

The Brian Kelly Clause

By Martin J. Greenberg and Margaret Williams

I. Who is Brian Kelly?

Brian Kelly (“Kelly”) is the current head football coach at Louisiana State University (“LSU”). Kelly played football at Assumption University from 1979 to 1983. Kelly’s coaching history began in 1983 when he was hired as Assumption University’s football defensive coordinator and linebackers coach as well as the university’s softball coach.¹ Following his success at Assumption University, he went to Grand Valley State University (“Grand Valley State”) for a coaching position in football,² where Kelly was the defensive backs coach from 1987 to 1988.³ From 1989 to 1990 Kelly was the defensive coordinator and the recruiting coordinator for Grand Valley State.⁴

Kelly got his start as a head football coach at Grand Valley State in 1991.⁵ He was the head coach of Grand Valley State from 1991 to 2003.⁶ From 2004 to 2006, Kelly was the head football coach of Central Michigan University (“Central Michigan”).⁷ Kelly was the head football coach for the University of Cincinnati (“Cincinnati”) from 2007 to 2009.⁸ From 2010 to 2021, Kelly was the head football coach for Notre Dame University (“Notre Dame”).⁹ Kelly is currently the head football coach for LSU which he began in 2022.¹⁰

¹ McWilliams, Julian, *At LSU, Mass. native Brian Kelly has reached the top of college football. The journey started as a softball coach at Assumption*, BOSTON GLOBE, Dec. 21, 2021, <https://www.bostonglobe.com/2021/12/20/sports/how-brian-kellys-path-top-college-football-began-assumption-college-worcester/>

² *Brian Kelly*, Saturday Down South, <https://www.saturdaydownsouth.com/coaches/brian-kelly/>

³ *Id.*

⁴ *Id.*

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ *Id.*

⁷ *Id.*

⁸ *Id.*

⁹ *Id.*

¹⁰ *Id.*

Kelly created a name for himself as he led team after team to winning seasons, bowl games, conference titles, and national games.¹¹ Kelly himself was named National Coach of the Year by multiple outlets in 2012 and 2018,¹² and won the Home Depot Coach of the Year Award three times.¹³ Kelly has also had many football players that he coached drafted by the NFL.¹⁴

Despite his seemingly constant jumping between universities, LSU signed Kelly as their head football coach in November of 2021 for a deal worth \$95 million for a 10-year contract term.¹⁵

II. Brian Kelly's years at Notre Dame.

Kelly was the head football coach at Notre Dame from 2010 to 2021, which Notre Dame refers to as the “Kelly Era.”¹⁶ During the Kelly Era from 2012 to 2020, Notre Dame produced 45 players that were drafted to NFL teams, including nine first-round picks and nine second-round picks.¹⁷ The highest picked players under Kelly were both first-round, sixth picks, Quenton Nelson, Offensive Guard, to the Colts in 2018, and Ronnie Stanley, Offensive Tackle, to the Ravens in 2016.¹⁸ The Los Angeles Chargers drafted six players during the Kelly Era.¹⁹ The Kelly Era also produced nine defensive linemen drafted, seven tight ends, six offensive linemen, three running backs, and one quarterback.²⁰ The 2021 draft also procured eight players from Notre Dame.²¹ Out of the nine first-round picks from the Kelly Era, “five have at least one Pro Bowl selection to their

¹¹ *Brian Kelly*, LSU Athletics, <https://lsusports.net/sports/fb/roster/coach/brian-kelly/>

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ *Id.*

¹⁵ Dodd, Dennis, *Brian Kelly touts LSU's investment in football after growing tired of waiting for Notre Dame to modernize*, Apr. 7, 2022, CBS Sports, <https://www.cbssports.com/college-football/news/brian-kelly-touts-lsus-investment-in-football-after-growing-tired-of-waiting-for-notre-dame-to-modernize/>

¹⁶ Prister, Tim, *Notre Dame and the NFL Draft During the Brian Kelly Era*, Irishillustrated.com, Apr. 27, 2021, <https://247sports.com/college/notre-dame/article/notre-dame-and-the-nfl-draft-during-brian-kelly-era-164714272/>

