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The Flutie Effect at Indiana State

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Abstract

Indiana State University has recently had a surge of success in their men's basketball program, bringing attention to the school that it has never seen in the era of social media. This success has led to a massive increase in undergraduate applications to the school, a result from the spotlight being on the team all last season and new people wanting to experience it. This is called the Flutie effect and dates back to 1984 when Doug Flutie was a football player at Boston College. We will look at the origins of the first Flutie effect and how much it affected Boston College and some other examples of this phenomenon. We will also dive into how the transfer portal and NIL deals have impacted the Flutie Effect and how these factors make the effect prominent in much more than just one school.

This includes talking about how athletic programs market their athletes during their rise to stardom and how NIL has made players into superstars overnight. Universities also use athletics initially as a lure to attract new students and this happens every year and not just when they are experiencing the Flutie Effect. This is a persistence that schools are looking for to where they can market their teams to new students based on past results and the culture that surrounds the program.

Finally we take a look at how individual athletes have elevated a program and schools status as they become more popular by their on court play and their social media presence. This leads also into how the Flutie Effect impacts current students and its effect on incoming students who will have a completely different experience than their predecessors.

Flutie Effect at Indiana State

On November 23rd, 1984 the Boston College football team traveled to Miami to take on the defending national champion, Miami Hurricanes. The game was nationally televised with both teams being ranked in the top 12 at the time. With 6 seconds left to go in the game, Boston College trailed by 4 points and needed a miracle. On the last play of the game Doug Flutie would scramble around before finding Gerard Phelan in the endzone for a touchdown which gave the Eagles the win as time expired. Brent Musburger delivered the famous line, "Caught by Boston College, I don't believe it. It's a touchdown and the Eagles win!" Flutie would go on to win the Heisman that season, becoming the first quarterback to do so in 12 years.

This play not only changed the life of Doug Flutie, but Boston College as a whole as it saw applications to their university rise tremendously. The school received 14,398 applications in 1984 and the following year they received 16,163 and the number of applications didn't fall below 13,000 again until 1990. Flutie had the phenomenon named after him because of this and since we have seen many other examples of athletics increasing a school's applications and overall popularity. We know it takes more than a good team to bring in more applications to a school and there are some key factors we can turn to. The first of these factors is having a moment people can turn to as a moment that defines a team or even a sports program.

For Appalachian State this moment was in 2007 when their football team traveled to The Big House. This is the home of the Michigan Wolverines, a powerhouse team that has the most Big Ten Conferences titles all-time with 44. Michigan Stadium is often called The Big House because it is the largest stadium in the United States with a capacity of 107,600. This was abundantly true on September 1, 2007 when over 109,000 home fans watched as Appalachian State won the game 34-32. The Mountaineers would go on to a 13-2 record that year, winning

their third FCS national championship in a row. Despite the team's continued success, applications rose by 15% from 2007-2008. The team has historically been a very good program with winning records in nearly all their seasons. However, beating one of the top college football programs of all time in the form of Michigan, earns you more respect and much more attention than anything that can be achieved at the FCS level ever will.

This was an incredible increase in applications, all from one football game. Which raises the question, how important is the success of a school's sports teams to incoming freshmen and current students? According to a study done at Michigan University, male students attend 3 hours of live sporting events each week while female students attend 2.7 hours per week. 67% of students also said that college sports is their most talked about form of sports media. This goes to show how much of a factor sports play in these students' lives and how it can affect where they choose to apply. This is why many universities consider their athletics to be the 'front porch' of the school. It is meant to draw students in with its success and make them want to be a part of the culture that surrounds a winning team. When incoming freshmen watch a game on TV and see how passionate students are about their team, it can persuade them to apply and be a part of that passion.

