

The Power of the Walk-on Athlete

Walk-on athletes may not have arrived via scholarships, but they still make big plays.

When you think of college football players, you likely assume that most—if not all—were recruited as high schoolers to play for their next-level educational institutions. And while that's true for many, it doesn't account for every valuable player. In fact, a significant portion of most teams today consist of "walk-ons." These players weren't scouted and wooed to their colleges with scholarship money to play. Walk-ons are players who go out for the team on their own. They also still pay their tuition, room, board, and books on their own or through individually pursued academic or merit scholarships and loans.

To become a walk-on, athletes attend a team's open tryouts. Coaches evaluate them and offer the most promising athletes a roster spot if one is available. Becoming a walk-on is easier to do at NCAA Division II (D2) and III (D3), and small and junior colleges than it is at big Division I (D1) schools. However, walk-ons who do make it onto a D1 team can still prove themselves crucial to the team's success.

The University of Nebraska is considered the birthplace of college football walk-ons. It all began with coach Bob Devaney in the 1960s. Traditionally, Nebraska walk-ons were from small, rural towns. These players filled spots on practice teams to help recruited players hone their skills. Back then, team rosters numbered close to 200 players. That's almost twice the number of rostered players allowed now. With today's smaller rosters, walk-ons do more than just aid in training. Many emerge as big players on game day.

University of Michigan is a D1 Big Ten Conference school. Its football team is no stranger to the powerful contribution of walk-ons. Joe Taylor is one of those. The college junior was named the Wolverines' special teams player of the week after a 49-0 win over Michigan State in October. Meanwhile, walk-on teammate Jake Thaw led the team in the fall with the most yardage gained on punt returns. Coaches call both Taylor and Thaw "invaluable to the team."

"On our kickoff team, there are a handful of walk-ons," Taylor says. "Everyone here does a great job of making everyone feel like they're part of the team whether they're a walk-on or on scholarship."

Sometimes walk-ons perform well enough to earn a scholarships from their schools. University of Nebraska, University of Wisconsin, and University of Minnesota have offered scholarships to walk-on players in the past few seasons.

Just as walk-ons are instrumental to team success, so are we all as members of God's family. In God's view, there are no "less important people." (See 2 Peter 1:1-2.) *You* are more instrumental in His kingdom than you may even imagine. The body (which is Christ's whole church) is made of many parts. All are needed to complete the whole.

Why? Each image-bearer of God has unique skills and purposes given by His wise design. Today's sports teams can illustrate the truth that even those who come aboard with less acclaim are still invaluable to the whole.

Nebraska's Malachi Coleman (15) celebrates with Alex Bullock (84) after catching a touchdown pass during a football game in Lincoln, Nebraska, in October 2023. Bullock, a walk-on, was awarded a scholarship in fall camp and is among the team's top receivers. (AP/Rebecca S. Gratz)

Michigan coach Jim Harbaugh looks on during a football game against Michigan State in East Lansing, Michigan, in October 2023. Harbaugh calls walk-on players like Joe Taylor and Jake Thaw "priceless." (AP/Al Goldis)

Minnesota place kicker Dragan Kesich (99) kicks a field goal during the second half of an NCAA college football game in Iowa City, Iowa. Walk-on Kesich leads the Big Ten with 16 completed field goals. (AP/Matthew Putney)

Minnesota running back and walk-on Jordan Nubin (30) signals during a football game against Michigan State on October 28, 2023, in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Nubin rushed 204 yards against Michigan State and was named Big Ten Offensive Player of the Week. (AP/Abbie Parr)

University of Nebraska head coach Bob Devaney is carried off the field by his victorious players after defeating the University of Oklahoma 35-31 at Norman, Oklahoma, in 1971. (AP)