¹⁷ *Id.*

¹⁸ *Id.*

¹⁹ *Id.*

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ NFL Draft Home 202, Available at <https://www.nfl.com/draft/tracker/picks/1/1/2021>

name: Safety Harrison Smith, Tight End Tyler Eifert and Offensive Linemen Zack Martin, Ronnie Stanley and Quenton Nelson.”²²

In his years at Notre Dame, Kelly finished with a 113-40 record.²³ Under Kelly’s leadership, Notre Dame also made an appearance in 2018 and in 2020 in the College Football Playoffs (“CFP”).²⁴ The team also appeared in nine bowl games, with a 5-4 record.²⁵ In 2012, the team also made an appearance at the BCS Championship Game, where they lost to Alabama.²⁶ Overall, Kelly built an impressive football program at Notre Dame, and LSU was excited to bring Kelly in to do the same for their program.²⁷

III. How Kelly quit Notre Dame.

In a controversial move, Kelly announced he was leaving Notre Dame on social media and news outlets without prior warning to the coaches and players. The text that Kelly sent to his players said:

“Men ... Let me first apologize for the late-night text, and more importantly, for not being able to share the news with you in person that I will be leaving Notre Dame. I am flying back to South Bend tonight to be able to meet with you in the morning, but the news broke late today and I am sorry you found out through social media or news reports.” [paragraph break] “I will have more to share when we meet tomorrow at 7 a.m. but for now, just know that my love for you is limitless and I am so proud of all that you have accomplished. Our program is elite because of your hard work and commitment and I know that will continue. I will share more

²² James, Tyler, *Ranking Notre Dame’s top NFL Draft picks of the Brian Kelly era*, IndyStar, Apr. 22, 2020, <https://www.indystar.com/story/sports/college/notre-dame/2020/04/22/ranking-notre-dames-top-nfl-draft-picks-brian-kelly-era/3003214001/>

²³ Holliday, AJ, *5 things to know about Brian Kelly, who is leaving Notre Dame to become LSU football coach*, The Daily Advertiser, Nov. 29, 2021, <https://www.theadvertiser.com/story/sports/2021/11/29/5-things-know-brian-kelly-lsu-football-notre-dame/8802468002/>

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ *Brian Kelly*, Sports Reference, <https://www.sports-reference.com/cfb/coaches/brian-kelly-2.html>

²⁶ Holliday, *supra* note 23.

²⁷ Dodd, *Brian Kelly touts LSU’s investment in football after growing tired of waiting for Notre Dame to modernize*, *supra* note 15.

in the morning when we meet. Again, my sincere apologies for not being able to be the one to share the news directly with you. Coach Kelly.”²⁸

It was reported that the meeting with now-former players lasted two minutes and Kelly did not answer any questions.²⁹ Kelly is heard, in a leaked video of the meeting, praising his time at Notre Dame, his pride in his athletes, and his love for “each and every one of you.”³⁰ Kelly said, “thank you for allowing me to pursue what I love to do, and that’s to develop 18-to-21-year-olds. And you will continue to achieve at the highest level, and will have great success, no matter what moves forward for you.”³¹ In response to Kelly’s actions, a reporter wrote that

Kelly’s ‘sincere apologies’ are laughable; if he had acted sincerely, he wouldn’t have to apologize at all. He could have called a team meeting two days earlier and said LSU had called and he was considering a move. He could have waited to see whether his team has a shot to win the national championship before decided he wanted to go somewhere else.³²

The fact that Kelly left less than a week before Notre Dame could be eligible for the playoff berth left coaches, players, and South Bend shocked.³³ However, their reactions were varied. A report expressed an assistant coach’s experience stating that “[he] was exiting a recruit’s home when he found out the news and expressed how he felt after he had just basically told the recruit lies. ‘The news broke when I walked out of the house, so I look like a f – a – e.’”³⁴ In a podcast,

²⁸ Frank, Vincent, *Brian Kelly exit from Notre Dame apparently turns ugly*, SportsNaut, Nov. 30, 2021, <https://sportsnaut.com/brian-kelly-exit-notre-dame-turns-ugly/>