Major upsets or national championships are the primary causes for universities to receive a sudden burst of attention with this being an opportunity to advertise the teams as a brand. For example, Appalachian State sold t-shirts for years after their win over Michigan that only talked about that game, whether it showed the final score or some other aspect of the game, Appalachian State didn't want to be known as just the App State Mountaineers but rather the team that beat Michigan. An article published by Doug Chung in 2013 at the Harvard Business School showed that mediocre teams with a major upset or a sudden national title run have a

17.7% application increase the next year. The schools can also market their team to incoming students as a success which increases the merchandise sales for the team. Logos of the university and its sports logos can go a long way in determining an incoming freshman decision.

We see this a lot in athletes who are choosing a school, visiting each one and trying on its uniform and showing the world what they would look like in those colors. This is very similar for students when they go and visit schools they may attend. If a sports arena looks worn down from the outside and the team that plays inside isn't very good, a visiting student who loves that sport can have their interest decrease very quickly. The same goes for the apparel of that sport, if a student is a big fan of baseball and the school's baseball logo is generic, boring or overall unappealing, this can also affect their decision. Student athletes and non-athlete students both want to come to a school where they feel they look good in those colors and they can proudly wear a team's logo and this can be swayed in a number of ways depending on the person and their interests.

A key question about the Flutie effect that few understand is why it affects so much about an upcoming class. This is a very interesting question and is understandably confusing. It is true that Doug Flutie threw the famous hail mary in his last year at Boston College, meaning that none of the new students the next year would've been enrolled while he was still quarterback. While Flutie was the star of that play and the entire year, it was still the team's success that new students were attached to. Boston College only went on to win 4 games the next year but the story of Doug Flutie would live on. We saw the same thing with Appalachian State, winning their third straight FCS national championship in 2007 but only getting back to the semi-finals once before their move to the FBS in 2014. This is very similar to what Indiana State is

experiencing right now, following the basketball team's best season since 1979, the senior year of Larry Bird.

In March of 2021, Indiana State Director of Athletics, Sherard Clinkscales hired a new head basketball coach by the name of Josh Schertz. Schertz had previously been very successful at the Division II level at Lincoln Memorial University, in which during his 13-year tenure in Harrogate, Tennessee, the Railsplitters had five seasons with 30 or more victories and he finished his time there with an overall record of 337-69 (.831). During the 2010's they had the second best record in the entirety of Division II with a 272-50 (.845) and finished with an incredible home record of 188-16 during his 13 seasons.

Schertz's success at Lincoln Memorial did not carry over to Indiana State initially, as in his first season at the helm the Sycamores managed to win only 11 games and lost 20. This quickly turned around as the Sycamores had much more success in his second year, winning 23 games and making a postseason appearance as the number 1 seeded team in the CBI (College Basketball Invitational). This season showed the kind of impact that Coach Schertz can have, winning 23 games for just the second time since 1979 and bringing in two key players in Robbie Avila and Courvoisier McCauley which drew lots of media attention to the Sycamores. Avila was a standout freshman, averaging 10 points a game, starting in 29 of the Sycamores 34 games and was selected to the Missouri Valley Conference All-Freshman team. McCauley had previously played for Coach Schertz at Lincoln Memorial and then transferred to DePaul. He decided to take a graduate year at Indiana State and play for his old coach once more, which earned him the honors of Missouri Valley Conference Newcomer of the Year, the first Sycamore since 1988 to win the award. All of this helped Schertz win MVC Coach of the Year Runner-Up and a Skip Prosser Award Finalist.

Schertz's success continued to snowball at Indiana State as in his third season he brought in two more standout transfers in Ryan Conwell and Isaiah Swope. Both of these two players started every game they played for the Sycamores this season and helped lead to the teams first AP (Associated Press) National Ranking since 1979. This success can be attributed to Schertz coaching style and the explosive offense that style produces. This coaching style and a knack for recruiting players who fit the system has been the focal point of his success here, managing to keep bringing in new guys to keep up to the standard of success. This would end in Indiana State winning their second most games in school history in 2023, finishing with 32 wins and 7 losses and ending their season on an NIT championship loss. The Sycamores would rake in the awards with Robbie Avila being selected to the All-Missouri Valley Conference First Team, Ryan Conwell, Jayson Kent and Isaiah Swope were all selected to the MVC Second Team, Julian Larry was an MVC Third team selection and Xavier Bledson was selected to the All-Bench team. Conwell also won Missouri Valley Conference Newcomer of the Year and Xavier Bledson won Sixth-Man of the Year. The awards didn't stop there as Josh Schertz won Missouri Valley Conference Coach of the Year in his final season at Indiana State.

