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Compensation for College Athletes: The American Saga of Commercialization in Intercollegiate Sports

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Abstract

Between 2021 and 2025, national media gave attention to federal court cases and legislation that established new policies for increasing the compensation of college athletes. Foremost was “NIL,” acronym for the “Name-Image-Likeness” payment guidelines. Although NIL was hailed as a “whole new ball game” for students as paid athletes, our research tempers news coverage by drawing from historical findings about trends and traditions in college sports practices and policies. Compensation and commercialization in American intercollegiate athletics—and issues of the rights of college students and the governance of college sports—have been central to intercollegiate athletics from their founding to the present. An enduring legacy is an “American Dilemma” in the balancing of academic and business principles in the education of collegiate student athletes and conduct of varsity sports programs.

Keywords: Intercollegiate athletics; college sports; commercialization and colleges; institutional branding; National Collegiate Athletic Association; Congress; courts and colleges; academics and athletics; student athletes

Between 2021 and 2025, national media gave attention to federal court cases and legislation that established new policies for increasing the compensation of college athletes. Foremost was “NIL,” acronym for the “Name-Image-Likeness” payment guidelines.¹ Although NIL was hailed as a “whole new ball game” for students as paid athletes, our research tempers the news coverage by drawing from historical findings about trends and traditions in college sports. Compensation and commercialization in American intercollegiate athletics—and issues involving the rights of college students and the governance of college sports—have been central to intercollegiate athletics from their founding.²

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Along with historical continuity, a major change has been the increased scope and coordination of commercialization and compensation in intercollegiate sports at the campus, conference, and national levels. In 1925 a profile of American college sports programs indicated that many modern components of commercialism in programs and compensation for student athletes were already in place—but the two were seldom coordinated.³ An irony of the modern refinements is that reforms often legitimized excessive practices—such as dubious payments to students who were athletes along with increased commercialization of college sports.

Historical Context: Looking Backward from 2025 to 1925

A century ago, the “college athlete” was a prominent American hero. Wearing a letter sweater representing his college team, he was a popular figure celebrated as “All American.” “Character” was the defining value—not academics or scholarship. The college athlete personified a distinctively American ideal of good sportsmanship. A college player who won on the field was expected to play fair and, above all, to be an amateur.

Alongside this branding was the secondary casting of the college athlete as a source of contempt. The “dumb jock,” “mucker,” or “tramp athlete” alluded to an underside of intercollegiate athletics. To be paid and not be an amateur was a negative. From around 1890 the recruited, subsidized athlete often represented a snapshot of immigration and upward mobility, with a succession of Irish, Italians, Slavs, Native Americans, and Blacks. Jim Thorpe exemplified the Native American as All-American. The sad sequel was that after winning an Olympic championship in the decathlon, he was stripped of his gold medal for allegedly having received prohibited compensation as a minor league baseball player. Among the contrasts between 1925 and 2025 were race and gender. In the early twentieth century popular depictions of players on varsity sports rosters and intercollegiate teams were almost always white males.

Along with picture postcards glorifying student athletes, American intercollegiate sports made a leap in marketing in 1915 when the University of Pittsburgh affixed numerals to its football players jerseys. This was the origin of the American expression, “You can’t tell the players without a program.” College football programs flourished as a source of revenue and commercial art, combining full color covers followed by photographs with rosters. Paid advertisements by local businesses added to the commercialism.

College sports aligned with the “Graphics Revolution” in newspapers as publicity moved to the front page with headlines on game day and, on Sunday, front-page headlines with coverage of the games. Rivalries, such as Yale versus Princeton, gained prominent newspaper coverage for days prior to the game.⁴ The University of Chicago invested in billboards with its home football schedule and information about how to purchase tickets.⁵

College football program sales on game day soared by 1925 as colleges built new stadiums with large seating capacities. Although a game in 1880 might have been popular, it often was limited to seating for about 10,000. Construction of

Harvard's Soldiers' Field and, a few years later, the Yale Bowl, meant top college teams could accommodate more than 40,000 spectators. The East Coast college teams had no monopoly on these expansions. The University of Chicago built a medieval revival stadium on its campus that seated about 35,000.⁶ Across town, Soldier Field's often filled more than 100,000 seats for college games—especially as the home field for the nearby Notre Dame team. A high point was in 1927 when more than 120,000 football fans watched Notre Dame play the University of Southern California. State universities also became the home of new, large football arenas. Civic and state pride with a public focus on patriotically honoring World War I veterans led to construction of numerous "Memorial Stadiums."⁷

