

COLLEGE FOOTBALL AND SOCIAL MOBILITY:  
A CASE STUDY OF NOTRE DAME FOOTBALL PLAYERS\*

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*This study examined the social origins and career mobility of college football players who graduated from Notre Dame between 1946 and 1965. It was found that Notre Dame football players came from much lower socioeconomic backgrounds than regular Notre Dame students. In terms of social mobility, both ballplayers and regular students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds have moved well beyond their social origins. Only in educational attainment do the two groups differ significantly. Among ballplayers, first teamers experienced greater income mobility than second teamers and reserves. First team ballplayers were also found to be over-represented as top ranking executives in their companies.*

It is a widely held belief that college football has been an effective avenue for upward social mobility. Thousands of boys, so the argument goes, would never have risen above their humble origins if they had not received athletic scholarships. One has only to point to such parvenu celebrities as Joe Namath, O. J. Simpson, or Franco Harris for evidence in support of this view. The main purpose of this study is to determine whether conventional wisdom concerning big time college football and social mobility holds up under empirical investigation.

There are a number of empirical studies which show that athletic participation in high school is positively related to academic achievement (Schafer and Armer, 1968; Phillips and Schafer, 1971) and to educational expectations (Bend, 1968; Rehberg and Schafer, 1968; Schafer and Rehberg, 1970; Spreitzer and Pugh, 1973; Snyder and Spreitzer, 1977). All of this research suggests that sport involvement in high school in some way enhances an

athlete's chances of attending college and of becoming upwardly mobile later in life. Few studies, however, have examined the consequences of sport participation at the college level for an athlete's career mobility.

It is hard to deny that commercialized college football, as played at schools like Notre Dame, Texas, or the University of Nebraska, makes far greater demands on an athlete than is typically the case in high school. Thus, it is reasonable to expect that athletes will face many obstacles in obtaining their college educations they did not encounter at the high school level. In other words, even if athletes benefit in a number of ways from high school sport, their experiences might be quite different at the big time college level.

Sage (1967) and Webb (1968) provide evidence that college athletes are less successful academically than non-athletes. Sage compared two groups of former high school athletic stars; one group chose to play college sport while the other did not. Sage found that non-athletes received better grades, were more occupationally oriented, and were less concerned about fraternities and campus social life than athletes. Webb, in a study of Michigan State athletes, found that only 49 percent of the team athletes as opposed to 70 percent of the regular Michigan State students had actually graduated when five years had lapsed since the graduation of their original college classes.

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The argument that college sport often interferes with an athlete's intellectual development is supported by a number of former college athletes (e.g., Meggysey, 1970; Scott, 1971; Shaw, 1972; Edwards, 1973; Sack, 1977). All of these writers found the demands of "big time" college sport to be incompatible with the pursuit of a first rate education. While the views of former athletes and the work of Sage and Webb do not provide enough solid empirical evidence to make firm conclusions, they do at least suggest that participation in college sport might in some ways hinder career mobility.

Many of the studies of college athletes, as Loy (1969) points out, have either focused on their social origins (McIntyre, 1959; Webb, 1968) or on their careers after graduating from college (Coughlan, 1956; Litchfield and Cope, 1962; Crawford, 1962). There have been few attempts, however, to compare an athlete's status of origin with his status later in life.

Loy (1969), in his study of athletes from UCLA, attempted to correct this shortcoming. By using mailed questionnaires, Loy was able to gather data on the social origins as well as the present social statuses of 845 life pass holders at UCLA. To obtain a life pass, an athlete must have competed at the college level for 4 years and have earned at least 3 varsity letters. Loy utilized the Duncan Socioeconomic Index (SEI) to rate an athlete's first job after graduation (status of entry), present job (status of destination) and his father's job when the athlete entered college (status of origin). By comparing the mean SEI scores for fathers and sons, Loy was able to derive a measure of social mobility.

Loy's use of data on origins and destinations was a marked improvement over earlier studies, but he failed to deal adequately with a number of other important methodological problems. Most importantly, he failed to use a control group of college students who were not varsity athletes. Thus, there is no way of knowing whether the mobility experienced by ballplayers in his study was a consequence of athletic participation or whether ballplayers and non-ballplayers alike experienced mobility during this period due

to factors unrelated to athletic involvement.

