

2026 COLLEGE FOOTBALL ELIGIBILITY RULES

Fifth-year, JUCO, and pro-return rules by conference. A printable cheat sheet.

Heads up: Several of these rules are being challenged in court right now and can change week to week. Check the linked article for the current status before you rely on it.

PRO-RETURN BAN, BY CONFERENCE

All four Power conferences have now passed a rule that penalizes schools for rostering players who declared for a pro draft, signed a pro contract, or appeared on a pro roster.

Conference	Ban?	Adopted	Current legal status
SEC	Yes	Aug 25, 2026	BLOCKED Put on hold by a Texas court order (Aug 27) covering 40+ players; the portal was ordered open for one week for that group.
Big Ten	Yes	Aug 25, 2026 (football first)	IN EFFECT No injunction. Penalties include coach suspensions and a budget-based fine.
Big 12	Yes	Aug 26, 2026 (all sports)	IN EFFECT No injunction. Broadest scope of the four.
ACC	Yes	Aug 27, 2026 (4th and final)	IN EFFECT No injunction. Covers football and basketball.

The NFL has also said players who leave to return to college will not be allowed back into the NFL this season. A follow-up court hearing on the SEC order is expected in September.

THE ELIGIBILITY CLOCK

The old rule (still available in 2026)

Four seasons of competition, used within a five-year window that starts at first full-time enrollment. A redshirt year lets a player spread four playing seasons across five calendar years.

The new "5-in-5" rule (adopted June 23, 2026)

Five seasons within a five-year window. The clock starts at enrollment or the academic year after the athlete turns 19, whichever comes first. It is built to phase out redshirts and injury or hardship extensions.

Phase-in: athletes already enrolled and this fall's freshmen can choose whichever model helps them more. Later classes use 5-in-5 only. **Class of 2022 note:** a fifth-year group briefly won eligibility, then an appeals court paused that ruling on Aug 21, so they are currently not eligible under the new rule while the appeal plays out.

OTHER RULES AT A GLANCE

Rule	Where it stands for 2026
Redshirt	Under the old model, a player can appear in up to four games and still preserve that season. The new 5-in-5 model is designed to make redshirting obsolete going forward.
Medical hardship	A season-ending injury early in the year can be waived back under the old model. The new model is set to eliminate injury-based extensions.
JUCO time (post-Pavia)	A late-2024 waiver stopped non-NCAA (JUCO/NAIA) time from counting for some players, but it was narrow. How JUCO time counts in 2026 is still being litigated; treat individual cases as unsettled.
COVID (2020) year	Effectively expired. The extra COVID season has run out for nearly everyone; extra-year fights now run through the new clock litigation, not COVID waivers.
House settlement rosters	Scholarship limits became roster limits. Players cut by the new limits can be kept as "Designated Student-Athletes" who do not count against the limit and keep that status if they transfer, but each school chooses whether to use it.

WHO IS AFFECTED RIGHT NOW

- **Players returning from pro rosters** — the direct target of the four conference bans, and the group helped by the Texas court order against the SEC rule.
- **Class-of-2022 fifth-year hopefuls** — currently ineligible under the new rule after the Aug 21 appeals-court pause. Highly time-sensitive.
- **Former JUCO and NAIA transfers** — still resolving whether their non-NCAA time counts; several remain in limbo.
- **Athletes cut by House roster limits** — protected as Designated Student-Athletes only if their school opts in.
- **COVID "super seniors"** — that cohort has largely aged out.