

What Championship Rosters Look Like in the Portal Era

A Data Analysis of the 2021–2025 CFB National Champions

June 2026

Overview

This report analyzes the five most recent CFB national champions to identify patterns in **(1) how championship rosters are built** — portal vs. developed players and recruiting star ratings — and **(2) what those teams do well statistically**, with a deliberate emphasis on efficiency and field-position metrics over raw volume stats.

Why only these five seasons? This is a design choice, not a data limitation. NIL and the unlimited transfer portal have fundamentally changed how rosters are built. Champions from before 2021 were assembled under different rules and would contaminate the comparison. Even within this window, rules loosened further in 2023 (one-time rule lifted, unlimited portal), making the most recent champions — especially Indiana 2025 — the highest-signal data points for where the sport is heading.

Table 1: The five champions analyzed. ‘Season’ = the fall season year. Indiana 2025 confirmed: QB Fernando Mendoza, 16-0 record, Jan 2026 title game.

Season	Champion	Conference	Record	Title Game
2021	Georgia	SEC	14-1	Jan 2022 vs Alabama (33-18)
2022	Georgia	SEC	15-0	Jan 2023 vs TCU (65-7)
2023	Michigan	Big Ten	15-0	Jan 2024 vs Washington (34-13)
2024	Ohio State	Big Ten	14-2	Jan 2025 vs Notre Dame (34-23)
2025	Indiana	Big Ten	16-0	Jan 2026 vs Miami (27-21)

Data source: CollegeFootballData.com API via `cfbfastR` v2.0.0, pulled June 6 2026. All raw data cached; outputs reproducible by re-running the four project scripts.

Part 1 — Roster Construction

Contributor Definition and Portal Methodology

A player is counted as a **contributor** if they meet any of these thresholds (this approximates “started or played a meaningful share of snaps” given the data available):

- **Offensive skill** (QB/RB/WR/TE): usage rate $\geq 2\%$ of offensive plays
- **Defense**: 15+ total tackles, OR 1+ sack, OR 1+ INT, OR 3+ pass deflections
- **Special teams**: 5+ kicking points, 10+ punts, 100+ kick return yds, or 50+ punt return yds
- **OL**: All offensive linemen on the roster are included, **not filtered by performance**. The API contains no snap-count data for linemen. This inflates OL counts and makes OL portal% figures non-comparable to other position groups.

Portal definition: A player is classified as a **portal** addition if their first + last name matches a transfer portal entry (CFBD database) destined for that team, in any of the three portal cycles leading up to and including the season year. A player who transferred from a Group of Five, FCS, JUCO, or international program counts as a portal player. Star rating for portal players uses their original high school composite rating (not their portal rating), so the star comparisons reflect recruiting class talent, not portal recruiting.

Overall Portal vs. Developed Split

Table 2: Roster construction overview. Star ratings from CFBD HS recruiting database (developed players) or original HS composite (portal players). ‘Unrated’ = walk-ons, FCS/JUCO transfers.

Label	Total	% Portal	Avg Stars	5-star	4-star	3-star	Unrated
Georgia (2021)	69	1.4%	4.12	14	30	8	17
Georgia (2022)	67	3.0%	4.08	10	35	6	16
Indiana (2025)	52	44.2%	3.14	0	5	32	15
Michigan (2023)	67	14.9%	3.73	1	35	15	16
Ohio State (2024)	55	14.5%	4.10	10	34	5	6

Georgia (2021–22) used the portal minimally (1.4–3.0%) while averaging **4.1 stars** across contributors — the blue-chip development model. **Indiana (2025)** is the opposite: **44.2% of contributors came through the portal** at an average of only **3.1 stars**, proving a championship roster does not require elite recruiting classes. Ohio State 2024 is the hybrid: elite recruiting base (4.1 stars) topped off with high-impact portal additions.