²⁹ *Id.*

³⁰ Rivera, Joe, *Here’s Brian Kelly’s leaked 3 ½-minute speech to Notre Dame players after accepting LSU job*, The Sporting News, Dec. 1, 2021, <https://www.sportingnews.com/us/ncaa-football/news/brian-kelly-speech-notre-dame-lsu/2dsqffxh83fz1d4jsgdkvw4r4>

³¹ *Id.*

³² Rosenberg, Michael, *Brian Kelly’s Brusque Exit at Notre Dame Is More of the Same From Him*, Sports Illustrated, Nov. 30, 2021, <https://www.si.com/college/2021/11/30/brian-kelly-leaves-notre-dame-for-lsu>

³³ Dodd, Dennis, *Brian Kelly selfishly leaving for LSU with Notre Dame in playoff race puts sport’s hypocrisy on display*, CBS Sports, Nov. 30, 2021, <https://www.cbssports.com/college-football/news/brian-kelly-selfishly-leaving-for-lsu-with-notre-dame-in-playoff-race-puts-sports-hypocrisy-on-display/>

³⁴ Navarro, Omar, *The devastating effects of major college football head coaches leaving suddenly*, The California Aggie, Dec. 12, 2021, <https://theaggie.org/2021/12/21/the-devastating-effects-of-major-college-football-head-coaches-leaving-suddenly/>

players Kyle Hamilton, Cam Hart, Conor Ratigan, and KJ Wallace discussed Kelly's departure.³⁵

Cam Hart said that

I'm getting all these texts and calls, like 'Yo, Are you okay? Come to my school, come to this school.' One of my boys [said], 'Come to Jackson State.' Like, no bro, I'm fine, I didn't come here for Coach Kelly. Like, respect for Coach Kelly, I have nothing but respect for the man, he's helped me along the way, but I came here because of Notre Dame.³⁶

Kyle Hamilton offered similar remarks:

No offense to Coach Kelly, but I know what the school can offer me, I know what the people can offer me, and I know what the football, obviously, can offer me. The football's not going anywhere. Everybody's acting like the program is in shambles. We're still going to be here, we're in the Playoff hunt ... You come here for a plethora of reasons, and one of those being football for sure, but there are so many other things that go into the school, that a coach leaving, no matter how good or bad he is, shouldn't affect your decision.³⁷

During the podcast, Kyle Hamilton reportedly stated his reaction to how the news broke and expressed that "the worst part of the situation is the manner in which the news came out. [Hamilton] says that he holds the media more responsible than Kelly for the news breaking before he could tell his players."³⁸ Hamilton further went on to explain his sympathy for Kelly saying "I think Coach Kelly has it the worst right now... He's invested so much into his team, and everybody is saying stuff to his team except for him. He can't say what he wants to say."³⁹

When offered a position at LSU, Notre Dame defensive line coach Mike Elston showed his allegiance to Notre Dame tweeting, "Notre Dame is home!! 12 years and counting!! Let's ride fellas!!"⁴⁰

³⁵ Lyons, Dan, *Four Notre Dame Players Recorded a Podcast Right After Brian Kelly News Broke*, Sports Illustrated, Nov. 30, 2021, <https://www.si.com/college/2021/11/30/brian-kelly-to-lsu-notre-dame-players-react-inside-the-garage-podcast-kyle-hamilton-cam-hart>

³⁶ *Id.*

³⁷ *Id.*

³⁸ *Id.*

³⁹ *Id.*

⁴⁰ Papke, Grey, *Brian Kelly trolled on social media over staff rejections*, Larry Brown Sports, Dec. 2, 2021, <https://larrybrownsports.com/college-football/brian-kelly-trolled-on-social-media-over-staff-rejections/588112>

IV. Why Kelly left Notre Dame.

Interviews with Kelly provided a few reasons why he left. Kelly spoke to The Associated Press before his first LSU practice. Kelly has been quoted as stating:

It's been awesome because you've got incredible facilities, you've got players that want to be great. I want to be in an environment where I have the resources to win a national championship. And I came down here because I want to be in the American League East.⁴¹