Print media was joined by radio broadcasts of college football.⁸ However, in the 1920s distribution limits, turf wars, boundaries, and limits in technology kept most print and broadcast media coverage local or regional. Also, time-zone differences tended to segment audiences and advertising markets. Yet there was a persistent press toward standards and standardization. College sports provided a good example of enterprising advertising agencies, not government regulation, leading to toward national uniformity. The Don Spencer Advertising Agency in New York City gained a nationwide clientele of schools and colleges, resulting in covers of game day football programs often emphasizing college football as a source of patriotic American values.⁹

One important exception to college sports' expanding broadcast technology was television in the 1950s. Many athletic directors opposed televised games, fearing that telecasts would hurt live attendance (and revenue) at nearby college games. This became a source of contentious debate within the ranks of athletic directors. Constraints on individual institutions' broadcasts eventually prevailed and remained in place into the 1980s, long after television broadcast technology had become affordable and national in scope.¹⁰

Promotion of college sports led to both endorsement and opposition within the academic community. The Dean of the University of Chicago applauded college sports as useful institutional advertisements.¹¹ Elsewhere, academic officials disagreed with the drift into commercialism. In 1925 the Dean of Brown University noted, "In recent years intercollegiate athletics has been exalted to a place in the general university policy—it has become a *method of advertising*. Winning teams pay, we are told; they attract students, and with more students come better athletes, and so the fame and welfare of alma mater are assured." The editors of *The Brown Alumni Monthly* agreed and argued strongly against commercialization, noting that "Intercollegiate games are advertised on every blank wall and on every streetcar." Opposition to commercialism continued with concern by alumni editors and faculty that "an admission fee is charged at the gate *and* at the grandstand." The editors concluded, "College athletics is becoming too much of a business!"¹² This minority dissent, however, was drowned out by a chorus of cheers for college sports commercialism by alumni, trustees, donors, business, and even by many college presidents.¹³

Commercialism, until after World War II, was uncoordinated and unregulated. Photographs of spectators from 1925, or even 1955, pictured few fans wearing caps with a college emblem. Pennant sales were brisk, but unregulated. Most college arenas had relatively little in the way of product advertisements. Lack of

attention to copyrights and licensing on logos meant that a college sports program might gain publicity that led to increased ticket sales and attendance, but in contrast to 2025, it forfeited any potential revenue from product licensing. Other commercial media, such as Hollywood movies, juvenile pulp fiction, and sheet music frequently used college settings, which led to brisk media sales—yet were scant sources of revenues for the colleges themselves.

One change was sports' role in state pride in the form of "the booster college." When the University of Minnesota's football team was named national champion in 1934, it prompted the university president and the governor to declare a holiday—a victory for the entire state of Minnesota, featuring a parade in which the governor and president led the automobile cavalcade. In Louisiana, Governor Huey Long sponsored public celebrations of Louisiana State University football. He negotiated reduced train fares for fans to go from New Orleans to a game against Vanderbilt in Nashville. Governor Long served as drum major and led the LSU team on to the field and in parades.

The Rose Bowl and other postseason games had no formal connection with the NCAA, which was formed in 1906. The Big Ten Conference was exceptional in that it was highly organized—but most conferences were loose confederations of teams that did not necessarily play against each other every year. Not until after World War II did the Tournament of Roses committee organize a contractual agreement that the opponents in the New Year's Day Rose Bowl game would be the regular-season winners of the Pacific Coast Conference and the Big Ten Conference. The Ivy League is usually cited in the annals of sport history as "historic." In fact, Harvard, Yale, and Princeton resisted any formal organization and did not agree to join in founding an Ivy Group of Presidents until 1954.