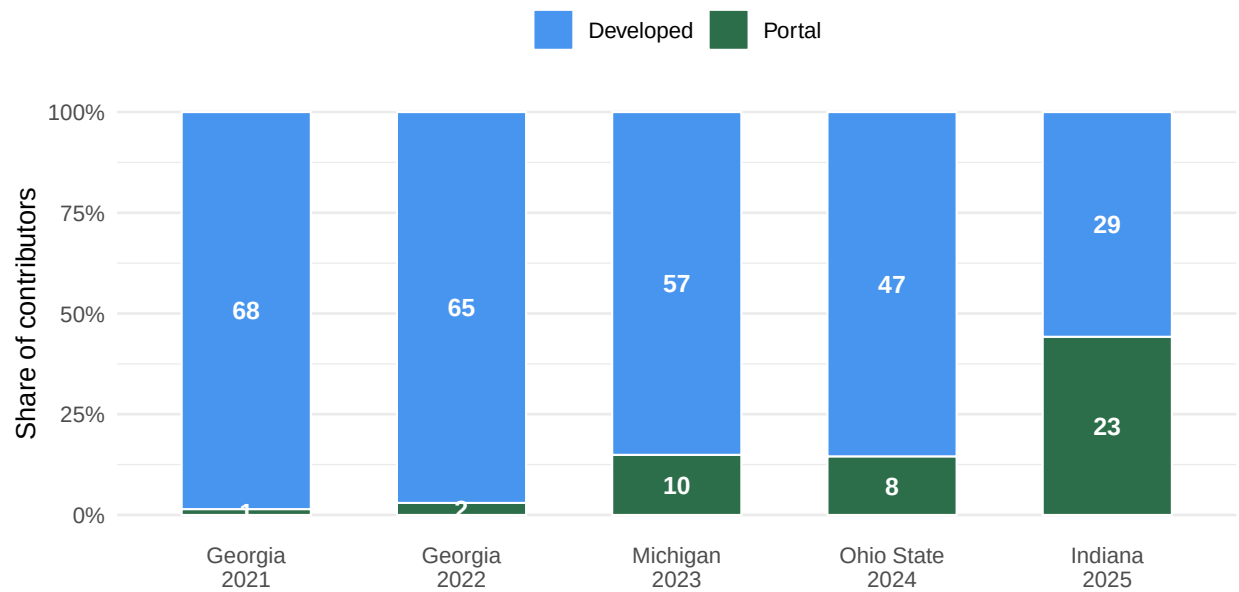


Figure 1: Portal vs. developed share of contributors. Numbers = raw player count.

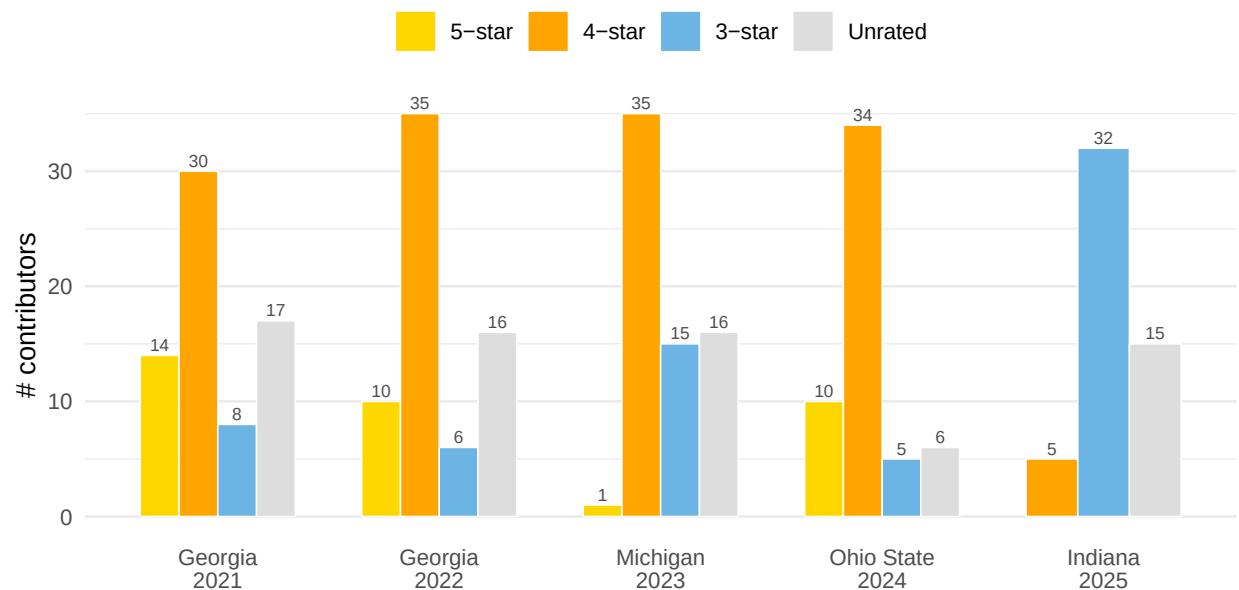


Figure 2: Star-rating distribution among contributors. Sources: CFBD HS recruiting database for developed players; original HS composite for portal players.

