

Written Testimony of Tommy Brown

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“Who Gets the Scholarship? How the Global Shift in College Sports Affects Americans”

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Chairman, Ranking Member, and Members of the Committee: thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony. I come before you as a coach, an athletic director, an educator, and someone who has spent more than three decades helping young people grow through sports. The purpose of my testimony is not to close American college athletics to the world. It is to preserve a fair place in that system for the American students whose families, schools, and communities have invested in them for years.

International students enrich our campuses, and many international athletes are outstanding teammates, students, and citizens of their college communities. The concern I bring to Congress is about scale, incentives, and balance. When a publicly supported or federally assisted American college team can fill most of its competitive opportunities with older, highly developed recruits from abroad, the mission of college athletics begins to drift away from developing students and toward importing finished athletic talent.

My testimony addresses a connected set of pressures on opportunity: international recruiting is a small-school issue as well as a major-college issue; many small institutions use athletics to support enrollment; partial-scholarship systems can concentrate meaningful aid on a few immediate-impact recruits; some lower-division rosters are now predominantly international by listed hometown; that imbalance reaches historically Black colleges and universities; expanded eligibility can further slow roster turnover; and a uniform per-team limit can restore balance without ending international participation.

My Background and Perspective

I spent more than twenty years in college basketball, including service as head men's basketball coach and athletic director at Bluefield College and as head men's basketball coach at Lee University. My teams reached the National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics (NAIA) national tournament repeatedly, and I later worked at the NCAA Division I level. I also served in high school athletics, including as athletic director at Boyd Buchanan School in Tennessee. Across those roles, I recruited athletes, allocated limited aid, built rosters, supervised coaches, and answered to presidents, families, and communities.

Today, through One Heartbeat, I work with coaches, athletic departments, and student-athletes on mental performance, leadership, accountability, and team culture. One Heartbeat has trained

more than 1,000 teams in 43 states. That work keeps me close to the daily realities of college and high school sports, including what coaches are rewarded for, what families are experiencing, and how roster decisions affect opportunity.

This is not only a professional concern for me. It is personal. My stepson, Blake, came out of high school unranked and unrecruited. I made the calls that helped him find a division III opportunity at Berry College. He played nine total minutes as a freshman. By his junior year he was All-Conference. As a senior, he was Conference Player of the Year. In a fifth year at University of Alabama in Huntsville, a division II program, he was the Gulf South Conference Tournament MVP, and he has since had opportunities to play professionally. Blake needed the years that a finished, ready-made recruit does not need. I think about him every time I hear a coach describe an experienced international signee as the safer choice over an eighteen-year-old who has not yet become what he is capable of becoming. Every roster spot that goes to an established international instead of a developing American kid is not just a game-day decision, it is a chance at that kind of growth that gets taken away.

My views are therefore not theoretical. I know the pressure to win. I know the pressure to enroll students and generate tuition. I know what it is like to stretch a limited scholarship budget across an entire team. I also know the difference between college athletics as a developmental opportunity and college athletics as a market for ready-made talent.

The Small-School Reality

The national conversation often focuses on football and basketball at the largest universities. That is only part of the story. College athletics also includes many other sports and divisions. International recruiting is deeply present at smaller NCAA institutions, NAIA schools, and junior colleges. The NAIA itself reports that athletes from 170 nations compete at its member institutions. The reach of this issue is broad precisely because smaller institutions often depend on athletics to drive enrollment.

At many tuition-dependent colleges, adding a sport is also an admissions strategy. A roster can bring twenty, thirty, or more tuition-paying students to campus. Coaches are not simply filling a lineup; they may be expected to meet enrollment targets, retain students, and produce a competitive program at the same time. International recruiting services make it possible to identify experienced athletes from around the world quickly, often through video, centralized contacts, and established pipelines.

This does not mean every coach or school uses the same strategy, and it does not mean that recruiting an international student is improper. It means the incentives are real. A coach who can enroll an older, technically polished athlete with high-level club or professional-system experience may view that recruit as less risky than an American high school senior who still needs time to develop.

How Limited Aid Can Shape Recruiting

At the lower divisions, the phrase “athletic scholarship” can be misleading. NCAA Division II uses an equivalency model, and the NCAA explains that most Division II athletes receive partial, not full, athletic scholarships. Those awards may be combined with academic, need-based, and other institutional aid. In practice, a coach works with a limited pool and tries to assemble complete financial packages for an entire roster.

