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"Josh was somebody that stood out from the second he stepped on the field at Yale."

JUSTIN GALLANTY, FORMER ESPN+ COMMENTATOR

New NCAA eligibility model could draw athletes to Ivy League

NCAA

BY AZARA MASON
STAFF REPORTER

An age-based eligibility model approved by the NCAA Division I Cabinet in June could make playing at an Ivy League school more appealing to high school athletes.

The so-called five-for-five model, which allows varsity athletes to compete in five seasons across five years of college enrollment, is replacing a framework that permitted competition for only four seasons over five years. Since graduate students cannot compete in Ivy League athletics, an athlete at a school like Yale would need to transfer after four years of undergraduate play in order to use their fifth year of eligibility — which for some recruits could be an enticing opportunity.

"The new framework will definitely help Ivy League coaches recruit players with the selling point that they can get an elite education while competing for four years, and still be promised an opportunity to play on a bigger stage when done," football player Brice June '27 wrote in a text to the News.

Under the previous system, Ivy athletes hoping to preserve a season of eligibility often had to make difficult decisions around their athletic careers — whether that meant limiting competition during a season, taking a leave of absence or graduating early before transferring.

For some athletes, that meant strategically limiting how much they competed. June said he had heard of peers playing in as many games as they could before hitting their sport's redshirt cutoff — after which they could no longer sit out the season — before taking the year off to preserve eligibility.

Former Yale football player and member of the undergraduate class of 2027 Spencer Mermans did exactly that. As a first year, Mermans played in four games before deciding to sit out the remainder of the season to preserve a year of eligibility. He spent three years at Yale before transferring to Georgia Tech, where he now has two seasons of eligibility remaining.

"It really helps athletes because they don't have to worry about it anymore," Mermans said of the new model in a phone call with the News. "Deciding to redshirt my freshman year was a big decision. You're coming in as a freshman, you're just trying to play, you don't want to think about something that's happening four years later."

An athlete's five-year clock begins upon full-time college enrollment or in the academic year following their 19th birthday, whichever comes first. The new model also offers athletes more flexibility by eliminating traditional redshirt rules, season-of-competition limits and many of the eligibility waivers that have long complicated collegiate careers.

Former Yale men's basketball center Samson Aletan '26, who entered Yale as a member of the class of 2027, graduated from Yale last spring, a year early, after playing three seasons for the Bulldogs. He then transferred to Providence, allowing him to use his remaining eligibility with the Friars.

Under the new "five-for-five" model, those calculations become much simpler. An athlete can compete for four full seasons at and earn an undergraduate degree from an Ivy League school, then enter the transfer portal with another season of eligibility still available.

The system creates a straightforward pitch: spend four years developing as both a student and an athlete in the Ivy League and, if the opportunity presents itself, use a fifth season at another Division I program.

Yale men's basketball has already offered another glimpse of what that pathway can look like.



LIZA KAUFMAN / PHOTOGRAPHY EDITOR

The so-called five-for-five model, which was approved in June, guarantees collegiate athletes five years of competition. For the Ivy League, which limits athletes to four undergraduate seasons, the new rule could prove to be an unexpected advantage.

Former Yale forward Nick Townsend '26, the 2026 Ivy League Men's Basketball Player of the Year, transferred to Stanford for his final season of college basketball after four years with the Bulldogs.

For Ivy programs, players like Townsend succeeding after transferring could become evidence that the conference is capable not only of attracting talented athletes, but of preparing them for the highest levels of college competition.

Richard Kent, a sports lawyer and sports law professor at Rutgers Law, said on his podcast "March to March" that fifth-year transfers could ultimately benefit the conference even if the Ivy League maintains its four-year limit.

"But if we get the five years now and we see all of these grad transfers going out of the Ivy League, I do believe that they can have a significant impact at all these places," Kent said.

That impact matters beyond the individual athletes who transfer.

The Ivy League rarely competes with major-conference programs for the very top tier of high school recruits. Its programs have instead often relied on identifying players who can develop over several seasons.

Under the new model, every successful fifth-year transfer gives coaches another example to point to on the recruiting trail.

Aletan, who will now compete in the Big East at Providence, credits his three seasons at Yale with preparing him for that transition.

"Thanks to playing at a program like Yale, we've played some great competition and I've learned a lot," Aletan wrote in a text to the News. "I can combine that with my physical attributes to hopefully help make an impact in the Big East."

"If we see them then producing at the next level, that development happened at an Ivy League school," Kent said.

That may be the five-for-five model's most important consequence for the Ivy conference — its inability to offer athletes a fifth year of play could become part of its appeal.

The new rule was approved by the NCAA Division I Cabinet on June 23, 2026.

