

Meet the Industry Exploding Around Name, Image, & Likeness

The NCAA is set to vote on new name, image, and likeness (NIL) policies in January 2021, but forward-thinking universities and entrepreneurs are already way ahead of the game. For those less familiar with NIL, the policy change will open the door for collegiate athletes to take ownership of their personal brands and get paid for sponsorships, autographs, endorsements, event appearances and more, as long as there is no money passing directly between school and athlete, nor personal use of “institution markings and facilities” by the players. Of course, that’s a simplistic description, but the bottom line is that there is *a lot* of money to be made by student-athletes and no shortage of resources to help them earn it.

Content Production

You have to be a big deal to make a big deal, and the size of the contracts will depend on the student athlete’s personal fanbase. Schools can help players maximize their following by providing them with exceptional digital content, such as behind-the-scenes footage, hype reels, highlight videos, and so on. Athletics programs have traditionally done this by maintaining a team of in-house media specialists, with some of these photographers and videographers being team-specific while most float between sports depending on the season.

NIL is already changing this model. Some schools have decided to get ahead of the boom in content needs by bringing in independent creative agencies and teams to boost their production capacities. The emerging first-pick is [J1S Studios](#), an independent creative agency based out of Dallas, Texas. So far, they have partnered with Oklahoma, the University of Southern California, and Georgia Tech, and their work has set a new standard for team branding in college football. Most recently, J1S helped to launch Georgia Tech’s [For the 404](#) campaign, a social media offensive built around National Signing Day that featured a hype video for the team and animated portraits of each GT signee, and augmented reality images that fans could engage with (see this [example](#)). This #4the404 campaign blew last year’s content out of the water, with a [60% increase](#) in impressions from Signing Day 2019 and some significant retweets by top 2022 prospects. Jackets general manager Patrick Suddes acknowledged the impact on the recruiting process, saying this “puts us on the cutting edge of marketing to recruits by showing the nation’s top student-athletes everything that Georgia Tech has to [offer](#).”

Though the #4the404 campaign is a testament to their creativity, J1S’ partnership with USC is a more accurate model for J1S’ growing role in the NIL industry. In summer 2020, the innovative studio teamed up with the SoCal university to introduce BLVD Studios: an NIL-focused creative studio within the football program. So far, they have gone above and beyond in capturing the Trojans’ journey to the 2020 PAC-12 Championship, along with cinematic shots of palm trees and red carpets to make all of us wannabe-Californians a little (OK, very) jealous. This first-of-its-kind creative lab will also educate students on branding strategy, financial literacy, and data & reporting.

Now a comprehensive NIL solution, J1S's main concern heading into 2021 will probably be how to keep up with demand for their work. Athletics programs and student-athletes, however, have more to think about. For one, BLVD Studios is currently only available to USC Football, but other sports will no doubt demand the same quality of content production and resources. In particular, the athletics programs across the country should be developing a plan for serving female athletes who would have a legitimate Title IX case if they are denied the same level of support as the football team.

Individual student-athletes need to consider how they will build their personal brand and execute sponsorships without the help of school staff. The highest-grossing endorsement deals will require specialized content. It is unlikely that school-sanctioned creatives will be allowed to help individual players execute their personal content needs without creating a compliance issue. There is also the fact that student-athletes with the strongest brands will be those with more diverse content than gametime photos. Who is going to photograph or film them on the weekends? At home? With their friends? If I were a D1 athlete right now, I would be actively befriending students in the art school and creating a personal network of creatives. The potential for students-helping-students is a really exciting element of the content production space.

Content Management

Once the top tier photos and videos have been curated by the creative staff, the next step is to distribute content to the student-athletes and empower them to leverage it across their various channels.

One name you are going to hear over and over again is [Opendorse](#). Opendorse is a content sharing platform that helps to coordinate campaigns between schools & athletes by enabling the institution to deliver "tap-to-publish" posts right to their players' smartphones. The idea is to take the scheduling, copywriting, and editing off of the athlete's plate and let the program's media team do the busy work. All the player has to do is approve the post. Founded in 2012 by two former college football players, Opendorse is already being used by 30,000 athletes with a combined audience of 1.5B; and has established partnerships with the likes of Clemson, Mizzou, BYU, TCU, Augustana (their 1st D2 partner), IU, Nebraska, and more.