Marketing Milestone: College Products and College Players

Although colleges by 1950 did not do much marketing, some initiatives set precedents. In 1949, Charlie Justice, star halfback for the University of North Carolina, and Doak Walker, halfback and Heisman Trophy winner at Southern Methodist University, were All-Americans who became central figures as college players who marketed their own likeness on T-shirts. The president of Quality Textile Corporation in Greenville, South Carolina, approached the two college stars who had become friends. The agreement was to wait until both had concluded their senior seasons to avoid conflict with amateur standards set by the NCAA. According to Stephen Fletcher's memoir, "The white T-shirts came in three designs—running, passing, and kicking. Those featuring Charlie Justice had Carolina blue lettering. Doak Walker's T-shirts had red lettering, representing SMU's helmet color. After the New Year's Day bowl games, the two embarked on autograph signings and sales promotions at department stores."¹⁴

Charlie Justice was especially successful. A newspaper headline proclaimed, "Choo Choo Mobbed By Adoring Fans," as more than 2,500 customers lined up outside Meyers Department Store in Greensboro to meet the star, purchase a "Choo Choo" T-shirt, and get an autograph. A few days later, Justice repeated the script at the J.C. Penney's Store. In Dallas-Fort Worth, Doak Walker of SMU

undertook a comparable tour of department stores to sell the All American T-shirts.

In addition to T-shirt sales, a North Carolina magazine, *The State*, featured a cover photograph and story showing Charlie Justice at home with his wife and young son—part of a campaign that led him to be selected as North Carolina’s “Man of the Year.” In addition to these local publications, Justice demonstrated how a college football star could attract national fame when his photograph was on the cover of *Life* magazine on October 3, 1949.

The Charlie Justice T-shirts represented the potential and limits of college sports marketing in 1950. It showed the power of college fan interest. Its limit was that the T-shirt was not in any marketing plan with the University of North Carolina athletics department. It was local in scope and not a source of program revenue. College athletes were also absent from marketing that featured professional sports stars such as on boxes of *Wheaties*, advertised as “The Breakfast of Champions” starting in 1934 and featuring major league baseball players.

College Student Athlete Compensation

Although recent court rulings have expanded opportunities for college athlete compensation, the historical reminder is that there never has been a period of pure amateurism in American intercollegiate athletics.¹⁵ The ideal of the college athlete as an amateur coexisted with the realities of numerous allowances for compensation—some approved and administered by college officials, others either off the record or dubious in terms of college rules.

Often overlooked was that the financial aid to students as athletes could be frugal. A good example was Marion Morison, a tackle on the USC football team in the 1920s, who received some financial aid from USC athletics. The aid included a mix of scholarships and part-time jobs. Morison, later famous as western movie actor “John Wayne,” recalled often not having money for meals and having to patch together various sources of income to pay for his tuition and living expenses. In fact, it was his part-time summer job at a movie studio where he was working as a custodian that led to his getting a “break” to take on a small acting part. As a student athlete on a successful football team, he did receive compensation for tuition and books. However, it was not extravagant and could be taken away by a coach.

Student scholarships varied from one college to another. There were regional schisms in the 1930s when football coaches in the South pushed for outright scholarships (what today are called “grants in aid”), whereas the coaches and athletic directors in the Big Ten discouraged scholarships and favored work-study jobs through alumni and local businesses. These differences coexisted with a tradition of student payments under the table.

It is useful to look beyond the extravagant illegal slush fund payments, often associated with football programs at prominent universities. That’s because colleges and universities in the 1950s typically had varsity squads in about 5 to 15 men’s sports. A good example was Wes Santee, a track and field athlete at the University of Kansas from 1950 to 1954. Santee’s case illustrated how many

college student athletes were caught in a bind over conflicting rules from the NCAA and the Amateur Athletic Union (AAU).

Santee was a National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) champion in cross country and in track as a miler, ranked among the top four distance runners in the world. And, as was typical for track and field athletes, he competed year-round. Track and field meets in AAU competition continued throughout the summer. Even with his achievements, Santee struggled to balance academics with competition while working to pay tuition and living expenses. In early 1955, the AAU banned him from amateur athletic events because he had been paid more than \$1,000 in travel expenses by track meet organizers and sponsors—for a nine-day trip—which was above the AAU's maximum allowance. This sidelined Santee for the 1956 Olympics in Australia and dashed his hopes of breaking international records.¹⁶

If Wes Santee faced prohibition from amateur sports, what were allowable compensations? In reality, there was great variance. In the early 1900s one could forfeit collegiate amateur status merely by competing against professionals. In contrast, in the late 1970s the NCAA ruled that a college athlete was allowed to be an amateur in one sport while being a professional in another. The permutations have increased in the era of NIL, revenue sharing, and the transfer portal.