That structure can produce a pattern I have seen in small-college athletics. Several American athletes may receive modest athletic awards, enough for the school to say they were recruited or received a scholarship. A larger share of scarce athletic or institutional aid is assembled for a high-end international recruit who is expected to make an immediate competitive impact. The exact accounting differs by school, division, and sport, but the practical result can be the same: several small awards preserve roster depth while the most powerful package goes to the most developed recruit.

I want to be clear about what I am saying. Combining forms of aid is contemplated by existing rules, and an international athlete who receives aid has not done anything wrong. The problem is the incentive structure. When athletic aid, merit aid, tuition discounting, and admissions goals interact without a meaningful limit on international roster concentration, a school can comply with each individual rule while still producing a roster that leaves very little opportunity for American high school athletes.

What Lower-Division Rosters Now Show

Public rosters make the change visible. As one current example, not an accusation against any school, the 2026 men's soccer roster at Southeastern University (an NAIA institution), lists 39 players. Twenty-eight list hometowns outside the United States. That is approximately 72 percent of the roster. The listed hometowns span Brazil, Italy, England, Spain, Portugal, Germany, Sweden, Serbia, South Africa, Jamaica, Colombia, Costa Rica, Israel, and the Isle of Man.

A listed hometown is not the same thing as citizenship, and this single roster should not be treated as a national census. It is, however, a concrete illustration of what coaches and families can see with their own eyes: in some lower-division sports, international recruiting is not supplemental. It is the dominant roster-building model.

The opportunity cost is substantial because college roster spots are already scarce. NCAA data for 2024-25 estimate that only 5.9 percent of boys' high school soccer players, 4.7 percent of boys' tennis players, and 5.4 percent of boys' golfers will compete at any NCAA level. On the women's side, the estimates are 7.9 percent in soccer, 4.0 percent in tennis, and 6.9 percent in golf. These figures do not include NAIA or junior-college opportunities, but they show how narrow the NCAA pathway already is.

The Value of a Mixed Roster — and Where It Inverts

I want to be direct about something Congress should not miss in the numbers above: a genuinely mixed roster is valuable, and I do not want this testimony mistaken for an argument against international teammates. I have watched cross-cultural exposure benefit American and international student-athletes alike, and I believe in that exchange.

My concern, drawn from firsthand experience with the teams I have worked with through One Heartbeat, is that this benefit inverts once a roster tips so heavily international that the American players on it describe playing for another country's team rather than their own. I have seen how American kids react to that shift, and it is not the experience of enrichment their families expected when they signed on. Balance is what turns a roster into a genuine cross-cultural experience. Imbalance is what turns it into something else.

A Uniquely Important Consequence for HBCUs

This dynamic is not confined to major conferences or predominantly white institutions. It reaches historically Black colleges and universities with particular force, and Congress should not overlook that reach.

Tennis shows the pattern most starkly. Across all sixteen MEAC tennis programs, roughly two out of every three listed roster spots are held by international student-athletes. At Norfolk State, the men's team has been entirely international. At South Carolina State, the men's team has been close behind, at roughly 92 percent. NPR reported on this trend at HBCUs in 2023, and it has not reversed since.

Basketball, the flagship HBCU sport, shows a smaller but still meaningful share. A full roster audit across all forty Division I HBCU basketball programs in the MEAC and SWAC found 44 international players among approximately 575 total roster spots, or roughly 7.5 percent.⁶ That is a lower rate than tennis, but every one of those spots is a spot that did not go to an American student, at institutions whose founding mission has been to build pathways for students America once denied elsewhere.

Golf shows the same story in miniature. At Alabama State, eight of nine roster spots on the men's golf team have gone to international players, a pattern an Andscape investigation documented as far back as 2018.⁷

HBCU athletics has always been about more than sport. A roster spot at these institutions can become an education, a network, a career, and a foothold in leadership that a young person carries for a lifetime. When international recruiting concentrates in these specific programs at these rates, it does not just shrink a roster. It narrows one of the clearest pathways American students and Black American students have to the developmental and economic benefits college athletics provides.