Table 3: Portal usage among estimated starters. Starters are approximated by highest usage per position group plus top defensive producers; the API provides no official games-started data.

Label	Starters	Portal Starters	% Portal (Starters)
Georgia (2021)	13	1	7.7%
Georgia (2022)	13	0	0%
Indiana (2025)	13	9	69.2%
Michigan (2023)	13	1	7.7%
Ohio State (2024)	13	3	23.1%

Starters Portal Split

Star Rating Distribution

Portal Usage by Position Group

The table below shows portal % and contributor count for each position group. **OL figures are roster-wide counts only and are not performance-filtered** — treat them as directional, not directly comparable to the other groups.

Table 4: Portal percentage and contributor count (n) by position group. OL counts include all rostered linemen (no performance filter) and are not directly comparable to other groups. QB/RB/LB-edge portal rates are consistently highest across programs.

Champion	QB	RB	WR/TE	OL	DL	LB	DB	ST
Georgia (2021)	0% (n=3)	0% (n=7)	0% (n=13)	0% (n=23)	0% (n=7)	0% (n=8)	16.7% (n=6)	0% (n=2)
Georgia (2022)	0% (n=3)	0% (n=6)	7.7% (n=13)	0% (n=21)	0% (n=8)	0% (n=7)	14.3% (n=7)	0% (n=2)
Indiana (2025)	50% (n=2)	66.7% (n=6)	57.1% (n=7)	20% (n=15)	66.7% (n=9)	25% (n=4)	33.3% (n=6)	66.7% (n=3)
Michigan (2023)	20% (n=5)	0% (n=8)	11.1% (n=9)	13% (n=23)	25% (n=8)	20% (n=5)	14.3% (n=7)	50% (n=2)
Ohio State (2024)	66.7% (n=3)	25% (n=4)	14.3% (n=7)	11.1% (n=18)	0% (n=9)	0% (n=4)	25% (n=8)	0% (n=2)

Portal usage is consistently highest at **QB, RB, and pass-rusher (LB/EDGE)** — positions where one player can immediately elevate a team's ceiling. OL and interior DB development remains more in-house across all five programs.

Part 2 — On-Field Statistical Profile

All national ranks below are within the FBS field for that season (n = 135–138 teams). **Rank 1 = best nationally.** Metrics are efficiency- and field-position-focused by design; yards per play is included as a volume contrast point only.