Their most notable [partnership](#) is not with a university, but with sports-marketing giant Overtime. [Overtime](#) describes itself as a "publisher and an influencer" with over 1.5BILLION views monthly and 40+ M followers across its 7 platforms. The two leading companies will offer their partner-schools an exclusive package that includes content input from Overtime, access to Opendorse technology, and the opportunity for exposure on Overtime's platforms - a huge publicity win for students trying to grow their following.

Opendorse's main competition is [INFLCR](#), a similar cloud-based technology company offering schools an easy way to share content directly with student-athletes. They already have 100+ collegiate partners including Oregon, USC, UCLA, Duke, and more. Their latest win is teaming up with University of Miami Football to create Momentum - an NIL program that includes the

INFLCR product suite, financial literacy courses, strategy support, and analytical tools for student-athletes. Is it just a coincidence that this program shares a name with Miami's 2015 fundraising campaign ([Momentum 2](#)) that grossed over \$1.6B? Sure. More importantly, is the Momentum model going to set the gold standard for INFLCR's involvement with its clients? Absolutely.

INFLCR has two distinct advantages. First, they were acquired by Teamworks in 2019, which is a program-management platform used by over 2000 Division 1 sports teams. It would be hard to overstate the significance of this partnership, considering the INFLCR technology will be fully integrated with the Teamworks app in 2021, creating a valuable and accessible toolkit for the pre-existing userbase. Second, Teamworks and INFLCR have partnered with [Cameo](#) to create an exclusive offer for their clientele. When the policies are approved and players can start earning money, they will be able to use the popular Cameo platform to sell personalized videos to fans, just as professional athletes and celebrities are doing now. For context, a video from Drew Brees will set you back \$550, while Snoop Dogg will cost you \$1,200.

These two platforms are focused on distributing content to existing social media apps - they are the "how" of content management, while other companies have edged into the content management space by introducing a new "where."

Take [Athletes.tv](#). Comparable to a sports-focused YouTube, ATV allows athletes and sports influencers to create channels for video and podcasts. There are already tons of interesting channels from all types of creators, ranging from high school athletes using it as an additional place to post Hudl tape to professional athletes posting vlogs. There are no exclusivity requirements, so creators can take a video that they post on their socials and reshare it to Athletes.tv. Why bother adding it to this young platform? Well, continuing with the YouTube comparison, creators have to earn 4000+ subscribers and 1000+ watch hours before their YT channel can be monetized. Athletes.tv is streamlining the earning process and using creative ad strategies to reward good content in real time. Student-athletes will be able to earn revenue from ads without competing for certain benchmarks.

Student-Athlete Education

Most of the companies identified so far bleed into student-athlete education; INFLCR and Opendorse in particular offer extensive resources to train young players in their technology, as well as brand strategy, financial literacy, etc. However, high-level connections and an emphasis on compliance and legal guidelines are setting [Altius Sports](#) apart in this field. Acutely aware of how *complicated* this NIL stuff is going to get, Altius has developed resources for coaches and athletics administrators in addition to student-athletes. They offer expert consulting in compliance, fundraising solutions to help manage boosters' involvement, and a team of experienced advisors including college football phenom Urban Meyer. So far they have partnered with LSU and Texas, whose student-athletes will gain access to Altius' network of top agents, mentors, and externship opportunities with Fortune 500 companies.

Let's talk about the Division 1 football player's schedule *before* NIL: 6 AM lift session, 2-4 classes, mandatory tutoring, team meeting, position group meeting, 2-3 hour practice, evening tutoring or life-skills mentoring, homework - not to mention meals and the occasional much-needed nap. To make it even more complicated, a student-athlete's brand value will peak when they have the least amount of time, ie post-season tournaments and championship games which tend to overlap with finals. I have a hard time seeing how and where any additional mentorship is going to go if programs are going to maintain the same level of academic integrity. I think the best solution would be for athletics programs to partner with their respective schools of business and/or communication to create general education classes available to all students so that student-athletes could include their NIL training in their academic schedule and meet core requirements along the way. Legal Compliance for NIL 101, or Intro to Financial Literacy.