Loy's study was also deficient in that it only included subjects who had at least 3 varsity letters. Thus, average and reserve ballplayers were excluded. The tendency to focus on star athletes when discussing sport and social mobility is a major problem with many studies in this area. An adequate study of how participation in college football affects social mobility must include all ballplayers who experienced the rigors of commercialized college sport. It is important to emphasize that most big time college ballplayers never reach the star category and many never earn a letter. There is also a sizeable number of athletes who receive scholarships, attend practice for 4 years, but never dress for a game. To exclude such ballplayers would be a gross oversight.

#### METHODS

In the present study, the social origins and career mobility of 2 groups of college graduates were examined—former Notre Dame football players and Notre Dame students who were not varsity athletes. Social rank was measured in a number of ways. The Hollingshead Two Factor Index of Social Position (ISP) and the Duncan SEI were used as measures of social status. In addition, income and educational attainment helped to locate respondents in the stratification system. Social mobility was measured by examining the status, educational and income attainment of respondents who came from similar social origins. By social origin was meant the father's social rank when the respondent entered Notre Dame.

The sample consisted of 344 Notre Dame football players who graduated between 1946 and 1965. It also included 444 randomly selected regular students who graduated from Notre Dame during that same period.<sup>1</sup> The years 1946–1965 were chosen because graduates during that era should now be well established in their

<sup>1</sup> Of the 482 respondents who returned the questionnaires, 12 reported that they never received their degrees. Only one of those was a former football player.

Table 1. Percentage Distribution of Indicators of Social Origin by Type of Student.

Father's Education	Players (N = 215)	Students (N = 261)	Total
16 years or more	15.8	36.7	130
12-15 years	29.3	33.3	150
Less than 12	54.9	30.0	196
Father's Income <sup>a</sup>	Players (N = 202)	Students (N = 238)	Total
\$40,000 +	15.9	39.5	188
\$20-39,000	28.2	29.0	126
Less \$20,000	55.9	31.5	126
Father's Class (ISP)	Players (N = 205)	Students (N = 248)	Total
Upper	23.4	53.2	180
Middle	25.4	25.4	115
Lower	51.2	21.4	158

<sup>a</sup> Father's income is based on 1977 dollars.

Note: In this and in all subsequent tables, the total number of ballplayers and students should be 218 and 264 respectively. Where this is not the case, it is because of missing data.

$\chi^2$  is significant at .001 for all three indicators.

careers. A 20 year span was chosen to insure that a large number of football players could be included. The oldest subjects in the study were around 55, the youngest 35. Care was taken to include first team, second team and reserve ballplayers in the sample. It should be noted that Notre Dame was an all-male university during this period.

Data were gathered by use of a mailed questionnaire. Current mailing addresses of ballplayers and regular students were obtained from the Alumni Records Office at Notre Dame. Lists of football players were derived from rosters in football *Dopebooks* that were published yearly during the period under investigation. Only seniors were taken from each roster. A systematic sample of regular students was drawn from names in alumni files. Of the 788 questionnaires mailed out, 759 actually reached the respondents. The returned questionnaires numbered 482, with 218 coming from ballplayers and 264 from regular students. The overall response rate of 64 percent was about equal for both ballplayers and regular students.<sup>2</sup>

#### FINDINGS

It is clear from Table 1 that Notre Dame players came from lower socioeconomic

<sup>2</sup> It should be noted that the age distributions for football players and regular students who returned the questionnaires were almost identical. ( $\chi^2$ -square = .52,  $P < .98$ ).

backgrounds than average Notre Dame students. In education, income and in social status (Hollingshead ISP), the fathers of ballplayers rank much lower than the fathers of regular students.

Table 2 indicates that both ballplayers and regular students have experienced considerable status mobility. The mean Hollingshead ISP scores of respondents whose fathers were from classes IV and V reveal that both ballplayers and regular students have moved well beyond their social origins.<sup>3</sup> A two way analysis of variance indicates that the main effect of student type on respondents' ISP is not statistically significant, nor are there any significant interactions. Thus, ballplayers were no more or less mobile than regular students. The main effect of father's status on son's status, however, is statistically significant at the .03 level.<sup>4</sup>

It is obvious that the rather high social status enjoyed by the respondents can be largely attributed to their being college

<sup>3</sup> The use of Duncan's SEI yielded very similar results. The mean SEI scores of ballplayers and regular students who came from lower status origins were 74 and 78 respectively. Given the fact that the mean SEI scores for the fathers of both group were in the 30's, it is clear that the respondents have experienced considerable status mobility.