One reason why he left Notre Dame was the facilities at Notre Dame. Kelly explained that there was disagreement between him and the leadership at Notre Dame about the facilities.⁴² Kelly stated, "I felt like that what I was looking for was student-athlete-centered... And we didn't seem to be on the same path as to how that was going to get accomplished."⁴³ Kelly said, "one difference between LSU and Notre Dame in that regard: LSU has a nutrition center, dining hall and chef dedicated solely to the football program and the players."⁴⁴

Another reason that Kelly expressed was that recruiting to LSU was easier than Notre Dame. "Notre Dame relies on a national recruiting plan."⁴⁵ Kelly described that he was gone for weeks going all over the country to find recruits, but at LSU he can "drive a few hours in any direction to recruit blue-chip prospects."⁴⁶ He further said, "Baton Rouge is also a four-hour drive from Houston, one of the most talent-rich metro areas in the country."⁴⁷

⁴¹ *Brian Kelly Details Decision to Leave Notre Dame for LSU: 'We Were On Different Paths,'* NBC Chicago, Apr. 7, 2022, <https://www.nbcchicago.com/news/sports/brian-kelly-details-decision-to-leave-notre-dame-for-lsu-we-were-on-different-paths/2802060/?amp=1>

⁴² Al-Khateeb, Zac, *Why did Brian Kelly leave Notre Dame for LSU? Lagging facilities, greater commitment at heart of decision*, The Sporting News, Sept. 4, 2022, <https://www.sportingnews.com/us/ncaa-football/news/brian-kelly-leave-notre-dame-lsu/pyzm7a0qibicjtxzbbp9swt>

⁴³ *Id.*

⁴⁴ *Id.*

⁴⁵ *Brian Kelly Details Decision to Leave Notre Dame for LSU: 'We Were On Different Paths,'* *supra* note 41.

⁴⁶ *Id.*

⁴⁷ *Id.*

A third reason is that Kelly wanted to win a National Championship ring. “Although Kelly had a successful career in South Bend, a National Championship ring has alluded him.”⁴⁸ When speaking about LSU, Kelly said, “[y]ou’re here to win a [N]ational [C]hampionship and play in the American League East.”⁴⁹ Being in the Southeast Conference (“SEC”) greatly increases Kelly’s opportunities to be in the College Football Playoff.⁵⁰ “SEC teams have taken nine of 14 spots in the last seven national title games.”⁵¹

Finally, the money that Kelly will receive through his LSU contract is a large draw. Along with the 10-year, \$95 million deal, there are several other incentives for Kelly.⁵² First, for the Southeastern Conference (“SEC”), if the team participates in the Championship game, Kelly will receive \$75,000, or if the team wins the Championship game, Kelly will receive \$150,000.⁵³ Second, Kelly will automatically receive \$500,000 for a bowl eligible team, and \$100,000 for participating in the New Year Six Bowl, \$200,000 for participating in the CFP semifinal game, \$300,000 for participating in the CFP final game, or \$500,000 for becoming the CFP National Champion.⁵⁴ Third, Kelly will receive \$500,000 if he becomes the SEC Coach of Year, and \$75,000 if he becomes the National Coach of the Year.⁵⁵ It was determined that, “[b]etween his yearly salary and bonuses, Kelly will be the highest paid coach at a public university.”⁵⁶

⁴⁸ Coleman, Madeline, *Brian Kelly Goes Into Detail on Surprising Decision to Leave Notre Dame for LSU*, Sports Illustrated, Apr. 7, 2022, <https://www.si.com/college/2022/04/07/brian-kelly-goes-into-detail-surprising-decision-to-leave-notre-dame-for-lsu>

⁴⁹ Dodd, *Brian Kelly touts LSU’s investment in football after growing tired of waiting for Notre Dame to modernize*, *supra* note 15.

⁵⁰ *Id.*

⁵¹ *Id.*

⁵² Term Sheet for Brian Kelly, Head Coach, with Louisiana State University dated Nov. 30, 2021, on file with the author.

⁵³ *Id.*

⁵⁴ *Id.*

⁵⁵ *Id.*

⁵⁶ Coleman, *supra* note 48.