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How two recent Yale football stars are making career headways

FOOTBALL

BY AUDREY KIM
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After graduating from Yale last year, two star players of Team 152 — running back Josh Pitsenberger '26 and wide receiver Nico Brown '26 — took their careers to the next level.

Pitsenberger, who was the Bulldogs' captain, signed with the Houston Texans during NFL free agency, where he was injured in a preseason game and is set to recover by the end of this year. Brown transferred to the Stanford Cardinals for a graduate year, taking advantage of recent changes to NCAA transfer rules to gain a better shot at future professional prospects.

"Josh was somebody that stood out from the second he stepped on the field at Yale," former ESPN+ play-by-play commentator Justin Gallanty wrote in a text message to the News. "Putting aside his play on the field, being voted captain by your teammates certainly stands out at a place where there is only one captain."

Pitsenberger and Brown were key contributors to Team 152's historic 2025 season. After going 6-1 in conference play — including steamrolling Harvard 45-28 in the 141st edition of The Game, handing the previously undefeated Crimson their first loss of the season — the Bulldogs secured the Ivy League regular season title and clinched the Ivy League's first auto bid to the FCS playoffs.

The Elis then continued to make history, becoming the first Ivy team to win an FCS playoff game when they overcame a 29-point deficit to defeat Youngstown State in the first round, before falling to Montana State, who then went on to become the champions. Harvard's strong season earned the Crimson an at-large bid to the playoffs, but their run ended in the first round where the team collapsed before the Villanova Wildcats, 7-52.

Yale quarterback Dante Reno '28 said his two former teammates' work ethic set them apart from the rest of the team.

"I think the biggest trait that sets both Josh and Nico apart from other players is their competitive edge," Reno wrote in an email to the News. "Both guys will endlessly watch film, protect their bodies and make sure they are 100% both on and off the field. Then when they are on the field, they are willing to do whatever it takes to win."

Pitsenberger in injury recovery at NFL

Pitsenberger, who hit the gas the second he touched down in New Haven, was named Ivy League Rookie of the Year his freshman year and continued to be an asset to Yale's offense throughout his four years representing the Blue and White.

In his senior season, Pitsenberger was named the league's Offensive Player of the Year after boasting 313 carries for 1571 yards and 19 touchdowns, three of which were scored in the postseason game against Youngstown State. He also scored the game-winning touchdown of that game with a 56-yard run in the fourth quarter, which Reno described as his favorite memory with Pitsenberger.

After the 2025 season, Pitsenberger signed with the NFL's Houston Texans as a free agent. He played one game during the NFL preseason against the Chargers, rushing for 33 yards across nine attempts before leaving the game with an ankle injury. Pitsenberger was then placed on injured reserve in August before reaching an injury settlement, and he is expected to be healthy again later this year.

"I think Josh would have gotten a chance at the next level regardless of what happened in last year's postseason but his performance certainly had to garner more attention," Gallanty wrote.

Similarly, Jim Cain, an ESPN+ play-by-play commentator, pointed to Pitsenberger's impressive performance across his four years that made him a strong professional prospect.

"With how dominant he was, pro teams had no choice but to pay attention to him," Cain wrote in a text message to the News.



LIZA KAUFMAN / PHOTOGRAPHY EDITOR

After leading the Bulldogs' first playoff run in history, Team 152's Josh Pitsenberger signed with the Houston Texans and Nico Brown transferred to Stanford, both in hopes of taking their athletic career to the next level.

Brown takes advantage of new transfer rules

While Pitsenberger turned his attention to the NFL, wide receiver Brown went a different route and entered the transfer portal after the 2025 season, migrating to Stanford for a graduate year.

Recent changes in the NCAA's transfer portal rules enabled Brown to enter the transfer portal and immediately take the field this season, without having to sit out a season.

In 2021, the NCAA allowed all athletes a one-time transfer with immediate eligibility and no waiting period, and in 2024, the NCAA authorized unlimited transfers for athletes.

Those developments expanded flexibility and opportunity for athletes to move from an FCS or FBS Group of Six team, to a team within the FBS Power Four, the top tier of college football conferences.

Gallanty wrote that the changes increased NFL prospects for Ivy League athletes, enabling them to play in the Ivy League for a few years before transferring to play at a higher level.

"I do believe that talent will get found wherever it is and there are plenty of examples of players from the Ivy League or other FCS conferences making it to the NFL," Gallanty wrote. "With that said, there is no doubt that the opportunity to play against better competition week-to-week and having more eyeballs on your games absolutely gives players a better chance to get noticed by NFL personnel."

In Brown's breakout senior season at Yale, he averaged 108.5 receiving yards per game and totaled 1085 yards and 11 touchdowns.

"He was so dangerous and made Yale's offense so dynamic," Cain wrote.

Brown and the Stanford Cardinals will face off against the Duke Blue Devils on Sept. 19 at 4 p.m. Eastern.

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