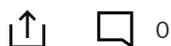


High school sports will feel the impact of NIL changes. For some, that's cause for concern.

By Roman Stubbs

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Verron Haynes spent the past few weeks visiting some of the country's top college football programs with his son, four-star running back Justice Haynes, and the pitches they heard from recruiters had a new twist.

With imminent laws allowing college players to make money off their name, image and likeness, most schools are in an arms race, hiring third-party companies to act as consultants in content creation, education and compliance — and touting just what they might do for recruits such as Haynes.

“They all have a spin on the way they want to handle it,” said Verron Haynes, whose son holds scholarship offers from Georgia, Alabama and Florida, among others. “We’re still waiting to see all of the nuances of it. But it is happening. I do know that.”

With potential federal legislation up in the air, six states have NIL laws going into effect July 1. In an effort to help stop that patchwork system, the NCAA governing body is expected to vote on its own national framework this month.

This potentially seismic shift at the college level has already affected the world of recruiting, but it is also sowing confusion and stoking concern among stakeholders at the high school level, with some administrators, coaches and parents worried about the issues the movement could create in youth sports in the future if certain regulations are not put in place.

Some believe elite youth athletes will — and should — have the chance to make money off their NIL in the future. I say that could create more opportunities for adults to exploit those athletes and create a high school landscape in which there is more pressure on kids to market themselves and less emphasis on traditional team-driven values.

“They’re kids. They’re not professional athletes yet,” said Haynes, who added that he has already had to turn away brands that want his son to be an endorser on social media. “Those are the conversations I’m having with Justice and with the schools. How are we going to protect them? ... How are we going to make it about the purity of the game?”

Karissa Niehoff, the executive director of the National Federation of State High School Associations, the organization that writes the rules of competition for most high school sports across the country, said she is trying to protect amateurism rules that each state association has in place for athletes. In an address to the organization this year, Niehoff wrote, “High school student-athletes should not be considered the same as college student-athletes, who have opportunity for scholarships, different eligibility requirements, and different access to resources, training, compensation and exposure.”

In an interview this month, Niehoff said that while few high school athletes are likely to be able to profit from NIL, the adoption of such a system by states or the NCAA would create an unfair balance for the majority of high school athletes who won’t have the ability to benefit. She added that it would also threaten a core tenet of high school sports: the concept of the team.

“What we’re trying to protect is the role of the student-athlete with that high school jersey on and everything that that jersey means,” she said. “Which is that they are part of a team of equals, they are part of a school where students are embraced for being who they are, they are part of a growing and learning experience. They are not part of an athletic endeavor that is about sponsorships and payments or anything like that.”

Prospective high school athletes cannot accept endorsement deals if they want to maintain their collegiate eligibility under current rules, but the shift at the NCAA level could allow players to benefit through NIL deals before they step foot on campus. While state laws have been designed to stop boosters from influencing recruits through inducements, the NCAA's proposed NIL framework reportedly supports recruits in entering NIL agreements as long as those deals are disclosed to colleges before they sign with the school.

It's not yet clear what the NCAA legislation, if passed, would mean for high school amateurism and eligibility rule on a national or local basis.

"We are very concerned state laws might change that would undermine those state association bylaws completely there would not be controls over where kids go, how they get paid," Niehoff said. "There's going to be tremendous disruption. ... Nobody has a clear sense of what that means or what that looks like."

The reality is that few high school athletes have the prowess to earn money before they graduate, said Jim Cavale, the founder of INFLCR, an Alabama company that has partnered with more than 100 college athletic departments to handle NIL content for college athletes. But there are already several high school athletes with massive social media followings who could earn thousands of dollars to promote products, particularly in youth basketball; that includes Mikey Williams, a 2023 North Carolina prospect who has more than 3 million followers on Instagram.

"There's going to be kids that are really good at this," Cavale said. "... They're going to create their own merchandise brand and sell it; they're going to partner up with companies and sell their products; they're going to do all of this stuff earlier and earlier. Stuff we see pro athletes do, it's going to come down into college and high school."

Many high school coaches and parents wonder what kind of ripple effects that kind of system would have on the majority of high school athletes who will never make a dime off their NIL. Most teenagers already focus much of their time and energy on social media, said Scott Zanni, a longtime volleyball coach at Magruder High in Montgomery County. But the effort for athletes to brand themselves might intensify with the lure of NIL dollars to be earned in high school or college.

"High school coaches don't want to see things on social media — college coaches don't, either — that sort of detract from the larger team or are negative in any way. So there's this balance of, the more you call attention to yourself online, are you doing it in a way that is positive?" Zanni said. "The kids, I don't feel like they get free rein on this, but they do have the ability to promote themselves hopefully in a positive way. And I think that's a good thing. And I think the chance for them to capitalize on it is only a good thing as well."

Beyond the potential for players' self-promotion to cause conflict within high school teams, there is a concern that the muddled nature of the NIL changes could lead to athletes inadvertently running afoul of eligibility rules.

“It’s going to be difficult,” said Antoine Sabb, the father of five-star football prospect Keon Sabb, “because the average high school coach is either a teacher or some kind of worker that won’t be equipped to deal with it, the knowledge of what’s going on, or to point a kid in the right direction. Or what about a kid who is coming from a home without information?”

Some youth programs have embraced the shifting landscape by incorporating education on NIL into their routine. Moka Basketball, a top grass-roots program, became the first organization with high school players to partner with Opendorse Ready, a brand-building program run by the technology company that is also building NIL platforms for numerous college athletic departments, including those at Indiana, Nebraska and Clemson.

“I think it’s inevitable that it’s going to pass at the collegiate level,” founder Matt Suther said, “so getting our young men prepared to maximize that when it goes through is important.”

Niehoff is determined to continue fighting against the encroachment of any NIL influence in high school sports, although the NFHS has little control over athletes when it comes to AAU and traveling leagues.

“The horse is out of the barn. Already, our high school student-athletes are being approached to get payments for their name, image and likeness,” Niehoff said. “We’re just really trying to hold the line on whether the high school jersey is a part of that and that connection to the school is part of that.”

Ultimately, for some high school athletes — including those preparing for college this summer — NIL changes represent relief. Ceyair Wright found his calling as an actor well before he became one of the country’s top high school football players, and even after he scored the breakthrough role of his young career in 2019, as the son of LeBron James in this summer’s “Space Jam: A New Legacy,” there were times when Wright wondered how he was going to make football and acting work in college.

“That’s been a thing I’ve thought about, how I would handle that, considering a lot of people are forced to make a decision if they’re passionate about something else, whether they want to be able to play football or do that other thing,” he said.

Wright’s hometown school, Southern California, was willing to let him chase both of his passions. By the time he committed to the Trojans in December, the program had already positioned itself to accommodate Wright’s talent by creating an in-house NIL arm to help leverage his personal brand as both an actor and a college football player. He will enroll in August.

“[With] the name, image and likeness stuff coming out, that’s just a big reliever, just so I don’t even have to worry about any type of compliance or anybody saying that I’m breaking any rules. It was a big weight off my shoulders,” Wright said. “My name and image shouldn’t be owned by somebody else.”