<sup>4</sup> In this and all subsequent ANOVA, effects have been estimated using the least squares approach to unequal cell N's. Post-hoc between-group comparisons were made using the Scheffe approach, a conservative test appropriate to the non-orthogonal design.

Table 2. Mean Hollingshead ISP Scores of Ballplayers and Regular Students Controlling Father's ISP.<sup>a</sup>

Student Type	Father's ISP Score					Total
	I (11-17)	II (18-31)	III (32-47)	IV (48-63)	V (64-77)	
Players	15.3(12)	19.5(35)	19.9(51)	20.3(74)	19.5(31)	19.6(203)
Students	16.6(57)	18.5(74)	18.0(63)	17.4(46)	18.2(6)	17.7(246)
Total	16.4(69)	18.8(109)	18.9(114)	19.2(120)	19.0(37)	18.6(449)

<sup>a</sup> In Hollingshead's ranking system, ISP scores range from a high of 11 to a low of 77.

graduates. The fact that the Hollingshead ISP as well as other indices of social status rely heavily on education as a factor impairs somewhat their usefulness in assessing differences in social rank within a sample of college graduates. It should be noted, however, that the use of educational attainment, independent of the occupational factor in Hollingshead's index, reveals some important differences among Notre Dame graduates.

Table 3 indicates that Notre Dame football players were less likely than regular students to have earned graduate or professional degrees, regardless of father's educational attainment. Of the regular students whose fathers did not graduate from high school, 44 percent earned advanced degrees. This was true of only 29 percent of the ballplayers from similar origins. This would suggest that the former experienced greater educational mobility. It would also appear that for players and regular students alike, there was a positive relationship between father's and son's educational attainment.

A two way analysis of variance examining the effects of father's income and student type on son's income found no statistically significant main effects or interactions. It is clear, however, that both ballplayers and regular students experienced considerable income mobility. Even respondents whose fathers made less than \$15,000 a year (adjusted to 1977 dollars) now have a mean annual in-

come of over \$30,000 (see Table 4). A three way analysis of variance using father's income, father's education, and rank on football team, i.e., first team, second team or reserve, as independent variables and son's income as the dependent variable, uncovered only one statistically significant main effect. That was the effect of rank on team. The absence of any statistically significant interactions means that the relationship between rank on team and son's income holds up regardless of father's education and income.

Table 5 clearly illustrates this relationship between a ballplayer's rank on the football team in his senior year and his present income. Whereas 41 percent of the first team ballplayers are now making \$50,000 or more, this is true of only 30 percent of the second teamers and 13 percent of the reserves. Table 5 also indicates that there is very little difference in income attainment when regular students are compared with ballplayers as a whole.

A player's rank on the team, while influencing income, had little effect on a player's social status or educational attainment. A two way analysis of variance examining the effect of father's ISP and rank on team on son's ISP revealed that only father's ISP had a statistically significant main effect. Furthermore, while 42 percent of the second teamers, 33 percent of the reserves and only 29 percent of the first team ballplayers earned advanced

Table 3. Percentage of Respondents Who Earned Advanced Degrees by Type of Student and Father's Education.

Student Type	Father's Education			Total	(N)			
	16 or more years	(N)	12-15 Years			(N)	Less than 12 Years	(N)
Players	38.2	(34)	34.9	(63)	28.8	(118)	32.1	(215)
Students	55.2	(96)	50.6	(87)	43.6	(78)	50.2	(261)
Total	50.8	(130)	44.0	(150)	34.7	(196)	42.0	(476)

Table 4. Mean Income of Ballplayers and Regular Students Controlling Father's Income (In Thousands of Dollars)<sup>a</sup>

Student Type	Father's Income					Total
	<\$15,000	\$15-\$19,999	\$20-\$29,999	\$30-\$39,999	\$40,000+	
Players	35 (70)	33 (42)	37 (46)	41 (11)	44 (31)	37 (200)
Students	36 (35)	35 (40)	36 (43)	36 (24)	38 (94)	36 (236)
Total	35 (105)	34 (82)	36 (89)	38 (35)	36 (125)	37 (436)

<sup>a</sup> The means in this table were calculated on the basis of midpoints of intervals. Income categories ranged from 1 to 8 with 1 being 0-\$4,999 and 8 being \$50,000+. All entries are rounded to nearest thousand.

degrees, this difference was not statistically significant at the .05 level.