Schertz went on to accept a head coaching position at Saint Louis University, being paid \$12 million over a 6 year span with incentives. This is where the similarities start as almost the entire basketball team has committed to new teams, meaning none of the incoming freshmen will ever see this past season's team play while a member of the student body. Despite this, applications to Indiana State are expected to rise based on the team's success. With Coach Graves taking over next season the Sycamores have a window of 3 to 5 years to turn back into a winning team before the effects of last year's team fizzle out. This is because we know that the Flutie Effect, no matter how big or small, can raise applications for the rest of the school's history and

based on the other examples we have looked at, that is the window I suspect they will have before applications level off again.

Hopefully, the athletic success of these past few seasons can influence some persistence in Coach Graves' new team and new Sycamores will get a taste of the experience that past Sycamores have had during the Coach Schertz time. If the basketball team can remain at this level of competition or get close to it, the donors and sponsors should continue to be looking at Indiana State as a valuable program that is worth their money. If the success continues we should see some more individual athletes rise to some form of stardom like we have with Robbie Avila, who became a national sensation this past year,

Avila came to Indiana State in 2023 ranked as a 2-star prospect and the 11th ranked player from Illinois. This is not a high recruiting grade by any stretch of the imagination but Avila turned his first year around very quickly, getting a starting role early in the year and making the Missouri Valley Conference All-Freshman Team. Avila then broke out in a big way in his second year, averaging 17.4 points per game and 6.6 rebounds while shooting 53.6% from the floor. This launched him into social media stardom, raising his Instagram followers to over 20 thousand, which is double what Indiana State's basketball team has on Instagram. This is because of all the attention he got through other Instagrams that included him in their posts, this started with the account Ball Dawgs which has over 1.1 million followers and was the first thing to really put Robbie on the map. He was even interviewed by Giuliana Caringella, the marketing director of Ball Dawgs, and the interview received over 100 thousand views on Instagram and thousands more on Ball Dawgs other platforms.

This would only be the beginning for Avila and the Sycamores as they would receive more attention than has ever been on the program and all of this through some sort of social

media. This attention really started when on December 10th, 2023, Avila was posted on the Ball Is Life Instagram. Ball If Life is one of the largest platforms for basketball online and has over 9 million followers on Instagram alone. Ball Is Life tracks everything from high school basketball all the way to the NBA and their post about Robbie Avila compared him to NBA 2-time MVP Nikola Jokic. This is when the real noise started accumulating around Indiana State and when the Sycamores became a daily topic on ESPN. This kind of attention around Avila clearly had an impact as just 10 days later he gave brand new shoes to all the players on his former high school basketball team. The stardom continued with several more Instagram appearances on accounts like CBB Content and tons of NIL apparel and merchandise accounts. He also made a post on Overtime, a sports account with over 10 million followers.

While Robbies play on the court was stellar, it was his name, image and likeness that made him as famous as he is today. Robbie Avila always had a certain marketability about him and many different companies wanted a piece of that pie. The goggles were his initial draw with him being one of very few basketball players at any level to wear goggles consistently and be as good as he is. This was already the idea behind many shirts and even, Be Like Robbie day at Indiana State, where they gave out goggles to everyone in the arena. This was a money maker but was nothing compared to all the merchandise that has been made from the nicknames he has been given. Robbie started being called things such as, the College Jokic, Cream Abdul-Jabbar, Larry Nerd and my personal favorite, Milk Chamberlain. These are all references to former and current NBA players Nikla Jokic, Kareem Abdul-Jabbar, Larry Bird and Wilt Chamberlain but with the Robbie twist, they were marketing gold.