The Fifth Year Further Slows Roster Turnover

In 2026, NCAA Divisions I and II adopted new age-based eligibility models. The change is sometimes described as a blanket fifth year, but the details matter. The framework generally provides a continuous five-year eligibility period tied to age and enrollment, and it may allow an athlete who enrolls on time to compete for an additional season. It is not a retroactive extra season for everyone. Athletes who exhausted eligibility in 2025-26 do not receive another year, and transition provisions govern current and incoming athletes.⁸

Even with those qualifications, the practical concern is clear. The rule does not automatically create a new roster position or a new scholarship for every returning athlete. When an established player stays for a fifth season, that player may occupy a place and financial-aid package that otherwise would have turned over to an incoming freshman. In announcing its Division II transition, the NCAA itself recognized that granting another season to athletes who had already exhausted eligibility could disrupt expected roster spots, playing time, and aid packages, including those of incoming freshmen.⁹

I have written about how this changes recruiting decisions. A coach comparing an 18-year-old high school senior with a 21 or 22-year-old college veteran is not comparing equal levels of physical maturity, strength, academic adjustment, or experience. In one example I described, a fifth-year team started five fifth-year players. Coaches under pressure naturally reduce risk by choosing older, proven players, especially when a younger player who develops successfully may soon transfer. The result is fewer developmental chances and fewer scholarships for high school graduates.¹⁰

This is not a criticism of athletes who use the eligibility available to them. It is a warning about cumulative policy effects. Fifth-year returners, transfer-market veterans, and older international recruits all compete for the same finite positions. As rosters age and turnover slows, the entry point for an American high school athlete becomes narrower still.

Why Coaches Make These Decisions

Coaches recruit internationally for understandable reasons. They are evaluated by wins and losses. They may need immediate contributors, not three-year development projects. Experienced international athletes can arrive with advanced tactical instruction, physical maturity, and extensive club competition. Recruiting networks can present multiple vetted players efficiently. At a tuition-dependent school, an international recruit may also help the coach satisfy both competitive and enrollment objectives.

If one coach takes that route and begins winning, conference rivals feel pressure to respond. What starts as a competitive advantage becomes an arms race. Individual coaches cannot solve that collective-action problem by voluntarily stepping back. Asking one program to restrict itself while its competitors operate without limits is not a durable policy. A common rule is necessary.

Roster-Balancing Rules Already Exist in Professional Sports Abroad

A roster limit of this kind would not be an untested idea in sport. Professional leagues outside the United States already use roster-composition rules to preserve meaningful opportunity for domestic or locally developed players while continuing to welcome talent from abroad. The details vary, but the governing principle is familiar, open competition can coexist with a protected domestic foundation.

In Italian professional basketball, the Italian Basketball Federation's 2026-27 rules allow Serie A clubs to operate under a 5+5 or 6+6 formula. Those formulas pair a maximum number of players who were not trained in Italy with a corresponding minimum number of players who were trained in Italy. This is a development-based classification rather than a simple citizenship test, but it demonstrates that a high-level European basketball system can place an enforceable boundary around imported, ready-made talent.¹¹

The Canadian Football League provides another example. Its current game-ratio rules set a maximum of 19 American-designated players and require at least 21 National players, along with Global-player requirements. The CFL's classifications and labor structure are its own, and I do not suggest copying them word for word. The relevant lesson is that a professional league can protect opportunities for players connected to its home country without barring Americans or other foreign players from participating.¹²

These comparisons do not settle the proper number for American colleges, and professional labor rules are not legally identical to student-athlete eligibility rules. They do answer one practical objection: roster-composition limits are workable tools already used in competitive sports. Congress can develop a transparent and education-centered version suited to American institutions.

A Reasonable Federal Policy

Congress should support a clear, uniform per-team limit on international student-athletes. Legislation such as Chairman Walberg's TEAM USA Act would set that kind of limit while still allowing international participation. The limit should apply consistently within each sport across similarly situated divisions and governing associations, so that a coach is not placed at a competitive disadvantage for protecting domestic opportunity. The purpose should be balance, not exclusion: international students would remain an important part of college athletics, but no team could allow international recruiting to become a near-total substitute for recruiting and developing American students.

