

How Do Coaches Navigate NIL?

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EXS 455: Philosophy, Principles, and the Administration of Sport

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April 5, 2024

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As NIL has grown and advanced, coaches have faced trials and difficulties in having the responsibility of navigating their athlete's receiving money for their name, image, and likeness. Coaches have been placed in a difficult position, with little authority and a lot of room to be suspended or even lose their jobs. Coaches and conferences only have so much they can do, with very little room to work. As the rules change, so does their freedom of work. A coach's job is to develop people, but if athletes come in for money and not be developed, challenges arise, and programs suffer. This is what we face in collegiate sport today.

As of January 2024, 31 states with the additional District of Columbia have laws in place regarding NIL deals. The NCAA however, despite its lost authority and respect from the conferences and athletes alike, has rules themselves over state law. In June 2023, the NCAA sent out a letter to every involved institution that "member schools must abide by the association's name, image, and likeness rules regardless of conflicts with state laws," (Walsh, 2023). The NCAA has made it clear that institutions must adhere to their legislation, even if state law permits certain actions. This puts the responsibility of conferences, institutions, and coaches to know and check state law and NCAA legislation for every athlete engaging in NIL. Having all the regular responsibilities on top of this, it can be difficult to remember what they can and cannot do. In result, coaches are facing suspensions, programs are facing suspensions, and probations, and fines. Coaches are put into a position where they must know these things but must be very limited in what they can do or help with.

Florida State Offensive Coordinator Alex Atkins was involved in a Level II infraction late last year. This comes from action taken two years ago, in April 2022 where "the coach facilitated contact between the player and a booster," whom the booster had "encouraged the player to

enroll at Florida State and offered him an NIL opportunity with a collective worth about \$15,000 per month,” (Fox35, 2024). Coaches and programs are responsible for making sure athletes fall in line with NCAA policy and/or state legislation, but cannot connect athlete to booster, apparently. How can we burden coaches with such responsibility but also say they must be completely hands off? Florida State faces a two-year probation, tied with a reduction on official visits, Atkins receiving a three-game suspension, and five lost football scholarships over the next two seasons in total. Florida State as an institution also received a fine of \$5,000. The punishments are distributed hot and heavy by the NCAA, who six months later would change the legislation in October 2022 so coaches “CAN assist an NIL entity with fundraising through appearances or by providing autographed memorabilia,” (Brice, 2022). So now coaches can make an appearance, yet in 2023 Florida State is penalized? Not to mention, would be denied the dismissal of a lawsuit with the ACC over such terms earlier this week, on April 4th, 2024.

What are the coaches’ takes on NIL? We seem to only care about hearing from the athletes and fans, but what about the coaches on the brute end of these affairs? Nick Saban, a future Hall of Fame Head Football Coach, who retired following the 2023 season at Alabama joined the Capitol Hill roundtable with Senator Ted Cruz in discussing the NIL matter. Compared to the 50 years that he had coached; football and collegiate sports are not the same. Not even similar, but rather non-existent. His philosophy was that collegiate sport “was always about developing players, it was always about helping people be more successful in life.” However, their “why” was questioned by his own wife, Terry at a recruiting breakfast, saying “All they care about is how much you’re going to pay them, they don’t care about how much you’re going to develop them, which is what we’ve always done, so why are we doing this?” (Sam, 2024). When the purpose of your job is questioned by your own wife, it is time to step back and take a

good look at the big picture. It is time to reevaluate why you are still doing what you are doing. Saban suggested on the floor that “If we had some sort of revenue sharing proposition that did not make student-athletes employees... I think that may be the long-term solution,” (Sam, 2024). Many can say Nick Saban, being 72 is out of the game. No one can deny that he is a successful and highly accredited coach with knowledge and wisdom beyond many of us. I would argue Saban has a great idea of what is going on despite his age. The game never out-ran him.

I will agree, the NIL has gone too far. Stimulations have been made and changed that are severely unclear as the NCAA has lost ground and respect from its members. Coaches have been put in a challenging situation, where their role is unclear. They may help with appearances and fundraising, yet coaches who did so before the rule change face sanctions. A state may allow certain methods of NIL deals while the NCAA prohibits them, and coaches are to regulate such methods yet should not be involved. Programs cannot promote NIL or pay athletes, yet schools are making them employees. Perhaps the NIL needs a reset, where a completely new body of legislation is formed and regulated by the NCAA, after they reset too.

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