This all culminated in Avila becoming a CHISOX NIL athlete, an NIL program through the Chicago White Sox major league baseball team. This all led to maybe Avila's biggest

appearance on the Pat McAfee show, which averages 1.4 million viewers per episode and just featured Caitlin Clark. This attention spilled over for some other Sycamores who all got some media attention as well. Isaiah Swope was featured on CBB Content many times during the season and drew some comparisons to Kyrie Irving on X. This resulted in him following Coach Schertz and Avila to St. Louis where the trio will continue their journey. Jayson Kent was frequently featured by Tipton Edits, a page that makes sports edits with 230 thousand followers. This helped him land an NIL deal with iHerb and boost his persona even further. Julian Larry was posted on Frankie Vision, a sports account with 113 thousand followers and he and Kent will be playing their final season as Longhorns at Texas University. Ryan Conwell was the last of the starters who wasn't featured as much online but he did make some appearances on CBB Content but nothing else that was major. Conwell gained most of his popularity through what he did on the court, earning him the previously mentioned Newcomer of the Year trophy in the Valley and a spot on the Xavier basketball team next season. Everyone on the Indiana State men's basketball roster also got to partner with Survivor and promote its new season very early on in the year but this was before much of the media attention they would receive later.

This is many examples of how NIL and the transfer portal could drastically change the Flutie effect. Players are starting to care a lot more about the possibility to make money through NIL than they are the team's long term success and are not afraid to jump around if it means sacrificing winning for money. Very few athletes that sign large NIL deals go to mid-major schools and the ones that do normally have a massive performance in the NCAA tournament or a big game against a larger school to make their money, opportunities that many mid-major schools rarely have. So while the upcoming students at Indiana State have a chance to see

another amazing season during their time here, the ugly truth is that if the team succeeds and players and coaches get offered more money in other places, they will leave.

This isn't to say that the athletes and coaches that leave have a pointless time here because that isn't true. Both the people and universities involved in these situations benefit massively. Indiana State will most likely never rehire Josh Schertz as their head basketball coach unless he decided to come back but his impact did Indiana State nothing but good. The Sycamores broke their record for most fans at home games this year at over 100 thousand and sold out the Hulman Center 4 times. On 6 different occasions there were over 8 thousand fans in the Hulman Center and both of the NIT games at Hinkle Fieldhouse in Indianapolis were sold out. This will surely carry over into next season with another strong turnout for home fans in at least the first couple home games and maybe more depending on the results. This will be the first season since 1978-1979 that the Sycamores will be coming into the season on back to back seasons where they won at least 23 games. This should rally fans and if Coach Graves and his new team can compete this year, the fans should continue to keep coming back until they win consistently or they lose consistently.

We can also expect to see a Flutie Effect on some of the schools that the old players are transferring to. The University of Texas has nearly 52 thousand students enrolled so their applications cannot be expected to rise too much based on Jayson Kent and Julian Larry transferring there for one year. While both of these players are good, they never achieved the kind of star status that Avila did and most likely won't make a significant impact, especially with Texas University men's basketball already being a very solid program. Ryan Conwell going to Xavier will also most likely not make a huge difference in their applications but he was the second best player last year for the Sycamores on paper and should create some buzz amongst

Xavier basketball fans. The school that will easily see the biggest jump is St. Louis and I expect their applications to rise by at least 10%. The Billikens of St. Louis University have had a very strong program recently with 4 of their last 5 seasons ending with over 20 wins (excluding 2020 which was a shortened season). However, this did not translate to any postseason success as they only managed to win their conference tournament 1 time during this stretch and this was in 2018. After finishing 13-20 last year, the Billikens knew they needed a coaching change and some star talent. They got both in the form of Josh Schertz, Robbie Avila and Isaiah Swope. This was exactly the kind of jump they needed to get back into the spotlight of the public and compete again in the Atlantic 10 conference. All kinds of attention will be on that team next year whether they are good or bad and all this publicity can only affect them in a good way. By getting Robbie Avila and Isaiah Swope they are also getting a brand. They can now market Avila and Swope constantly and make them the faces of their basketball program and online elements of the team. The Billikens basketball Instagram is already at 16 thousand followers and this could see a drastic rise with their new additions and with it already being a bigger platform than anything Indiana State has to offer.