A workable policy should include four safeguards:

1. A clear definition. The rule should rely on citizenship or lawful permanent-resident status, not birthplace, accent, surname, or listed hometown. Students who are U.S. citizens or permanent residents should be treated as domestic athletes.

2. Transparent reporting. Schools and governing associations should report aggregate roster and aid data by sport and status, with appropriate privacy protections. Congress and families should not have to estimate the scope of the issue from roster biographies.
3. A fair transition. Current athletes and signed commitments should be protected. A phased implementation would allow schools to comply without taking away a scholarship or roster position already promised.
4. Anti-circumvention and narrow hardship review. The rule should cover roster participation, not merely the label attached to a particular aid source, while allowing carefully defined relief for genuine humanitarian or unusual individual circumstances.

The principle should not be optional: an American college team should maintain a meaningful core of opportunities for American students.

Conclusion

College athletics is one of America's most effective classrooms. It teaches discipline, resilience, teamwork, leadership, and accountability. It also provides access to education and a community that can change the course of a young person's life. Those benefits are valuable to international students, and our colleges should continue to welcome them.

Welcoming the world, however, does not require surrendering the developmental purpose of American college sports. A reasonable per-team limit would preserve international participation, reduce the pressure on coaches to join an escalating recruiting arms race, and restore a fair measure of opportunity for American high school athletes. It would create one understandable rule for everyone rather than asking individual coaches or schools to solve a national problem alone.

I respectfully urge Congress to place domestic athletic opportunity alongside NIL, transfers, eligibility, health, and competitive balance in any comprehensive college-sports framework. If we believe college athletics exists first to educate and develop students, our roster policies should reflect that mission.

Thank you for the opportunity to submit this testimony. I would be pleased to answer the Committee's questions.

Source Notes

The policy judgments and firsthand observations in this testimony are Tommy Brown's. Public sources below support biographical statements and descriptive data.

1. National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics, "International Students" (athletes from 170 nations), <https://www.naia.org/student-athletes/prospective/international-students/>.
2. National Collegiate Athletic Association, "Scholarships & Financial Aid" and "Division II Athletics Scholarships" (partial-scholarship and equivalency model), <https://www.ncaa.org/student-athletes/scholarships-and-financial-aid/>.

3. Southeastern University Athletics, “2026 Men's Soccer Roster” (author's count of listed hometowns; accessed September 8, 2026), <https://fire.seu.edu/sports/mens-soccer/roster>.
4. National Collegiate Athletic Association, “Probability of Competing Beyond High School” (2024-25 participation estimates), <https://www.ncaa.org/student-athletes/probability-of-competing-beyond-high-school/>.
5. NPR/WABE, “HBCUs recruit international athletes for tennis. Some are calling it into question” (Nov. 2023); official 2025-26/2026-27 rosters published by MEAC tennis member institutions, including Norfolk State and South Carolina State athletics.
6. Official 2025-26/2026-27 basketball rosters published by all 8 MEAC and all 12 SWAC member institutions (author's roster audit).
7. Andscape, investigative reporting on international recruiting in HBCU golf (2018); Alabama State University Athletics men's golf roster.
8. National Collegiate Athletic Association, “Division I Adopts Age-Based Eligibility Model” (June 23, 2026), <https://www.ncaa.org/division-i-adopts-age-based-eligibility-model/>.
9. National Collegiate Athletic Association, “Division II Adopts Age-Based Eligibility Model” (August 5, 2026), <https://www.ncaa.org/division-ii-adopts-age-based-eligibility-model/>.
10. Tommy Brown, “The New Recruiting Reality: What Today's College Basketball Landscape Really Looks Like,” Coaches Insider (August 5, 2026), <https://coachesinsider.com/mens-basketball/the-new-recruiting-reality-what-todays-college-basketball-landscape-really-looks-like-2/>.
11. Federazione Italiana Pallacanestro, Disposizioni Organizzative Annuali 2026-2027, section 13.2, “Le Formule” (Serie A 5+5 and 6+6 roster formulas), https://fip.it/wp-content/uploads/2026/05/DOA-26_27-versione-1.pdf.
12. Canadian Football League, “Game Ratio Rules” (maximum American and minimum National roster classifications; accessed September 9, 2026), <https://www.cfl.ca/game-ratio-rules/>.