

What is NIL in college sports? How do athlete deals work?

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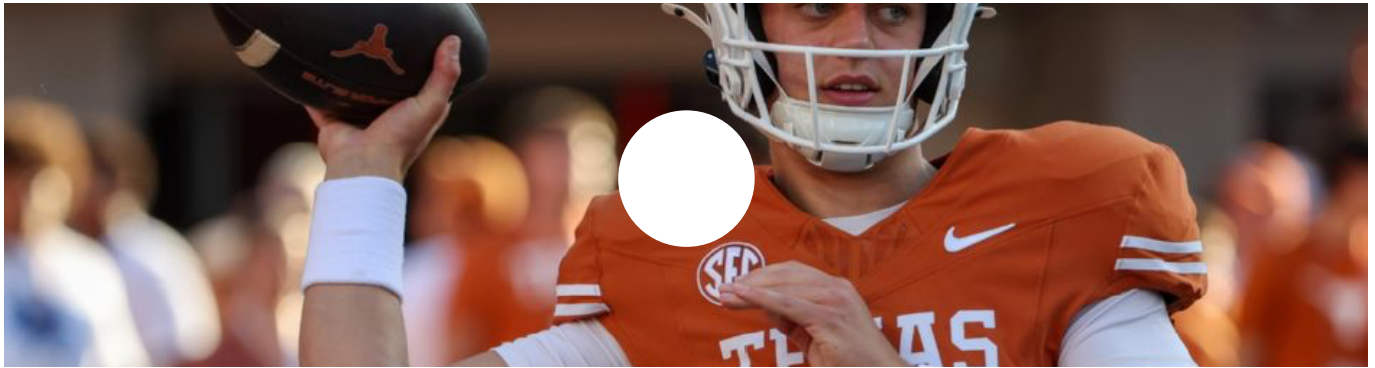
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Check out the key details on how name, image and likeness agreements work in collegiate sports. (1:25)



Sara Coello

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College athletes weren't always allowed to make money off their athletic ability. It wasn't until 2021 that the NCAA changed rules to allow students to profit from their name, image and likeness -- otherwise known as NIL. In 2025, [McNeese](#) men's basketball team manager Amir Khan became the first student manager [to sign an NIL deal](#). The Cowboys would go on to win their first men's NCAA tournament game in an [upset victory](#) over Clemson.

What exactly is NIL?

ADVERTISING

"NIL" stands for "name, image and likeness." It refers to a person's legal right to control how their image is used, including commercially. In college, student-athletes have long been prohibited from making deals to profit from their fame, so they forfeited their NIL rights by signing on with college sports teams. Three years ago, a combination of NCAA rule changes and state laws restored NIL rights to college athletes, and they've been making sponsorship deals ever since.

Who oversees the deals?

A combination of school policies and [state laws](#) dictate what deals athletes can make. In states with no oversight, the NCAA has universities write policies for their own athletes. Some common school requirements are that athletes get business advice or training before making deals, or preventing them from promoting certain products. State laws are primarily focused on preventing NIL deals from being used as recruitment tools. Schools can't pay students directly, but some states have murky laws surrounding just how involved a school's booster club can get.

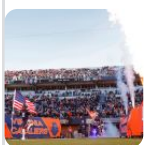
Do athletes get agents or or business advisors?

Yes, every athlete is allowed to hire professionals to help with marketing, legal issues, tax laws and other business dealings. Many schools also offer training and resources to athletes directly, often in the form of early-season classes on NIL law and basic business practices.

Do athletes have to report deals to their school or another authority?

Most colleges have policies that require athletes to report the details of any potential deals with their schools, and some must get school approval before signing. Several schools reserve the right to keep their athletes from advertising certain products, like drugs and alcohol.

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LGBTQIA+ college athletes cashing in on NIL deals

Sara Coello

Why do the rules differ between areas? Will that change?

While several states now have NIL laws or have proposed bills to implement them, the content is far from uniform. Like any state-by-state legislation, local lawmakers have taken different approaches to prioritizing local businesses and incentivizing top athletes to choose universities within their borders.

The NCAA has expressed concern that, without a federal law, enforcing its own NIL rules could violate antitrust rules -- so while the organization has hoped that Congress will pass a federal standard, there's no national set of rules.

What kinds of deals are athletes making?

From free sneakers and workout gear to high-end clothing items and dorm essentials, perks for college athletes signing NIL deals have skyrocketed since student-athletes won the right to cash in on the publicity they bring to their schools.

The biggest stars, guided by business mentors and school-provided financial advice, have cashed in. As of Aug. 29, On3 ranked [Colorado](#) quarterback [Shedeur Sanders](#) as the star of the current NIL market with a whopping \$4.7 million valuation, including a sequel to his father's Nike deal. The site estimates that each of the 20 players at the top of its list are worth a minimum of \$1 million. And by the same calculation, even the 100th-ranked athlete was worth \$583,000.

For the athletes who combine strong social media presence, business savvy and prowess on the field, big brands are eager to shell out. Top athletes have signed deals with Nike, Adidas and Under Armour, while non-athletic brands such as T-Mobile, Sam's Club and Amazon tap students across the country.

Naturally, the vast majority of college athletes don't meet that threshold -- which hasn't stopped companies from local mom & pop shops to international brands from partnering with up-and-coming students in every sport and a variety of schools.

Some particularly quirky deals have enamored both athletes and businesses beyond their usual audience.

Dienurst Collins, an offensive lineman at [Lake Erie College](#), scored both a deal and a second round of internet fame when he signed a deal with Popeyes -- where he [went viral at 9 years old](#) for side-eyeing a stranger who recorded him at the restaurant then posted the video.

[Decoldest Crawford](#) capitalized on his name to earn some extra money while injured. The [Louisiana Tech](#) wide receiver partnered with a family-owned air conditioning business to make a commercial based around the pun.

Running back [Bijan Robinson](#) took a similar approach to name-based leverage while playing for [Texas](#). He began selling Dijon mustard, marketing it as Bijan Mustardson and selling it in Texas. When Robinson joined the [Atlanta Falcons](#) he brought the branding with him, now touting it as the official Dijon mustard of the team.

Brands don't discriminate based on given names. [Ga'Quincy "Kool-Aid" McKinstry](#) snapped up a deal with his nickname's brand soon after the ruling that allowed NIL deals.

Other companies' strategies for NIL have had them sponsoring several athletes at a time.

Reese's Peanut Butter Cups didn't limit itself to one athlete, team, or even school in picking its NIL deals. Instead, the candy brand partnered with a dozen students from Texas to Delaware who seemingly share just two traits: playing football and having the last name "Reese." [Angel Reese](#) didn't appear in their original list but has since become an ambassador for the brand in her own right.

Many deals rely less on an athlete's individual story than their ability to play NIL for laughs -- such as one with Colorado lineman [Tommy Brown](#), who stripped down to model Shiesty underwear in a series of tongue-in-cheek poses that emphasized his farmer's tan. [Arkansas](#) wide receiver [Trey Knox](#) brought his dog, Blue, into a deal with him. PetSmart sponsored both of them, in a move that brought both a wave of online engagement.

Gymnast Sam Phillips, the first male athlete at Nebraska to come out as gay, has worked with plenty of local businesses but told ESPN he's been particularly excited to partner with businesses that celebrate Black and LGBTQIA+ customers. Before moving to Illinois, he modeled everything from underwear to athletic tape, the latter of which he did for Our Colour, which makes tape to match darker skin tones than many brands offer.

"It's definitely more like [small and minority-owned businesses] are taking care of me," Phillips said. "It's a really face-to-face, very personal relationship."