Kelly will also receive additional incentives not contingent on team performance. First, he will receive longevity compensation of \$500,000 each year if he is employed on July 1st.⁵⁷ Second, Kelly will receive two vehicles courtesy of the university or allowances of \$1,000 per month for two vehicles.⁵⁸ Third, Kelly will receive an interest free loan up to \$1.2 million of twenty percent of the purchase price of Kelly's residence.⁵⁹ Fourth, Kelly will receive a relocation allowance for moving expenses.⁶⁰ Fifth, Kelly will receive 50 hours of private personal air miles per year.⁶¹ Finally, LSU will pay the expenses of the voluntary termination of Kelly's Notre Dame contract.⁶²

V. How does Kelly's history of "jumping" affect the community?

Kelly is known for abruptly leaving a head coaching position to "jump" to another university. This creates a distrust with his football team and the greater university community.⁶³ When reflecting on Kelly's coaching history, he changed from successful Division II head coach to a sought-after Division I head coach. However, his success has led to distrust. In 2001, while at Grand Valley State, Kelly told media that he did not want to become a Division I football coach because of the pressure.⁶⁴ Despite his statement of avoiding a Division I school, Kelly took a position at Central Michigan in 2004.⁶⁵

While discussing a contract extension with Central Michigan, Kelly surprised everyone when he "jumped" to Cincinnati. Dave Heeke ("Heeke"), Central Michigan's Athletic Director in 2007,

⁵⁷ Term Sheet, *supra* note 52.

⁵⁸ *Id.*

⁵⁹ *Id.*

⁶⁰ *Id.*

⁶¹ *Id.*

⁶² *Id.*

⁶³ Rosenberg, *supra* note 32.

⁶⁴ *Id.*

⁶⁵ *Id.*

informed the players that Kelly left and that an interim coach would be taking over.⁶⁶ Heeke was shocked and disappointed by the move.⁶⁷ A linebacker for Central Michigan shared that he understood Kelly leaving, but “had a problem with how he left,” i.e. - having Heeke announce the change.⁶⁸ However, this shocking announcement was just the first time that Kelly would surprise everyone with such a move.

Cincinnati players were shocked to learn about Kelly’s decision to leave and take a position at Notre Dame.⁶⁹ Kelly arrived at a team banquet and announced the news to the team.⁷⁰ A Cincinnati receiver spoke to the media sharing that he felt as though he was lied to because Kelly assured the receiver that he was staying with Cincinnati, even though Kelly knew at the time that he was leaving.⁷¹ Unfortunately for Notre Dame, his pattern of suddenly departing was repeated when he left for LSU.

Beyond Kelly, Oklahoma head football coach Lincoln Riley suddenly left for University of Southern California and Mario Cristobal (“Cristobal”) suddenly left the University of Oregon for Miami University.⁷² A reporter commented, “[a]ll of these moves had something in common – money... With the high dollar figure offered, it’s no wonder these coaches just got up and left situations that many thought they would never leave.”⁷³ Although not quite the \$95 million that Kelly received, Cristobal received a 10-year, \$80 million contract.⁷⁴

The problem with these coaches leaving is that the effect goes further than simply finding a new coach and affects current student-athletes and recruiting. One report explained how current

⁶⁶ *Id.*

⁶⁷ *Id.*

⁶⁸ *Id.*

⁶⁹ *Id.*

⁷⁰ *Id.*

⁷¹ *Id.*

⁷² Navarro, *supra* note 34.

⁷³ *Id.*

⁷⁴ *Id.*

student-athletes are affected saying that “[w]ith moves becoming so volatile, these moves can ruin the college career of student-athletes as now they are placed in a situation that they weren’t expecting or must transfer in the middle of their college career.”⁷⁵ Another report explained the effects on recruiting experiences stating that “Kelly was at a recruit’s house on a visit for Notre Dame when the news of his move to LSU broke, leaving the family unable to wrap their heads around what happened.”⁷⁶ A third account explained that “[i]n the aftermath of all the coaches leaving, the universities have lost players who were committed to the school as well as players already there. It has created a ripple effect as players look for new homes.”⁷⁷