One company has a different solution: crowdfunding. [Student Player](#) has introduced a GoFundMe-like model to maximize player earnings while reducing the time invested to under 5 minutes per post. Individual donors and companies can donate to a position on a particular school's sports team. For example, I could send \$10 to the goalkeeper on some university's women's soccer team, and all she has to do is post the occasional video thanking StudentPlayer.com and a few of the major sponsors/donors. No fancy production teams, just a selfie video will do. Then the athlete collects her funds.

Student Player is explicitly and aggressively marketing itself as a way for college sports fans to get involved in the recruiting game. In their [own words](#):

Who wins? Simple, the team with the best players! How do you get them? SHOW THEM THE MONEY by contributing via Student Player.

Top recruits will pick the schools with the most sponsorship dollars...

Power comes from numbers, BIG NUMBERS, so spread the word. If everyone does their part your team will dominate. If you don't step up, and your rivals do, you will get destroyed.

TO CRUSH OR BE CRUSHED, THAT IS THE QUESTION!

Crush or be crushed, huh? Well some schools are already crushing it. Student Player has already started collecting donations and is holding them in anticipation of the 2021 rules changes, when the accrued funds will be distributed to student-athletes. They have raised **\$103,548**: 100K from one single company, [tocowarranty.com](#), who donated [10K to 10 schools' QB positions](#). By their current contribution totals, \$100,308 has gone to football, with men's basketball pulling in only \$865. That's a very distant second. Let's just pretend for fun that SP's early contributions reflect the ratio of earnings post-NIL: that's 115+ times more profitable to be a football player.

So no agent needed, just a rich fan base. And while some tips on financial literacy would still be helpful, this cuts out the need for fancy digital platforms and time-intensive content creation.

The issue is accountability and transparency. Anonymous donating (as shown on their top contributor lists) is going to make it pretty hard to hold boosters (and potentially schools) accountable for their contributions to a player's fund. And how is thanking an anonymous donor compliant with being paid for the use of your name, image, or likeness? There may be a few hurdles left for Student Player to overcome, but it has the potential to be one of the most influential platforms.

Accountability & Transparency

Understanding the rules is one thing, but having the tools to comply is an entirely separate challenge. Just as innovation in content management has created a new product suite, so has accountability and transparency inspired some extremely creative solutions for keeping the NIL industry transparent. Two companies stand out in this space: [NOCAP Sports](#) and [Spry Payments](#).

NOCAP Sports is seeking to be the premier platform for facilitating brand partnerships and sponsorships with student-athletes using a "matching system" driven by artificial intelligence and machine learning. NOCAP will compliment their matching program with automated reporting to help both institutions and governing bodies monitor partnerships and enforce compliance. Not only will these features help regulate the process, but they have the potential to help lowkey players with smaller followings find sponsors easily. To give you an idea of how much money is expected to flow through this industry, NOCAP claims that conservative models predict \$30M annual recurring revenue within 3 years.

Spry Payments, the smaller of these two startups, offers a platform to facilitate open payments and help young brand ambassadors with their 1099s. More importantly, they are the first platform I have seen even mention fair-market value. Spry offers a technical solution to determining the reasonable price of an endorsement, which will be essential to maintaining fairness and transparency. So far, Spry has partnered with Wake Forest University and Oral Roberts University.

Looking Ahead

So there you have the tip of the iceberg. The pending NIL policies are going to revolutionize influencer marketing, but more immediately they are going to change the value of a college offer. In football, the coach's promise is no longer an extended career and college glory days preceding a shot at the NFL. It's about offering student-athletes life changing resources that will set them apart dramatically in the increasingly competitive marketing industry. Fewer than 2% of college athletes go pro, but the NIL industry is setting up student-athletes to go first-round in the job hunt. Now, it's up to the institutions to determine what partnerships to pursue and how best to support their communities.