Concern for the Rights of College Athletes

Over the past century college officials and athletics directors have given attention to the terms of athlete compensation, including maximum dollar amounts and the allowable number of awards per sport for such forms as grants in aid, scholarships, and campus jobs. Official concern was less about the opportunities for (and rights of) college athletes and more about resolving institutional rivalries and distrust within conferences. It meant, for example, that some athletic directors with relatively limited resources from fund-raising and ticket sales placed high priority on protecting athletic department budgets. In contrast, universities with a record of success in revenues, philanthropy, and championships sought to extend their financial advantage. As historian Ronald Smith found, this clash led the formal discussions within athletic conferences concerning issues of “equitable competition” couched in slogans such as “maintaining a level playing field” among the wealthy and less wealthy programs.¹⁷

Government Regulation and Policy Precedents

Government oversight of college sports was slow to develop. Not until World War II were initiatives directed at national reform of sports carried out by a government agency rather than by a private foundation. The so-called Savage Report of 1929 sponsored by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, despite its publicity and media coverage, had no connection to any systematic reform initiatives.¹⁸

Controlling bodies in sports were voluntary associations. Foremost were the AAU and the United States Olympic Committee (USOC). Whereas the NCAA

oversaw football, it had little regulatory authority and was devoted to organizing postseason tournaments for minor college sports. The AAU oversaw athletic eligibility for all other sports with the USOC interested in Olympic sports. Because many college teams and athletes competed in both intercollegiate and AAU tournaments and meets, the AAU had by default extensive control in determining what constituted amateur standing. College coaches could not afford to violate AAU rules and risk opportunities for national AAU championships and Olympic team selection.

After World War II, college sports enjoyed a boom in fan attendance and media coverage. This entailed recruiting potential student athletes. By the mid-1950s, recruiting abuses such as cars, rent-free apartments, meals, and cash had become sufficiently widespread that some conference commissioners urged university presidents to take action. The foremost advocate of reform was Victor Schmidt, commissioner of the Pacific Coast Conference, which was plagued by violations.¹⁹ His alarm about abuses ultimately led to an NCAA proposal for a “Sanity Code,” which failed to rein in recruiting violations. As of 1950 the NCAA had little if any regulatory power over conferences and member institutions. College presidents were not reluctant to make public statements asserting the right of each college to determine eligibility and standards of conduct for their athletes—and in so doing dismissed initiatives at outside control.

Concern was triggered by college sports gambling rather than recruiting violations. Court cases with allegations of cheating, especially “point shaving” by college basketball players, led to change. The gambling scandal in the 1950s involved athletes at the University of Kentucky, Bradley University, Long Island University, and other colleges that had played in tournaments in New York City’s Madison Square Garden. Federal court cases (and player convictions) led to congressional concerns that coaches and athletic directors had lost control of their teams and players. Still, Congress begged off oversight, seeking instead to enlist higher education associations such as the American Council on Education (ACE) to be deputized as the Congressional proxy for compliance. But these efforts fell apart due to differences within the ranks of college and university presidents nationwide. As a last resort, Congress enlisted the small, relatively powerless NCAA to assume national oversight. Even as the NCAA exercised its enforcement powers in the 1950s, it was the voluntary association’s regulations—rather than Congress or the courts—that governed intercollegiate athletics. Not until the 1970s does one find significant involvement of federal agencies and courts in intercollegiate athletics policies.²⁰

The Contrasting Case of Television

The coupling of media coverage and college sports was a mutual gain that resembled a barter system. This was true of newspapers, magazines, and even broadcasts such as radio. Television, however, was different. During the 1950s, with the growth in family ownership of televisions and the increases in local broadcasts, TV presented a different situation for college football. In years without regulation, a small number of universities branched out to television.²¹

Notable cases were Notre Dame and the University of Pennsylvania, although their approaches and goals were markedly different. Notre Dame viewed televised football games as part of a plan of university promotion for admissions and alumni donations. Game broadcasts were fused with campus visits and interviews with university officials. In contrast, at the University of Pennsylvania, a new ambitious president, Harold Stassen, who had been governor of Minnesota, teamed with Athletics Director Francis Murray to televise games. They focused on football, commercial in scope and intent, to generate a large surplus that subsidized the entire varsity sports program. Television, like radio in its early days, was seen by college officials as a detriment to having fans buy tickets and attend live games. The NCAA asserted influence and ultimately control over broadcasts and revenue.

