

Iowa football walk-on tradition in jeopardy as House settlement decision looms

Brendan Schnoebelen

The University of Iowa football team has a longstanding tradition of welcoming walk-on athletes into their program to give them the opportunity to play at the collegiate level. That tradition is now in limbo after the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) Division I Board of Directors conditionally approved House settlement rule changes on April 21.

The settlement, which has yet to receive final approval, includes a litany of new changes to name, image and likeness (NIL) policy. If approved, one of the biggest changes will be in how schools can allocate scholarships. According to the NCAA, schools would be able to provide scholarships to all student-athletes on a given roster with no limit on how many scholarships can be allocated. Roster sizes will also be cut from over 120 players to 105.

According to Sports Illustrated, “While teams still have flexibility in how many scholarships they allocate, the new structure strongly incentivizes schools to fully fund all roster spots with scholarship athletes, leaving little room for non-scholarship players.”

Chad Leistikow is a sports columnist for the Des Moines Register and has covered the Iowa football beat every season since 2014. He explains the reasoning behind the changes the House settlement may bring to college football.

“I think they’re just trying to limit the number of athletes that they, quote, unquote, have to pay through whatever and then what other schools might do to fudge the rules,” Leistikow said. “So, in some ways the 105 cap brings a little bit more equity to college football.”

Leistikow also said that multiple walk-ons already within the Iowa football program entered the NCAA transfer portal after difficult discussions with members of the coaching staff in December, faced with the realization that they would have to find a better opportunity elsewhere in order to play at the collegiate level.

“A great example was Johnny Pascuzzi,” Leistikow said. “He was a tight end who contributed for the Hawkeyes the last couple of years, but it was like, we can’t really justify keeping this many tight ends and we’ve got this many coming in with the high school class, so he went in the portal.”

Pascuzzi recorded two receptions for 41 yards in his career for the Hawkeyes.

Redshirt freshman tight end DJ Vonnahme found out that he still had a home at the UI after sitting down with members of the coaching staff in December.

“I was fortunate they said that they still had a spot for me,” Vonnahme said about the meeting. “They were trying to be super transparent with everyone, just letting them know that it’s just an unfortunate situation.”

Vonnahme received a preferred walk-on offer from the UI during his time at Kuemper Catholic High School in Carroll, Iowa, a town with a population of over 10,000. Vonnahme passed up offers from schools such as the University of Northern Iowa and the University of South Dakota to come to the UI.

“I’ve always been a fan growing up,” Vonnahme recalled on what sold him on the UI in the recruiting process. “It’s always Iowa everything.”

Vonnahme also detailed the dwindling number of walk-ons within the program.

“I was good friends with a lot of the guys in my class, the walk-ons, but a majority of them got cut,” Vonnahme said. “I only think one of them is still with us too, Kyler Gerardy. Me and him, we’re pretty good friends, but I have a good relationship with everyone on the team no matter walk-on or scholarship.”

Vonnahme caught a touchdown pass from junior quarterback Jackson Stratton in last Saturday’s open practice session inside Kinnick Stadium to bookend the Hawkeyes’ spring practice season.

Even though walk-on athletes typically lack the aid and attention of an athlete on scholarship, the ones that do find success are praised for their hard work and determination. JJ Watt, Baker Mayfield and Clay Matthews are some of the greatest walk-on stories in the history of college football as all went on to have successful professional careers.

Talan Drake is a student at St. Ambrose University in Davenport, Iowa, and has been an Iowa fan for as long as he can remember, even after living outside of the state for most of his adolescence. Drake shared some of his favorite walk-on stories.

“I would say definitely Kaden Wetjen,” Drake said about the current Hawkeye wide receiver and star punt returner. “I remember Baker Mayfield, he was a walk-on. I was watching him in the Rose Bowl in 2018 against Georgia. It’s unfortunate they’re kind of getting rid of those,” Drake added.

Wetjen announced to the media recently that he was put on scholarship this offseason after playing the last three seasons at the UI as a walk-on transfer from Iowa Western Community College in Council Bluffs, Iowa. With the Hawkeyes, Wetjen has tallied 46 receiving yards, 53 rushing yards and 1,453 punt and kickoff return yards combined. The senior returned both a punt and kickoff for a touchdown last season, and won the Jet Award as the most outstanding return specialist in college football.

The tradition of writing successful walk-on stories at the UI dates back decades with former players such as Dallas Clark, Sean Considine and Quinn Schulte making lasting impacts to the UI football program. Six-time Upper Midwest Emmy nominee and KGAN television anchor Mitch Fick attended both the UI and Xavier High School in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, just as Schulte did. Fick knows Schulte’s story well with close ties to his family.

“I’ve known Quinn and his family for 20 years since he was a little kid. His dad’s the head (football) coach at Cedar Rapids Xavier,” Fick said. “It’s just been cool to see him, the local Catholic kid done good, as one of those great stories. The fact that a kid who walked onto this program started 40 games at one of the most important positions in Phil Parker’s defense, it’s really, really impressive that he was able to step in and hold down that job for three seasons. I mean, that’s not something most any player at any level can do.”

With a final decision around the corner, Judge Claudia Wilken delayed giving final approval to the House settlement last week, according to the Associated Press. If negotiations cannot be agreed to in the coming days between the NCAA and Judge Wilken, the settlement’s future becomes murky along with the future of the walk-on athlete.