#### DISCUSSION

From the above findings it can be concluded that both Notre Dame football players and regular students have experienced considerable upward social mobility. Only in educational attainment beyond a college degree do the two groups differ significantly. The fact that the respondents were all at least college graduates has undoubtedly contributed to their general success. Among ballplayers, rank on the team appears to have had a marked impact on income mobility.

The finding that ballplayers earned fewer advanced degrees than other students may indicate that athletes set a lower priority on academic accomplishment. Then again, the demands of commercialized college football may force even academically oriented ballplayers to do only enough studying to get by. What many people fail to realize, or refuse to acknowledge, is that big time college football demands as much time and energy as professional football. When presented with the statement, "playing football at Notre Dame is as physically and psychologically demanding as playing in the National Football League," 64 percent of the

respondents who had actually played pro ball agreed or strongly agreed. Only 32 percent were in disagreement and 4 percent were undecided.

Given the fact that big time college athletes work as hard as professionals, it is not surprising that many of them take academic shortcuts. When asked if they cheated in school work while at Notre Dame, 69 percent of the ballplayers and only 43 percent of the regular students admitted having done so. Ballplayers were also found to be under-represented in fields that require considerable scholarly commitment (such as science and engineering) and had lower grade point averages than regular students. As a result of the lower priority athletes are often forced to give to education, it is to be expected that they would earn fewer advanced degrees than other students.

The finding that first team ballplayers experienced greater income mobility than second teamers and reserves, while not surprising, is nonetheless open to a variety of interpretations. One could argue that the fame the first team athletes receive gives them entree to high paying positions which demand people with celebrity status. This fame is even enhanced if an athlete has a successful career in professional football. Paul Hornung, Daryl Lamonica, Myron Pottios,

Table 5. Percentage Distribution of Respondent's Present Income by Type of Student and Rank on Football Team.

Income	Student Type		Rank on Team		
	Players	Students	1st	2nd	Res.
\$50,000+	29.6	24.3	41.0	29.8	13.1
\$30-49,999	29.2	35.2	25.3	26.3	36.1
Less \$30,000	41.2	40.5	33.7	43.9	50.8
Total	(216)	(259)	(95)	(157)	(61)

$\chi^2$  for student type and income is not significant at .05.

$\chi^2$  for rank on team and income is significant at .05.

and Nick Pietrosante are just a few of the many Notre Dame graduates in the sample who were able to capitalize on their stellar careers in professional football.<sup>5</sup>

It might also be argued, however, that the interpersonal skills and character traits which make successful athletes are precisely those which make successful entrepreneurs. Athletes who rise to the top in the often brutal competition of big time college football may be best suited for careers in business. This study uncovered no significant status differences among first team, second team and reserve ballplayers. Likewise, the careers pursued by all three categories of ballplayers were fairly similar. There is one occupational difference though that is worth noting. Of the first team ballplayers, 34 percent are presently top executives in their companies, i.e., presidents, vice presidents, assistant vice presidents, or treasurers. This was true of only 13 percent of the second teamers and 14 percent of the reserves.

Whether the income and business success of first team athletes is the result of their celebrity status or their ability to thrive in highly competitive situations is a question worthy of further research. Further research should also explore in greater detail other differences among star, journeyman, and marginal college athletes. This is especially important in studies of sport and social mobility. An issue that was not raised here is how do ballplayers fare who do not graduate from college? It would also be useful to compare the career mobility and academic accomplishments of athletes who attend a wide variety of academic institutions. A comparison of big time college athletes with athletes in the Ivy League might be particularly revealing in this regard. These are just a few of the many possibilities for further research in this area.

<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that 59 percent of first team athletes, 28 percent of second teamers and only 8 percent of the reserves went on to play pro ball. Nonetheless, a two way analysis of variance examining the effects of team rank and playing pro ball on present income revealed that only team rank had a statistically significant main effect.

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