Sports Television Broadcasting in the Twentieth Century

The 1960s often are remembered for civil strife and political tumult. This existed in intercollegiate athletics as well. However, for commercialization of college sports, the decade was an extension of the policies created by the NCAA in the 1950s. Athletic grants in aid had been codified, and the NCAA established itself as a policy organization that punished those who were caught violating NCAA dictates. The NCAA membership overwhelmingly affirmed the organization's right to maintain a monopoly in the regulation of football telecasts as the sole negotiator for all contracts with television networks.

Football's television contracts became the financial lifeblood of the NCAA. The association's Television Committee approved corporate agreements, and Executive Director Walter Byers served as the key liaison between the NCAA and the television networks. Byers always pushed for more revenue while also attempting to limit any encroachment from the NFL—which he correctly viewed as college football's greatest commercial competitor. Although not yet drawing eye-popping revenue, the funds from television contracts allowed the NCAA to finance its investigative and enforcement activities, support travel for teams to NCAA championship events, and organize amateur “federations” such as USA Basketball and USA Tennis that would supplant the AAU as the primary agency selecting Olympic athletes.

In 1960, the NCAA signed a two-year deal worth \$3.1 million with ABC to televise football games. ABC's Boone Arledge proceeded to transform football broadcasting by “taking the fan to the game, not the game to the fan.” Arledge drastically improved the production of football broadcasts. He added cameras and used different angles to capture images of fans in agony, cheerleaders in elation, coeds chanting, and coaches barking out orders to their players. Halftime shows of college marching bands were replaced with highlights from the first half along with additional commentary and analysis. This attracted a growing viewing public, and game attendance also continued to grow.²² By 1966, ABC paid more than \$7.7 million per season. ABC continued to increase its payouts to the NCAA and hold the exclusive rights to college football into the 1980s.²³

Specific arrangements varied by contract and typically limited any single team to being broadcast for only one home game and one away game each season. ABC would generally provide one national broadcast each week as well as additional regional broadcasts of conference games. The NCAA generally kept the number of games even across its regional districts, to provide equality and ensure the product remained national in scope. The relative peace that existed during the 1960s regarding television and revenue sharing disappeared during the 1970s. The insatiable appetite for revenue and spending exposed fault lines among NCAA members. In addition, the growing revenue of college sports was met by a growing trend among athletic departments to outspend each other in what became known as the athletic “arms race.” Differences among institutions became evident—and polarizing. By the end of the decade, divisions were both figurative and literal in the NCAA.

In the early 1970s, many universities sought to curb athletic spending; these cost-cutting measures generally affected players rather than coaches’ salaries or stadium expansion. In 1970, the NCAA repealed its “freshman rule,” allowing first-year students to participate in varsity sports, with the exception of football and basketball. Two years later, the NCAA removed all restrictions on first-year students in all sports. The NCAA abandoned the policy designed to protect the amateur status of athletes so that institutions could save money by disbanding freshman teams, which brought added expense but little revenue.²⁴

In 1973, the NCAA took less than two minutes to debate and vote on a decision to make athletic grants in aid a one-year commitment to athletes. When athletic grants in aid were originally recognized by the NCAA in the 1950s, they were viewed as four-year offers, even if a student became injured, did not meet athletic expectations, or chose not to participate. During the late sixties, the NCAA amended the four-year “scholarship” that allowed for termination of the award for inappropriate behavior as well as “fraudulent misrepresentation of information.” This gave coaches the right to revoke scholarships as a disciplinary action but opened the door for removing poor-performing athletes or others that they did not want to keep on the team—all in the name of economy.²⁵

The year 1973 was a pivotal year for the NCAA in other policy decisions as well. First, the association reorganized its membership into three different divisions. Division I was designated as the home for institutions participating in big-time athletics. Division II existed for smaller (often regional) schools that still had competitive sports programs but did not have the financial resources to compete with big-time programs. Division III served primarily liberal arts institutions that did not offer athletic scholarships and did not attempt to keep up with big-time programs. Moving forward, institutions would vote on policies for their respective divisions.²⁶

The seemingly simple plan proved difficult to execute, revealing the allure of big-time athletics for many institutions. Although there were approximately 80 institutions that operated big-time football programs, more than 120 football-playing schools self-selected Division I. Another 100 institutions chose to be in Division I sports with the exception of football. While many schools could not keep up with universities like Alabama, Michigan, and UCLA in funding big-time football, they still hoped to share in the publicity generated by big-time athletics.