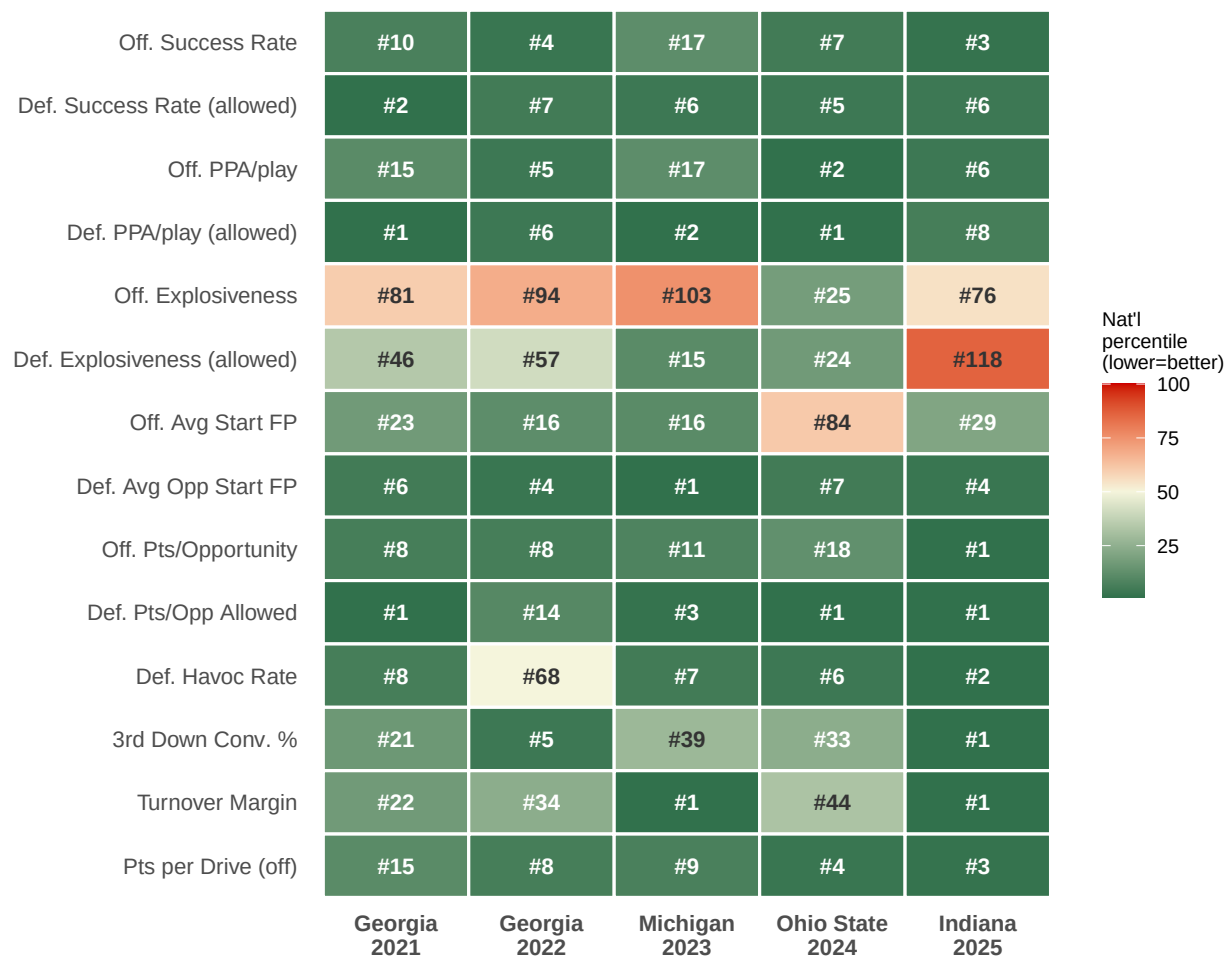


Figure 3: National rank percentile heatmap. Green (dark) = top-tier rank near #1. Red = below average. Numbers show the actual rank. Note: for field position, lower yards-to-goal is better for the offense (closer to end zone), so Rank 1 = shortest avg drive start.

Table 5: National rank in key efficiency metrics. Rank 1 = best in FBS that season (n=135-138 teams). TO margin now computed from drives data: INT + fumble TOs forced vs. committed.

Metric	Champion Seasons				
	Georgia (2021)	Georgia (2022)	Michigan (2023)	Ohio State (2024)	Indiana (2025)
Off. Success Rate	#10	#4	#17	#7	#3
Def. Success Rate (allowed)	#2	#7	#6	#5	#6
Off. PPA/play	#15	#5	#17	#2	#6
Def. PPA/play (allowed)	#1	#6	#2	#1	#8
Off. Explosiveness	#81	#94	#103	#25	#76
Def. Explosiveness (allowed)	#46	#57	#15	#24	#118
Off. Avg Start FP	#23	#16	#16	#84	#29
Def. Avg Opp Start FP	#6	#4	#1	#7	#4
Off. Pts/Opportunity	#8	#8	#11	#18	#1
Def. Pts/Opp Allowed	#1	#14	#3	#1	#1
Def. Havoc Rate	#8	#68	#7	#6	#2
3rd Down Conv. %	#21	#5	#39	#33	#1
Turnover Margin	#22	#34	#1	#44	#1
Pts per Drive (off)	#15	#8	#9	#4	#3

Part 3 — Key Findings

What ALL FIVE champions ranked top 10 nationally

- **Defensive success rate** — top 7 in every single season (ranks: #2, #7, #6, #5, #6)
- **Offensive success rate** — top 17 in every season (ranks: #10, #4, #17, #7, #3)
- **Defensive field position** — top 7 in every season; opponents started drives with 74+ yards to go (ranks: #6, #4, #1, #7, #4)

These three metrics are the clearest shared signature of a championship team in the portal era.

What Every Champion Had in Common

1. **Defensive success rate.** Limiting opponents to failed plays on a per-play basis forces third-and-long situations, which compounds across an entire game and season. This metric rewards scheme discipline, not just raw athleticism — it is achievable without a top-5 recruiting class.
2. **Offensive success rate.** Moving the chains efficiently keeps drives alive, creates third-and-short situations, and controls clock. All five teams ranked top 17 nationally; four ranked top 10.
3. **Defensive field position.** Every champion held opponents to an average starting position of 74+ yards from the end zone. Michigan 2023 was the national leader, holding opponents to 75.6 yards to go on average. Long fields drain opponent possessions and create a compounding advantage.

