

The SCORE Act Only Hurts Athletes and Cannot Pass: An Open Letter to Congress from the Members of Athletes.org

Congress is on the verge of making a massive mistake.

If lawmakers want to “save” college athletics, ramming the SCORE Act through the House is exactly the wrong way to do it. Not because college sports are beyond saving, but because this bill risks codifying the same power imbalance that created this chaos in the first place.

The current instability in college athletics did not emerge because athletes became “greedy” or stopped caring about education. It emerged because courts across the country, including the Supreme Court, recognized and began ruling that the NCAA’s long-running system of enriching itself and its member schools was at the expense of the freedoms, economic and otherwise, of college athletes - and in doing so, was blatantly violating U.S. law.

The legal system has not destabilized college sports. It has exposed that its suppressive traditions are unlawful and immoral.

For decades, college athletics operated as a multibillion-dollar sports and entertainment enterprise built on college athlete performance. The money that the NCAA, its member conferences and the universities generated off of athletes has powered the machine: soaring coaching salaries, conference expansion, administrator perks, luxury facilities and the generation of billions in donor contributions to universities.

College athletes were the engine. They were also the only group restricted from participating in the financial upside of this enterprise.

Arguably, at one point, a scholarship was a fair exchange for all college athletes, and today that is still true for some. But as the economics have evolved, the restrictions and control over athletes’ rights have tightened even more. This has forced athletes to turn to the justice system to try and regain rights that should have never been stripped from them in the first place.

Now, instead of modernizing the system with athletes, the NCAA, Power Four conference commissioners and institutional leaders are begging Congress for extraordinary legal protection through the SCORE Act. Simply put, these leaders want Congress to legalize their restrictions on athletes, which have been deemed illegal by multiple courts... in perpetuity. All so the universities can continue to grow their interests at the expense of the athletes.

Congress should not pretend this is a neutral rescue plan. It does not protect college athletes. It is a chess move dressed up as a fix that would restore unchecked power to the NCAA, the Power Four conference commissioners and universities. Even Supreme Court Justice Brett Kavanaugh referred to the NCAA as a “cartel” that violates antitrust laws. Why would Congress want to support this cartel?

Most boil this issue down to a financial one, but this moment in the industry's history is about so much more than compensation. It is also about health and safety, but most importantly, checks and balances on the organizations who, as history has shown, will do anything they can to preserve their interests.

By using a system called 'NIL' to avoid classifying athletes as employees, universities are avoiding being obligated to provide basic workplace protections to athletes. This confusing system is currently being used as a weapon to rob athletes by renegeing on payments and restricting their freedoms.

By coining the term 'student-athlete', not as a succinct descriptor, but as a legal loophole dating to the 1950s, universities are avoiding paying Worker's Compensation benefits to athletes (the first case being when college football player Ray Dennison died from a football-related brain injury he received in a game, and his widow and children received no benefits as a result).

Don't take our word for it. Look at one of the NCAA's own: the first Executive Director of the NCAA, Walter Byers, who developed this strategy and coined this term.

Decades later, Byers wrote a book about his time in the NCAA, *Unsportsmanlike Conduct: Exploiting College Athletes*. In the book, he shared that the term "student-athlete" was developed in order to insulate colleges from having to provide long-term disability payments to players injured while playing their sport (and making money for their university and the NCAA). He also stated that collegiate amateurism is an economic camouflage for monopoly practice, one that operates an "air-tight racket of supplying cheap athletic labor."

The SCORE Act would unabashedly allow institutions, conferences and their affiliated governing structures to coordinate restrictions on athlete compensation, transfers, eligibility, representation and economic opportunity. These limitations, when challenged in courts, have been categorically rejected. The NCAA and its member institutions are begging Congress to codify rules that are illegal and against the principles of which our country was founded.

If Congress wants solutions, it should consider fixing the reckless behaviors of college athletic departments. Starting with financial mismanagement.

Ironically, while begging Congress to cap athlete compensation, universities are doing nothing to help mitigate their own spending. In 2025 alone, universities spent more than \$270M buying out fired coaches; while simultaneously claiming that athlete compensation is untenable, and Olympic sports cannot be funded.

The hypocrisy in this debate is impossible to ignore. Conference commissioners reshape the map for revenue and collude with schools to join them while they are in existing contracts. Universities change conferences for more money and exposure. Coaches leave for higher salaries with zero remorse for the players they recruited and left behind. Athletic directors and administrators move freely for better opportunities. March Madness and the College Football Playoff add more teams to generate more revenue with no regard for the health and safety of the athletes who participate in these additional games.

Decades of tradition have been torched in the pursuit of money; yet one tradition persists: control and restrictions over athletes must remain for the entire business to be "sustainable." Restrictions and control that impacts athletes' mental and physical health, wealth creation and academic pursuits. All of which run counter to what colleges are supposed to do: enable young people to build foundations that last a lifetime.