The NCAA held a special convention in August 1975 to focus on “economy” in college sports. During the session, members voted to remove the \$15-a-month allowance for incidental expenses that full-scholarship athletes had received since the 1950s. Commonly referred to as “laundry money,” it was a small portion of athletic budgets but remained crucial for students from financially disadvantaged backgrounds. The NCAA also eliminated payments for course-related incidental costs such as calculators, pens, and notebooks.²⁷ Division I schools then reduced allowable football scholarships from 105 to 95 and set a limit of 80 scholarships for all nonrevenue sports. Similarly, Division II institutions set a cap of sixty scholarships for nonrevenue sports and set a total of 36 football scholarships, which could be divided to recruit more players.²⁸

The 1975 special session brought television revenue back into the spotlight as California State University—Long Beach President Stephen Horn proposed a radical plan to redistribute television revenues to benefit “mid-major” athletic programs, even if their football teams were rarely on television. Horn proposed that 15% of the revenue would go to teams being broadcast, with Division I institutions sharing 50% with Division II and Division III schools keeping 25% each. The “Robin Hood” plan made little headway, but it galvanized the “big-time” football programs into organizing a group outside of the NCAA to protect its television revenue.²⁹

In 1976 more than fifty big-time football programs met to discuss a way to protect their own interests—and money. This resulted in creation of the College Football Association (CFA), a group of universities engaged in big-time football who correctly believed that their interests were being thwarted by other members of the NCAA. When the CFA organized, it consisted of multiple “power conferences” as well as independents like Notre Dame and Penn State. Conspicuously absent, however, were the Big Ten and PAC-10, which kept their allegiance (and influence) with the NCAA.³⁰

In 1978, the CFA lobbied for creation of Division I-A for big-time programs and Division I-AA for “mid-major” football university and strong basketball schools, some of which did not sponsor football. To qualify for Division I-A status, institutions needed to schedule similar schools, have a stadium with a minimum capacity of 30,000, and attract an average attendance of 17,000 or more. It appeared that the motion would pass, but both the Big Ten and PAC-10 supported the so-called Ivy Amendment, which provided an exemption from the above thresholds if the institution sponsored at least 12 varsity sports. The Ivy Amendment passed, and more than 130 institutions remained in Division I-A.³¹

Having failed at its early initiatives, the CFA hired Big 8 Commissioner Chuck Neinas to serve as its first (and only) Executive Director. Neinas was a long-time executive at the NCAA and a member of its powerful Television Committee. He believed the CFA could command and keep more revenue for its members, and in 1980 he met with the nascent ESPN and the three major networks to discuss a television contract. Although no formal agreement materialized, the next year Neinas secured a \$180 million dollar bid from NBC for the 1982–1985 seasons. Feeling the pressure placed on it by the CFA, Walter Byers and the NCAA negotiated its first multiple-network bid for the same years with CBS and ABC.

Worth more than \$263 million, Byers also signed a two-year cable deal with Turner for an additional \$17 million.³²

The NCAA then threatened CFA institutions with probation and expulsion if they signed a separate deal. This would have also led to loss of additional revenue, as the NCAA had just negotiated a three-year deal worth \$48 million to broadcast the NCAA Basketball tournament. The CFA schools succeeded in getting Division I-A under 100 members at a special convention in December 1981, and the following month, the organization let NBC's offer expire.³³

Although compromise kept the NCAA from dissolution, the NCAA's threats to expel CFA members led to an antitrust lawsuit against the organization. Unable to sue the NCAA itself, the CFA (along with NBC) helped fund an antitrust lawsuit brought by the University of Oklahoma and the University of Georgia against the NCAA. The Federal District judge ruled that the NCAA's television monopoly violated the rights of individual universities and their programming—including football broadcasts. The NCAA's threats toward CFA members were "classic cartel behavior." When the Tenth Circuit Court of Appeals upheld the lower court's decision, the NCAA appealed to the Supreme Court, which agreed to hear the case. In *NCAA v. Board of Regents* (1984) the Court delivered a 7-2 decision declaring that the NCAA television policies violated the Sherman Antitrust Act.³⁴

