

FY2027 NDAA: Military Service Academy Athletics and Professional Sports

July 24, 2026

Congress has oversight over the five federal service academies including the three U.S. military service academies—U.S. Naval Academy, U.S. Air Force Academy, and U.S. Military Academy—under the Department of Defense; the U.S. Coast Guard Academy under the Department of Homeland Security; and the U.S. Merchant Marine Academy under the Department of Transportation. (The Department of Defense is “using a secondary Department of War designation,” under [Executive Order 14347](#), dated September 5, 2025.) The service academies function both as commissioning sources for officers and as four-year degree-granting universities. Students enrolled at the academies (called *cadets* and *midshipmen*) attend academic classes, military training, and may also participate in intercollegiate sports and other extra-curricular activities.

The military service academies host several National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) [Division I](#) athletic programs while the U.S. Coast Guard Academy and U.S. Merchant Marine Academy athletic teams primarily compete at the NCAA [Division III](#) level. Per [DOD policy](#), military service academy sports programs are to abide by NCAA rules and requirements, “while maintaining the professional and ethical values of the Services.” Recruited athletes are to comply with both [NCAA eligibility criteria](#) and other rigorous service criteria for service academy matriculation (e.g., [official nomination](#) and [medical entry standards](#)). [Several service academy graduates](#) have launched professional sports careers.

Background and Issues

NCAA Rule Changes

Starting in 2021, the [NCAA began relaxing rules](#) that prohibited student-athletes from earning compensation by monetizing their own name, image, and likeness (NIL). The NCAA also allowed for immediate eligibility for athletes who transfer between universities—a process the NCAA facilitated by creating what is referred to as the “transfer portal.” As [active duty servicemembers](#), cadets and midshipmen are subject to [federal ethics rules](#) that bar them from receiving NIL money. In addition, the

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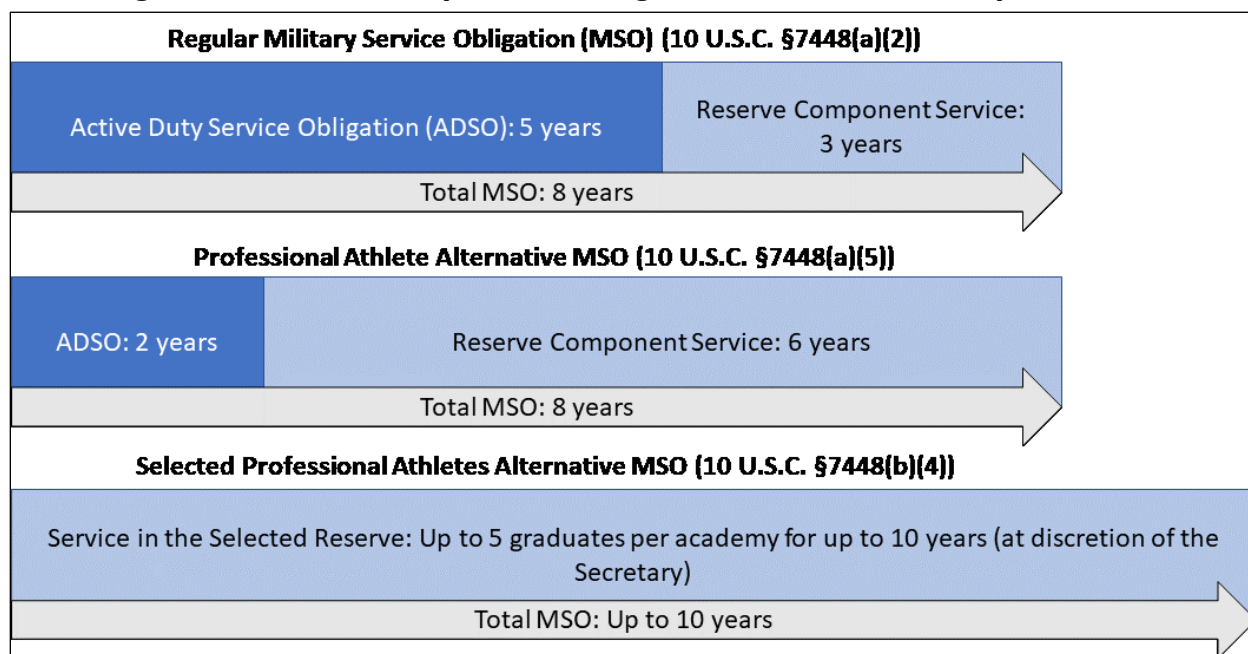
structure of the service academies—a closed-entry system with a [binding service obligation](#) upon starting junior year—limits the potential use of the transfer portal.