If you give in to the NCAA and college leadership's whims and restore their unchecked power by voting in favor of the SCORE Act, know that you have just voted to legally condone a system to persist that:

- Allowed a doctor at Ohio State University to abuse hundreds of former college athletes, including 51 former football players for years.
- Created the conditions that gave Larry Nassar and Robert Anderson opportunities to perform sexual abuse on countless college athletes at Michigan State University and Michigan respectively, despite the administrations being aware of allegations against these men for years without taking any action to protect athletes.
- Enabled 'leaders' like UAB's softball coach Taylor Smartt to inflict physical, mental and verbal abuse, racist remarks, humiliation, and food deprivation on her team, with no personal repercussions.
- Failed to save athletes, who could still be with us today, from dying: Jordan McNair at Maryland, Ted Agu at Cal, Ereck Plancher at UCF, and Braden Bradforth at Kansas.
- Refused (and still refuses) to model its kickoff rules after the NFL to protect player health and safety. This refusal caused Medrick Burnett Jr, Alabama A&M football player, to sustain a life threatening brain injury during a kickoff play, leading to his death in November 2024.
- Has compared college athletes to prison laborers multiple times, as recently as 2024, to make the argument that college athletes should not have employment rights. NCAA lawyers have cited *Vanskike v. Peters* (1992), where a judge ruled that inmates who do work while they are incarcerated don't qualify as employees of the prison due to the 13th Amendment, which states that slavery is illegal except as punishment for a crime.

These are a few of the public examples of college leadership's gross negligence and misconduct that would continue if the SCORE Act is passed. A vote for the SCORE Act is a vote to continue the abuse of athletes and limiting their options to save themselves.

The statistic that should keep you up at night? 42% of college athletes stated they would not raise a serious concern with their athletic director for fear of consequences. Ask yourself: Would you allow for these conditions in any other industry in the United States?

Would you allow a system that reneges on more than 30% of its contractually agreed upon payments to athletes to govern itself?

How about one that proactively pushes thousands of athletes into the transfer portal each season, ruining their academic and athletic careers? Not to mention one that strips scholarships away mid season at "coaches determination" with no rhyme or reason.

What about one that can't even follow the lead of its contemporary in updating basic safety rules to protect its players? (The NFL revised its kickoff rules to reduce injuries, particularly concussions, yet college leaders have not adjusted the game at all to be safer.)

The pattern is obvious: unchecked power, zero accountability, unsafe workplace conditions and, ultimately, no consequences.

College athletes are not trying to destroy college sports. They simply want to be afforded the same protections and opportunities as their peers on campus and in other industries.

Voting in favor of the SCORE Act not only absolves college athletics leadership of the responsibility to build a better future for athletes, it legally supports a predatory system. Stability should not be achieved by restricting one group of people's rights for the benefit of others.

At Athletes.org, our members believe that collective bargaining is the only sustainable solution for college athletics. But, before we cross that bridge, consider your current opportunity: to, once and for all, show college leaders that their days of power mongering, subjugation and unabashed actions of self-interest have come to an end.

Do not let the abuse of power and exploitation of college athletes continue.

Vote *against* the SCORE Act.

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Quotes from Member Athletes



"Honestly, how can they make decisions like this without including any athletes or asking for our input? These choices directly impact our careers, education, and health, so our voices should be part of the conversation."

— Jaden Mangham, Purdue Football



"I just think no matter what, players have to be involved. We are the ones putting it all on the field every Saturday, so there's no reason we should have no say."

— Tyrell Henry, Wisconsin Football



"We deserve a seat at the table. We as athletes are the reason the stands are filled, logos are worn and the game thrives the way it does. Ever since I was a little kid I dreamed about making it to the Division I level to play the sport I love. It is unfair and unfaithful to hold a discussion without the main attraction in mind. We deserve a say, just like the executives and leaders, in sports and in our futures. I believe that we, as athletes at every level, deserve to be at the table and fight for our best interest. We want college sports to thrive just like everyone else in the room. So let's bond together to generate the best outcome for all."

— Khalil Poteat, Temple Football



"You cannot plan for our future without our input. If a decision affects our bodies, our scholarships, our eligibility, or our livelihoods, athletes should have a voice in the room from the start, not after the fact."

— Angelina Vasquez, UNLV Track & Field, AO Executive Committee

Context & Supporting Materials

From the Arena, Not the Sidelines: College Athletics is Running Out of Time — *University of Louisville*

By President Dr. Gerry Bradley, Vice President and Director of Athletics Josh Heird, and Board Chairman Dr. Laurence N. Benz. Discusses the growing instability in college athletics and argues for structural reform to preserve the long-term future of the collegiate model.
<https://mail.uofl.me/t/r-e-tkujtiud-nttkjhijl-y/>

Study Finds University of Louisville Athletics Drives \$1.28 Billion in Annual Economic Impact — *University of Louisville*

Examines the economic impact generated by University of Louisville athletics, including job creation, tourism, institutional visibility, and statewide financial activity tied to college sports programs. <https://gocards.com/news/2026/1/29/general-study-finds-university-of-louisville-athletics-drives-1-28-billion-in-annual-economic-impact>