Initially big-time football TV contracts decreased in value as the unregulated market no longer kept prices artificially high and "product" artificially low. As the CFA began negotiating more lucrative deals, it appeared that the young association might challenge the NCAA's dominance. Then, the CFA's demise began in 1990 when Notre Dame signed an exclusive deal with NBC to broadcast its home games through 1995 for \$38 million dollars.³⁵ When Notre Dame departed the CFA, other big-time programs turned to their respective conferences to negotiate television deals. Independent programs like South Carolina, Penn State, and Florida State needed to find conference homes, and conferences looked to expand their respective television "footprint" by adding strong football schools. Although it took time, the growth of commercialization during the last 40 years would not have happened without the *NCAA v. Board of Regents* case and the deregulation of football.

Individual Campus Marketing

As universities signed over their "property" rights for football and basketball, they began exploiting new methods to generate revenue. Three sports-marketing pioneers began relatively small operations at their alma maters and grew those businesses into corporate giants in the college sports world. Their enterprises would eventually be consolidated by one larger company, but their individual stories reveal how big-time programs monetized the popularity of college sports.

Jim Host signed one of the first two baseball scholarships at the University of Kentucky as a pitcher in the 1950s. In the 1970s, Host won the exclusive radio broadcast rights of UK radio broadcasts of football and basketball games by bidding slightly more than \$50,000 for the season. To turn a profit, Host signed

affiliates across the state to broadcast the games, and he sold the advertising during the games. After multiple challenges during the early years, Host then emulated this model at dozens of other institutions.³⁶

Host Communications Inc. also operated a radio network for the Southwest Conference and the NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament Network. In the process, Host introduced "Bundled Rights" deals and offered more money to universities in exchange for the exclusive rights to corporate sponsors, which became the "Official" product (i.e., soft drink, car dealership, grocery store, or bank) of a collaborating University athletics department. With a growing portfolio of institutions, Host Communications lured both local businesses and national companies into sponsorships.³⁷

HCI's greatest transformation occurred when Walter Byers realized that the NCAA might lose control of televised football revenue, and he turned to Host to help monetize the NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament. Host sold corporate sponsorships to be the "Official" product of the NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament. In turn, those corporate sponsors helped promote the tournament. These sponsorships generated a few million dollars annually in the 1980s but became a key fixture in the television broadcast negotiations. Corporate sponsorships eventually help make the NCAA Men's Basketball Tournament a billion-dollar spectacle.³⁸

Host's model caught the attention of Clyde Lear, whose Learfield Communications had started in the early 1970s as a news and agriculture network with partner Derry Brownfield as the Missouri Network. Learfield (at the time still known as the Missouri Network) also had the rights to broadcast the University of Missouri football and basketball games. Threatened by HCI, Learfield adopted the bundled rights model for Missouri. While Host Communications maintained a portfolio of more than 30 universities along with its NCAA contract, Clyde Lear rapidly expanded the sports network model across the country, boasting even more institutions.³⁹

As HCI and Learfield focused on program broadcast rights and sponsorships, Bill Battle began monetizing university logos by creating the Collegiate Licensing Company (CLC). A player on Alabama's 1961 national championship team, Battle eventually became Coach "Bear" Bryant's booking agent. While signing Bryant to specific sponsorships, Battle realized that Alabama was losing out on revenue by not officially owning its "marks" (i.e., "trademarks") or phrases like "Roll Tide." Battle then started CLC in 1982 with Alabama as his first client.⁴⁰ Battle grew the CLC by partnering with universities across the country to develop, protect, and promote the use of trademarks and logos on virtually any product, generating impressive profits.⁴¹

Unknown to the casual fan, HCI, Learfield, and CLC transformed campus sports business operations across the country. The growth of these companies (and additional competitors) grew rapidly into the twenty-first century. Bundled rights, sports marketing across all communication platforms, and athletic licensing led to spectacular growth in revenue for universities with large fan bases and further separated the big-time programs from all others. It also led to multiple acquisitions and mergers in the industry. All three of these original companies (along with others) eventually became known simply as Learfield.⁴²