The announcement of Kelly leaving occurred “just eight days after he proclaimed his loyalty to the Irish.”⁷⁸ The reaction of community members led to important questions, “[w]hat are we supposed to believe these days? More than that, who are we supposed to believe?”⁷⁹

VI. What do we suggest?

Liquidated damages, sometimes referred to as “exit fees,” are expressed in coaching contracts to discourage coaches from “jumping” to another university and breaking their current contract. The liquidated damages provision in Kelly’s LSU contract is paraphrased as follows:

- if Kelly terminates his contract at LSU between November 28, 2021 and December 31, 2022, he will owe the university \$4 million;⁸⁰
- if he leaves during the 2023 calendar year, he will owe the university \$3 million; and⁸¹

⁷⁵ *Id.*

⁷⁶ *Id.*

⁷⁷ *Id.*

⁷⁸ Dodd, *Brian Kelly selfishly leaving for LSU with Notre Dame in playoff race puts sport’s hypocrisy on display*, *supra* note 33.

⁷⁹ *Id.*

⁸⁰ Term Sheet, *supra* note 52.

⁸¹ *Id.*

- if he leaves during the calendar years of 2024, 2025, 2026, 2027, 2028, 2029, 2030, or 2031, he will owe the university \$2 million.⁸²

However, many universities will pay the coach's "exit fee" for breaking their contract on the coach's behalf or buy out the contract from the prior university.⁸³

Blake Toppmeyer ("Toppmeyer"), SEC Columnist for the *USA Today Network*, proposed a clause he calls the "Brian Kelly clause" to combat "jumping."⁸⁴ Toppmeyer said, "money is the answer to preventing more coaches from being tempted to pull a Kelly."⁸⁵ Toppmeyer suggested the following clause:

If coach departs for a new coaching job during any season between Sept. 1 through playoff selection Sunday (usually the first Sunday in December), he will owe the university a buyout of \$50 million. The university may agree to waive this fee if it determines the team is not in playoff contention. Additionally, if the coach's team is selected to the playoff, he would owe the university a \$50 million buyout if he departs before the season is finished.⁸⁶

Despite the seemingly excessive penalty proposed by the Kelly clause, Toppmeyer emphasized that coaches would be willing to sign contracts with such a clause because they want the job.⁸⁷

Toppmeyer further wrote:

But surely some Power Five programs, particularly those that pay coaches top dollar, wield enough clout to install a 'Kelly clause' into contracts. Essentially, this clause would be saying: If you want to coach here, you cannot leave during the season if you are in national championship contention. Any Power Five coach who would refuse to sign a contract that includes a clause requiring him to try to win a national championship isn't worth hiring.⁸⁸

⁸² *Id.*

⁸³ Toppmeyer, Blake, *Introducing the 'Brian Kelly clause,' the solution to college football's ugly problem*, The Daily Advertiser, Feb. 17, 2022, <https://www.theadvertiser.com/story/sports/college/lsu/2022/02/17/brian-kelly-contract-lsu-football-buyout-notre-dame/6816044001/>

⁸⁴ *Id.*

⁸⁵ *Id.*

⁸⁶ *Id.*

⁸⁷ *Id.*

⁸⁸ *Id.*

The problem with this proposal is that the liquidated damages are likely not proportional to the actual damages that a university might face for finding a new coach for the playoffs and may be challenged in a court of law.

VII. Conclusion

To discourage coaches from “jumping” to different universities at critical times of the year, i.e. – when there is a decision being made as to who will participate in bowl games, there should be an absolute “no move” clause which is acknowledged as liquidated damages in the event of the violation of the “no-move” clause. The additional damages would be a recognition that damage would not only be done to players and coaches, but to the university and community as well. This “no-move” period should become effective in the weeks before the names of universities are announced until the conclusion of the bowl games. The coach’s contract should also contain a prohibition against discussions or negotiations with any third-party suitor during the “no move” period. Violation of such a covenant could also include additional damages.

Furthermore, the coach’s contract may contain a clause that any discussion or negotiation with any third-party suitor or violation of the “no move” clause would also constitute a tortious interference with contract on the part of the third-party suitor. Obviously, this is an important discussion that needs to be had with respect to the contract between the university and coach and needs to be done during the period when the contract is being formulated.

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