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Investigative Essay

Name, Image, and Likeness: The Future of College Sport

Imagine you're a high school senior athlete suddenly given the opportunity to earn millions of dollars as an 18-year-old freshman before you've even played a professional game. Before July 1, 2021, that possibility seemed completely unrealistic. Today, that dream has become a reality and has quite literally changed the entire dynamics of college athletics. For decades, NCAA athletes have generated billions of dollars for colleges and universities through endorsements, advertisements, and merchandise sales. Yet, they have received no compensation beyond their scholarships. That was until Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) came into the picture. Under NIL, "athletes were permitted to profit from their own name, image and likeness (NIL) while maintaining eligibility to compete in NCAA-sponsored sports" (Potter and White 1133). Although NCAA rules prohibit compensation from being used as "pay-for-play", it is likely that this happens under the table in some ways, with four- and five-star athletes being offered millions just to *play* for a college. This major shift in NCAA policy is highly controversial, especially since the NCAA has long opposed athletes earning money outside of school-issued scholarships. Supporters of NIL believe it creates fairness for students and benefits their schools in the long run. However, critics contend that student-athletes still have "student" in their titles, meaning they are not yet professionals and should not be compensated as such until

they are one. This leads me to the following question...how will name, image, and likeness ultimately impact the future of collegiate sports?

Before taking a deep dive into examining the effects of Name, Image, and Likeness, it is important to understand the basics of the policy and why it was introduced. NIL refers to the ability of student-athletes to legally earn income through advertisements, endorsement deals, and the use of their image online. The policy was created to help monetize their personal brand without jeopardizing their eligibility to compete for their schools. Now that it has been in effect for a few years, some have begun to question the integrity of many universities' tactics in approaching the matter, as well as the fairness of the system to all recruits. According to a study by Medcalfe and Ehrlich, athletes—particularly men—with larger Instagram or X followings earned more money than those with fewer (9). In short, they determined that gender and sport are the strongest factors influencing the athletes' pay. Although these factors may be the strongest predictors of athletes' overall NIL income, the policy has quickly become much more than endorsement deals and wealth for the individual alone.

One of the greatest benefits of NIL is that it now allows athletes to profit from the talent they have spent their adolescent years developing. Before the policy, the millions of dollars these young players were generating went only to universities and the NCAA, while those driving the organizations' success—the players—were granted only scholarships. Today, NIL has enabled athletes to earn money not only from scholarships but also from endorsements, social media partnerships, and even autograph signings. With some athletes earning well north of a million dollars annually, they can now support their families and repay those who have invested their money and time in their advancement. This also provides financial security in the event of a tragedy during the four years of college. For example, if an athlete were to sustain a career-

ending injury, his chances of making it to the National Football League (NFL) would be nonexistent – in other words, no payout for him or his family. Beyond improving the lives and well-being of athletes, Name, Image, and Likeness has also had an unexpected impact on universities, specifically on boosters.

Many critics believed that once NIL is active, it would weaken the financial support from boosters. Potter and White conducted a study to test the validity of this conjecture. The results were contrary to what the critics believed; in fact, they were the opposite. Their statistical analysis found that, surprisingly, major donors increased their support after the policy was introduced (1133). This greater financial support not only helped universities attract high-caliber players but also improved training facilities and the hiring of coaching staff. It should be noted, however, that the researchers acknowledged these findings primarily favor the wealthy (Power Four and Power Five schools), whose large alumni bases and high-profile boosters serve as significant financial resources. Thus, the gap between small schools and schools that are consistent contenders in most sports is widening, making it progressively more challenging for small programs to compete for top talent. While NIL has undoubtedly changed university finances, it has also changed how many athletes carry themselves off the field.

Aside from making athletes more financially stable, NIL has also transformed college athletes into something of entrepreneurs and influencers. Rather than solely focusing on athletic performance, athletes now devote time to financial management and name branding that can attract sponsors, but also does something much more valuable; help their future. The bitter truth is that “fewer than 2 percent of NCAA student-athletes go on to be professional athletes” (NFHS 2), leaving some stranded and contemplating what to do next. By making complex business and financial decisions, NIL has opened doors for athletes who cannot or choose not to reach the next

level. Molly Harry, an assistant professor at the University of Florida, conducted a field survey of 200 student-athletes, 21 of whom were from Power Five schools, to assess how NIL has influenced their day-to-day personal and professional lives. Their responses were overwhelmingly positive about the new policy. One participant stated, “It’s been great to feel seen and have your hard work in a sport help in other parts of life. It’s really nice to use NIL on a resume as marketing experience” (Harry para. 7). In the digital world we live in, learning how to manage wealth and portray a presentable and professional image of yourself has become a necessary skill. While NIL may introduce players to careers beyond being professional athletes, it has also changed what recruits prioritize when committing to a program.