St. Louis can be expected to experience a Flutie Effect surrounding their basketball team this year and next year since we know Josh Schertz has a history of bringing in highly talented recruits and transfers. We know this because of what happened at Indiana State. In 2021 Indiana State received 12,581 undergraduate applications, which was already a 6.65% increase from the previous year. However, in 2022 Indiana State would receive 18,531 applications, just under 6 thousand more than the previous year. This is a dramatic increase unlike anything we saw in the examples of the Flutie Effect at Boston College or Appalachian State. This incredible increase begs the question, will donors continue giving to the school or will they pursue giving athletes

money through NIL deals? We know that there are some donors out there willing to fundraise for the Indiana State men's basketball and we saw this by a record breaking fundraising effort in trying to match the offer Coach Schertz got from St. Louis.

Donors know that in today's college sports world, money matters more than ever to athletes and the portal is being used more than ever before, so keeping a player at one school is about much more than just how much they like the campus and the team's success. More and more donors may be shifting to making individual players NIL offers instead of just donating money to the university or even a specific team. This way donors know exactly who is getting their money and what it is being used on but even with this, there is no guarantee that any player will stay and not test the waters in the transfer portal. This may cause a negative impact if donors stop putting their money towards the sports program as a whole and give it to players that may still leave in the form of NIL deals.

In conclusion, we have seen a massive Flutie Effect here at Indiana State University and can expect one to happen at St. Louis university this upcoming year. Robbie Avila has become a massive name in the world of college sports which seems to care more about star players than it does star teams. Coach Schertz has also become a top name among coaches after his success at Lincoln Memorial and now Indiana State. We can expect to see more of these Flutie Effects as time goes on and more and more schools have some sort of March Madness upset or other forms of postseason success. These upsets have been becoming more frequent in recent memory as teams like St. Peters experienced a very similar situation to the Sycamores in which they had a great run in the NCAA tournament, making it to the Elite 8 in the 2022 NCAA National Tournament before losing their head coach and all their players to the transfer portal. This will continue to be a trend as more Flutie Effects become shorter with players leaving after a

successful season instead of graduating, affecting more than just one school each time as the small schools lose their players and try to find new ones while the big schools profit from the portal and get new players each year from these Cinderella type teams.

The Flutie Effect can be a hard concept for some to understand since there is no direct correlation between winning programs and an increase in applications. As I said before, Appalachian State had won two straight FCS national titles before beating Michigan in 2007 and experiencing the Flutie Effect. Despite Appalachian States continued success, it still took a major upset over one of the best college football programs ever, for them to experience a noticeable increase in undergraduate applications. This is simply because fans are still drawn to the spectacle of a big win or an unexpected season. While there is no direct formula for the Flutie Effect, it is evident to those who know what it is, when it has happened and it has certainly happened here.

Indiana State's baseball team also could have also experienced this effect, earning a trip to the Super Regional last season and they are currently projected to host another Regional at the conclusion of this season. This brought lots of attention last year with the controversy of Indiana State being able to host a Super Regional but declining which outraged the community. While this did make people upset, there is no such thing as bad publicity and this just brought more eyes to the school and the basketball team's success. With the baseball team having another outstanding year and a finish that is yet to be seen, they could also help increase Indiana State's undergraduate applications through their success as well as the basketball team. While NCAA baseball is nowhere near as popular as basketball, this team could make a run and greatly increase the Flutie Effect next year. I will admit, I had not heard of the recent FAFSA changes that are projected to decrease the applications this next year but even after hearing about them, I

would advise to not underestimate the power of sports to people and the impact it can have, especially here at Indiana State which is experiencing great success in not one, but two sports.

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