What Is The Florida Gators' First Class After Winning Championship? — *TikTok*

Video interview with Florida Gators men's basketball players in which multiple athletes are unable to identify their next scheduled class, with responses indicating online enrollment, lack of current attendance, or absence from academic obligations. <https://www.tiktok.com/@theathletic/video/7490813210208111915>

Ex-Ohio State Football Players Join Sexual Abuse Lawsuit Against School — *ESPN*

Covers former Ohio State football players joining litigation alleging institutional failures related to sexual abuse by team physician Dr. Richard Strauss and the university's handling of athlete safety concerns. https://www.espn.com/college-football/story/_/id/48705243/ex-ohio-state-football-players-join-sexual-abuse-lawsuit-school

NCAA to Investigate Michigan State's Handling of Larry Nassar Abuse Scandal — *CBS News*

Details investigations into Michigan State University's handling of abuse allegations against former physician Larry Nassar and broader concerns regarding institutional accountability in college athletics. <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/ncaa-to-investigate-michigan-states-handling-of-larry-nassar-abuse-scandal/>

University of Michigan Reaches \$490 Million Settlement With Robert Anderson Accusers — *NBC News*

Reports on the University of Michigan's settlement involving hundreds of athletes and students who alleged abuse by former university physician Dr. Robert Anderson. <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/university-michigan-reaches-490-million-settlement-anderson-accusers-rcna12713>

UAB Softball Coach Facing Allegations of Abuse, Racist Remarks Toward Players — *WBRC*

Covers allegations involving abusive conduct and racist remarks within the University of Alabama at Birmingham softball program, raising concerns regarding athlete welfare and oversight. <https://www.wbrc.com/2026/05/07/uab-softball-coach-facing-allegations-abuse-racist-remarks-toward-players/>

Maryland Football Player Jordan McNair Died After Heatstroke at Team Workout — *ESPN*

Examines the death of University of Maryland football player Jordan McNair following a team workout and the subsequent scrutiny of program culture, medical response, and athlete safety protocols. https://www.espn.com/college-football/story/_/id/24343021/jordan-mcnair-maryland-terrapins-died-heatstroke-team-workout

University of California Admits Negligence in Death of Ted Agu — *ESPN*

Details findings surrounding the death of California football player Ted Agu during a conditioning drill and the university's admission of negligence related to training oversight and medical care. https://www.espn.com/college-football/story/_/id/14682233/university-california-admits-negligence-2014-death-lineman-ted-agu

Jury Finds UCF Negligent in Death of Football Player Ereck Plancher — *The Florida Times-Union*

Discusses the legal ruling finding the University of Central Florida negligent in the death of football player Ereck Plancher during conditioning activities. <https://www.jacksonville.com/story/sports/college/2011/07/01/jury-finds-ucf-negligent-death-football-player-family-awarded-10/15898048007/>

Report Says Oversight Led to Death of Kansas Community College Football Player Braeden Bradforth — *ESPN*

Reviews investigative findings surrounding the death of football player Braeden Bradforth and concerns regarding conditioning practices, supervision, and institutional oversight. https://www.espn.com/college-football/story/_/id/28081567/report-says-oversight-led-death-kansas-community-college-football-player

Alabama A&M Linebacker Medrick Burnett Jr. Dies Following Head Injury — *ESPN*

Reports on the death of Alabama A&M football player Medrick Burnett Jr. after suffering a head injury, highlighting ongoing concerns surrounding athlete health and safety in contact sports. https://www.espn.com/espn/story/_/id/42680658/alabama-lb-medrick-burnett-jr-dies-head-injury

What You Need to Know About the Latest NCAA Legal Battle — *ESPN*

Overview of ongoing federal court cases challenging NCAA rules, including disputes over athlete compensation, employment classification, and antitrust law, and how these legal battles could reshape the structure of college athletics. https://www.espn.com/college-sports/story/_/id/35467766/what-need-know-latest-ncaa-legal-battle

Athletes.org's Collective Bargaining Framework — *Athletes.org*

Outlines a proposed framework for athlete representation, collective bargaining, compensation standards, and long-term protections for college athletes. <https://athletes.org/cba>

Save College Athletics Discussion Draft Bill — *Athletes.org*

Presents proposed federal legislative language intended to stabilize college athletics through athlete protections, governance reform, and structured representation mechanisms. <https://athletes.org/savecollegeathletics/>

Save College Athletics Section-by-Section Summary — *Athletes.org*

Provides a detailed breakdown and explanation of the provisions contained within the Save College Athletics discussion draft legislation. <https://athletes.org/savecollegeathleticssummary/>

Senate HELP Committee Request for Information — *Athletes.org*

Compiles materials and responses related to the U.S. Senate HELP Committee's examination of issues impacting college athletics, athlete rights, and institutional accountability. <https://athletes.org/senatehelp>

The Athletes' School Ratings — *Athletes.org*

Provides athlete-submitted ratings and reviews of college athletic programs, intended to increase transparency and accountability within college sports. <https://athletes.org/school-rating/>