Release from Military Service Obligation for Professional Sports

Cadets and midshipmen receive federally-funded tuition, room and board, and [monthly pay](#). As a condition of this funding, upon graduating, they are required to accept an appointment as a commissioned officer and incur a military service obligation (MSO) of a minimum of six years and a maximum of eight years. An MSO includes a minimum amount of active service, referred to as an *active duty service obligation* (ADSO), with the remaining MSO to be served in either an active or reserve status. For most graduates, [current law](#) and [DOD policy](#) require an eight-year MSO with a five-year ADSO immediately following graduation. Those who do not fulfill this obligation may be [required to repay the government for any “unearned portion” of the benefit](#).

[Current law](#) states that a cadet or midshipman “may not obtain employment as a professional athlete until two years after the cadet [or midshipman] graduates from the Academy.” Congress has created statutory exceptions for certain graduates offered employment as professional athletes. After the two-year active service period, [per DOD policy](#), the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Manpower and Reserve Affairs may approve a transfer to the Selected Reserve for “[e]xceptional personnel with unique talents and abilities [...] when there is a strong expectation their professional sports activity will provide the DoD with significant favorable media exposure likely to enhance national recruiting or public affairs.” (See the “professional athlete alternative MSO” in **Figure 1**.)

In the FY2025 NDAA (P.L. 118-159 §557), as amended by the FY2026 NDAA (P.L. 119-60 §556), Congress created an additional exception allowing selected cadets and midshipmen to pursue professional sports employment *immediately* upon graduation. This authority allows the Secretary of a military department to transfer up to five cadets or midshipmen per academy, per academic year to the Selected Reserve for a minimum MSO of up to *ten years*, with no requirement for an ADSO (the “selected professional athlete alternative MSO” in **Figure 1**). The law specifies that while serving in the reserves they would be expected to “participate in efforts to recruit and retain members of the armed forces.”

Figure 1. Current Military Service Obligation for Service Academy Graduates

Source: CRS analysis of chapters 753, 853, and 953 of Title 10, United States Code, [10 U.S.C. §651](#) and [DOD Instruction 1322.22](#), *Military Service Academies*, Incorporating Change I, November 1, 2023.

Notes: For the purposes of this figure, the sections of law cited are for the U.S. Military Academy. Identical provisions apply in chapters 753, 853, and 953 of Title 10, United States Code for graduates of the other two military service academies. The MSO is also commonly referred to as a “Commissioned Service Obligation” in law and policy.

Legislative Proposals

Some observers have [raised questions](#) about how recent changes to NCAA rules might be implemented by the service academies, or how these rules might otherwise impact the [viability of academy athletics programs](#). Some academy [alumni](#), [Members of Congress](#), and [other observers](#) have also had an interest in the impact that service academy athletics programs and representation of academy graduates in professional sports have on service academy admissions, military recruitment, and retention. The House and Senate Armed Services Committees (HASC and SASC) have reported legislation that would provide a review of how NCAA rules impact service academies and would amend service obligations for cadets and midshipmen seeking a career in professional sports following graduation (see [Table 1](#).)

The House-passed version of an FY2027 NDAA would remove the cap on the number of service academy graduates who could be released from an ADSO to pursue professional sports employment under the selected professional athlete alternative MSO. The SASC-reported version would increase the cap to ten graduates per year but allow for a waiver of the cap if the Secretary determines it is “in the national interest.” Both House and SASC proposals would leave in place the option for the two-year ADSO alternative.

Table I. Selected Legislative Proposals

House-Passed (H.R. 8800)	SASC-Reported (S. 4784)
Sec. 529A would require the Secretary of Defense to establish a panel to review the impacts of NCAA rules with respect to compensation of athletes as well as the transfer portal for athletes on the military service academies.	No similar provision
Sec. 524 would eliminate the cap on the number of cadets or midshipmen who may be released from their active duty service requirement to play professional sports immediately upon graduation.	Sec. 529 would increase the cap from five to ten on the number of cadets or midshipmen who may be released from their active duty service requirement to play professional sports immediately upon graduation. Service Secretaries would be able to waive the limit under certain circumstances.

Source: CRS analysis of legislation.

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