Comparing recruiting before and after NIL is night and day. It further illustrates how athletes’ priorities will continue to evolve. Before NIL, most athletes went to the university they wanted to based on familial connections, lifelong loyalty, the team and staff they connected with best, or because the school was closest to home. Nowadays, if you’re a four- or five-star athlete and your dad’s favorite team is not doing too well financially, most players are going to ‘sell out’ to the team that offers them the most money. Ryan Casey’s coverage of Christian McCaffrey’s commitment to Stanford is an example of what is considered unusual today. In this article, Casey emphasizes how impactful Christian’s decision really was. Despite receiving offers from various powerhouse football programs, McCaffrey chose Stanford, not just because he wanted to represent the school his dad played for, but also because he grew up a fan and wanted to attend an academically competitive university (para 2-5). The sad truth is that decisions like McCaffrey’s were relatively common among elite recruits. In the present day, however, many athletes must also weigh lucrative NIL opportunities that could be life-changing financially, not just for them but for their families. Although school culture and academics will always play a

role in recruiting decisions, potential profit now plays a much larger role than it did before the NIL era. For this reason, many believe NIL is a slippery slope and has done more harm than good.

Opponents of NIL argue that it has shifted the athletes' focus and priorities to somewhat narcissistic ideals like personal image and material possessions. With the alluring opportunities NIL presents, it is understandable that many *student*-athletes focus less on education and place more emphasis on financial gain. Instead, their priority should be to position themselves as role models for their university. If they don't, it could, in turn, negatively impact the likelihood of reaching their desired dreams in sport. A prime example of this is Bronny James. In an article written by Hayes Patton, he points to athletes such as James, who received multimillion-dollar NIL deals while only being a senior in high school, with major brands like Nike and Beats by Dre, which generated enormous attention before he even stepped foot onto the court he would play at in college (para. 1). Today, he may still have a contract with the Lakers, but his single-game high was 11 points, and he is spending most of his time in the (lesser) G League. Patton also sheds light on the poor financial habits many athletes have adopted, featuring athletes such as Caleb Williams, who bought a Porsche Taycan (\$100,000+) and leased a penthouse in Los Angeles (para. 6). Patton concludes with a wistful statement that "Student athletes are now essentially professional athletes pursuing money, as opposed to the promise of an education" (para. 9). Although Patton's article is opinion based, rather than scholarly, many of his assertions make logical sense reflecting criticisms commonly expressed among NIL critics.

While recruiting has certainly become more of a money contest, research suggests the policy's overall impact may not be as extreme as some members of the general public view it. Even so, it is undeniable that collegiate sports are more money-driven than they once were. Pitts

and Evans wrote an article using recruiting data from 247 Sports. It features stories told through the eyes of different coaches – along with their stances on the matter. One notable scenario was the dramatic juxtaposition between Head Coach Nick Saban and Jimbo Fisher, who critiqued one another's recruiting methods. Saban told the press that Jimbo “bought every player on their team” through NIL deals, while claiming he “didn’t buy one player” (317). This situation is ironic, considering Jimbo used to work under Saban as his assistant years ago. Despite these highly publicized examples, the researchers conclude that NIL has not completely redistributed talent. Instead, they claim that the universities that have historically been successful will remain successful because of the resources they have established over time. On the other hand, what is unlikely to stay the same is the athletes’ priorities.

In the light of evidence, Name, Image, and Likeness has both strengthened and complicated the world surrounding college athletics. On one hand, athletes now receive fair compensation for the value they generate, gain the ability to securely support their families financially, develop professional non-athletic skills, and enjoy greater freedom over their own identities. However, the critical sports fan has legitimate concerns. NIL has increased recruiting pressures in ways many feel are unethical, widened not only the financial gap between bigger and smaller schools, but also the skill gap, encouraged some athletes to prioritize their image over school loyalty and education, and most controversially, placed ridiculous amounts of money in their bank accounts. This leads to poor decision-making and the creation of bad habits that may take a toll on their lives in the future. So, how will Name, Image, and Likeness ultimately impact the future of collegiate sports? Based on the various sources examined, NIL will undoubtedly continue to reshape college athletics rather than simply improve or harm it. As NIL continues to evolve through policy changes, formulation, and regulation, its long-term impact

will depend heavily on how effectively these challenges are addressed. All in all, I do not feel there is a single correct or incorrect viewpoint regarding NIL. Instead, it should be viewed as an inevitable evolution of sport. Moving forward, the future should be up to not only the NCAA but also the fans and alumni to come together with a single goal: to make collegiate sports better than it was the year before.

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