4. Red zone and scoring efficiency. All five teams ranked top 20 nationally in points per scoring opportunity; Indiana 2025 was **#1 nationally** (5.13 pts/opportunity). Converting when in range — not just getting there — separates champions from contenders.

5. Turnover margin. Complete metric (INT + fumble TOs, via drives data):

Champion	Forced TOs	Committed TOs	Margin	Nat'l Rank
Georgia 2021	23	16	+7	#22
Georgia 2022	21	16	+5	#32
Michigan 2023	24	5	+19	#1
Ohio State 2024	19	14	+5	#45
Indiana 2025	30	8	+22	#1

All five had positive margins. Michigan and Indiana weaponized it. Ohio State won despite a middling TO margin — path mattered more than TO edge for them.

How the Champions Diverge

Champion	Primary Edge	Notable Divergence
Georgia 2021	#1 def. PPA , talent depth	Average TO margin; 14 5-stars
Georgia 2022	#4 off SR, #5 off PPA	Below-avg havoc rate (#68)
Michigan 2023	#1 TO margin (+19) , #1 opp. FP	Offense only #17 in success rate
Ohio State 2024	#1 def. PPA + #2 off PPA , balanced elite	TO margin #45, offensive FP #84
Indiana 2025	#1 TO margin (+22) , #1 3rd down % , portal-built	Zero 5-star contributors

Implications for a Development-First Mid-Budget Program

Indiana's 2025 national title is the most directly applicable data point for a program like Utah:

- **You do not need top-5 recruiting classes.** Indiana averaged 3.1 stars across contributors and had zero 5-star players. The path exists.
- **Portal strategy is now table-stakes.** 44% of Indiana's contributors came through the portal, at positions that move the needle most (QB, pass rusher, receiving). Targeted, high-leverage portal additions can close gaps that recruiting rankings cannot.
- **Defensive success rate is the great equalizer.** It is consistently the #1 predictor in this sample, and it responds to scheme and effort more than raw talent. A well-coached defense can achieve top-15 success rates without top-15 recruiting.
- **Win the ball.** Indiana's +22 TO margin and Michigan's +19 are the clearest separation metrics in their championship seasons. Ball security and pass-rush pressure are achievable emphases at any budget level.

- **Defensive field position compounds.** Every champion ranked top 7 in holding opponents to long fields. Elite punting and special teams coverage are under-valued, high-ROI investments.
 - **Develop OL in-house.** All five programs maintained significant in-house OL depth. Portal OL turnover carries chemistry and fit risk. Programs that develop multi-year OL gain a durable structural efficiency advantage.
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Data Limitations

This is an $n=5$ observational study. All findings are patterns worth investigating, not causal laws of championship football.

1. **$n=5$ sample.** Five data points can identify patterns; they cannot establish causation.
 2. **OL contributor counts are roster-wide, not performance-filtered.** Snap-count data is not available in the API for linemen. This inflates OL contributor counts vs. other positions.
 3. **Portal matching by name string.** The CFBD portal database lacks player IDs; matching is done by first+last name. Inconsistent formats (Jr., nicknames) may cause ~5% misclassification.
 4. **Recruiting ratings.** ~10–15% of contributors have no rating in the CFBD recruiting database (walk-ons, FCS transfers). These are coded “Unrated” and excluded from star averages.
 5. **Turnover margin is now complete** (INT + fumble TOs via drives data). Previous versions of this analysis used a partial metric; this version fixes that. Minor caveat: drive result labels in the CFBD API may categorize edge-case fumbles differently across seasons.
 6. **Portal era rule changes.** Georgia 2021–22 operated under the one-time transfer rule; 2023+ teams had unrestricted portal access. Indiana’s 44.2% portal rate reflects both strategy and expanded rules. Direct % comparisons across years require this context.
 7. **2025 Indiana data.** Verified: 16-0 record, QB Fernando Mendoza, title game vs Miami (27-21), Jan 2026. Data pulled from live CFBD API as of June 6 2026.
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Data: CollegeFootballData.com API via `cfbfastR` v2.0.0 / Analysis: June 2026