletic director, and even the dean of students if permission was not granted to them. Even once the student-athlete obtained permission from someone within their current institution, there was an inefficient process of tracing the student-athlete’s path to a new school and athletes not being allowed to participate in their sport in the next year unless a waiver was granted [2].

Despite the benefits that the “Transfer Portal” brought to student-athletes looking to transfer, the “Transfer Portal” itself did not grant student-athletes immediate eligibility in football, men’s and women’s basketball, baseball and hockey. However, “Starting in the 2021-22 academic year,…The Council expanded the one-time transfer exception to all sports, which means student-athletes…have the same chance as all other student-athletes to transfer and play right away” [3].

This combination of the “Transfer Portal” and granting student-athletes immediate-eligibility spring boarded a massive change in the landscape in recruiting including Men’s Basketball. In 2017, the number of end-of-season transfers in Men’s Basketball in 2017, 2018, and 2019 is 689, 704, and 694, respectively [4]. Then, as seen in Figure 1, the number of transfers has since skyrocketed with over one-thousand confirmed transfers in Men’s Basketball in each of 2021, 2022, and 2023 with that number reaching 1296 in 2023 [5].

A graph with numbers and text

Description automatically generated with medium confidence

Figure 1: Growth of Transfer Portal in Men’s Basketball Since 2021

This significant jump changes the entire landscape of recruiting in Men’s Basketball affecting everyone involved. This impacts players because now players have the freedom of “free agents” where they can transfer to a different school for any reason at all. This can range from something serious like their coach getting fired to something semi-serious like the athlete feeling like they are not getting appropriate recognition and playing time to something not-so-serious like my sandwiches have not been tasting so good – there is nothing to limit the student-athlete choosing to transfer and then being granted immediate eligibility. This freedom gives student-athletes options that they have never had before.

On the flip side, coaches and staff now must shift their recruiting strategies to stay ahead. In the past, coaches would recruit mostly high schoolers, international players, and athletes from junior-colleges (JUCO’s) and then build a “program” by developing their players so that as they age and gain experience, this will lead to success on the court. Now, players are leaving their current institutions at an incredible rate leaving coaches with more slots on their roster to fill than before. With the vast number of players in the Transfer Portal, the players that coaches are interested in obtaining are those that already have some level of college experience, which exist in the Transfer Portal itself. The combination of increased roster spot vacancies on top of the shift in opportunity to add “better” players via the Transfer Portal, this creates a new, challenging puzzle that has minimal to no analysis associated with it.

Currently, there are some products that Men’s Basketball programs use including HD Intelligence (HDI) and DAOR. HDI provides services including analysis of practice stats, scouting reports, box scores, and transfer analytics. Regarding transfer analytics, their service mainly includes a player database that gives their basic profile and identifies their status (Ex: “graduating”, “transfer”, “possible pro”, etc.) along with a rating score for that player. When clicking on a player name, the “Individual Player Dashboard” provides their rating history as well as some charts showing some charts regarding the player’s output of “Playmaking”, “Shotmaking”, and “Rebounding/Defense”. While this is not HDI’s entire product, only the player rating indicates an analytical dive into a player’s comparative ability.

The DAOR product, however, does provide a deeper insight specifically in analytical recruiting, yet still has caveats. DAOR provides a vast amount of information all within Google Sheets including a “Roster Analysis/Scheduling Tool”, a “Roster Analysis Tool”, a “Basketball Recruiting App”, and more. The “Roster Analysis/Scheduling Tool” is used to help teams build a non-conference schedule by looking at other teams’ rosters additions and losses. The “Roster Analysis Tool” is specifically designed for a team to construct a roster and obtain season projections based on the theoretical roster that is built. Finally, the “Basketball Recruiting App” has stats for AAU, high school, international, and college stats and associated ranking and projection of players based on that. One of the issues with this product is the overload of information with the five or more different Google Sheet spreadsheets each containing a multitude of tabs with some of the spreadsheets containing ten or more tabs. The other issue is the fact that it runs through Google Sheets – while it makes it easy for teams to share amongst the staff, the system is incredibly slow. Overall, DAOR is a more analytically minded and in-depth source for transfer portal recruiting than HDI, but the overwhelming amount of data and slow interface makes it a source that could still use some work.

With the rise of the Transfer Portal and the consequences that come with it along with the lack of proper tools to assess what is going on, there is room for analytical growth in this area. The target of this assessment will be to analyze the Transfer Portal from the 2018-19 season to the 2022-23 season in a multitude of ways. The first way will be by using classifiers to project players into certain tiers based on their performance in the previous year. The next form of analysis will be by creating similarity matrices using player-season data. Another form of analysis will include projecting player’s individual statistics of the next year based on the previous year and using the team’s continuity to assess the player-team fit. The congregation of these analyses can help give a better, simpler picture behind recruiting within the transfer portal.

In collection of the transfer portal data, two main sources are used. The first source used is Basketball Reference, grouped under Sports Reference, is a public source of data containing team-based, player-based, coach-based, and program-based comprehension of data. For the purposes of this project, the player-based data is the most useful while coach-based data can also be helpful in analysis. The second source used is KenPom, which is a pay-to-use service that also contains team-based and player-based data, and it also has

References

[1] <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/NCAA_transfer_portal#:~:text=The%20NCAA%20transfer%20portal%20is,to%20transfer%20between%20member%20institutions.>

[2] <https://s3.amazonaws.com/static.ncaa.org/static/champion/what-the-ncaa-transfer-portal-is/index.html#:~:text=Previously%20in%20Division%20I%2C%20when,case%20to%20the%20athletics%20director.>

[3] <https://www.ncaa.org/news/2021/4/15/di-council-adopts-new-transfer-legislation.aspx>

[4] <https://www.ncaa.org/news/2020/1/17/new-data-shows-transfers-in-division-i-men-s-basketball-remain-steady-over-recent-years.aspx#:~:text=Over%20the%20past%20three%20years,2018%20and%20694%20in%202019.>

[5] <https://www.ncaa.org/sports/2022/4/25/transfer-portal-data-division-i-student-athlete-transfer-trends.aspx>