Big Bucks: Broadcasting in The Twenty-First Century

The influence of bundled rights deals and corporate sponsorships on the NCAA Men's basketball tournament could be seen in the growth of CBS contracts to televise "March Madness" (A term trademarked by the NCAA). In the early 1980s, the \$16 million paid the NCAA to broadcast the tournament seemed stunning to many. It was no match for the \$142 million paid out for the tournament a decade later. Then, in 1999, CBS and the NCAA brokered an 11-year deal worth a total of \$6 billion. These sums supported nearly all NCAA operations.⁴³

In football, big-time conferences negotiated lucrative deals for their regular season broadcasting, and traditional postseason bowl games made room for the Bowl Championship Series in 1998, requiring a "Bowl Alliance" among the Rose, Orange, Sugar, and Fiesta Bowls. The Bowl Championship Series (BCS) selection committee chose two teams to play for a national championship, and the "Power 6" conferences were guaranteed team representation in one of the BCS games. Collective payouts for the postseason eventually amounted to nearly \$200 million.⁴⁴

The BCS gave way to the College Football Playoff in 2014–15. The College Football Playoff Selection Committee chose four teams to each play in a semifinal game before the winners moved on to the national championship game. With only four bids, no "Power 6" conference would be guaranteed a spot. This immediately led to a crisis among members of the basketball-dominant Big East. Having an automatic bid (ensuring multimillion payout) had kept the Big East intact. Without this guarantee, the strongest football powers in the Big East moved to other power conferences. Unable to prevent the hemorrhaging of its most powerful football programs, the "Power 6" conferences became the "Power 5."

The creation of conference television networks provided greater viewing access to football and basketball. Additionally, conference networks began providing more exposure for sports like baseball as well as women's basketball, volleyball, and softball. The winners in the conference network (and revenue) race were the Big Ten and the SEC. Far outpacing their competitors, the hundreds of millions of dollars that were distributed annually to the Big Ten and SEC amounted to nearly half the revenue disbursed to all Division I-A programs. The conference networks revealed that even among "power" conferences, financial tiers existed.⁴⁵

Transition: Trends from 1960 to 2020

The era from 1960 to 2020 was revolutionary for commercialization of intercollegiate athletics. As historian Ronald Smith noted, "The NCAA eked out a meager existence on its small membership fees. No Robin Hood emerged, for there were not yet riches to plunder and distribute among the poor."⁴⁶ In the 1970s and 1980s, institutions fought among themselves for additional resources. By 2020, nobody could argue that the revenues were meager.

With unprecedented wealth, the debate surrounded how this money was to be spent. During the previous half century, members of the NCAA regularly voted to

restrict benefits to students and failed to prove that without federal initiatives women's sports would be treated fairly in the commercialized system. In short, many players had been exploited in various ways as big-time programs reaped revenue. This turned national attention toward paying players for their time and effort which generated billions of dollars.

Courts and College Sports: Commercialism and Control, 2020 to 2025

By 2020, intercollegiate athletics had moved from the sports page to the front page. The contradictions central to American higher education were portrayed in the enterprise of intercollegiate athletics. Its peculiar character was that college sports were not part of any institutional mission statement yet often were foremost in publicity and institutional reputation. By 2020, national media gave attention to state legislation and a court case challenging NCAA policy on NIL rights.⁴⁷

The landmark case of *NCAA v. Alston* led to negotiations about new rights and responsibilities of student athletes. While coaches, athletic directors, conference commissions, governors, and student athletes all made public comments regarding the changes that dramatically affect the financial condition of athletics departments, university presidents were conspicuously silent. One exception was the June 26 letter to *The New York Times* by the president of Endicott College in Massachusetts who emphasized that NCAA Division III programs were different than those in NCAA Division I.⁴⁸

Without public commentary from presidents, it remained hard to determine a collective position. A good approximation came from the amicus brief filed by the ACE and other associations as part of the opening arguments for *NCAA v. Alston* in 2021. The ACE brief had three primary themes: First, "universities are not commercial, profit-seeking entities." Second, "judicial micromanagement was unworkable and inconsistent with the educational mission that undergirds collegiate athletics." Finally, "the vast majority of intercollegiate athletic programs aspire, first and foremost, to provide education through athletics, and higher education institutions are better positioned than the courts to inform decision making."⁴⁹

The ACE brief included the disconcerting claim, "Nor does it matter that a tiny fraction of sports teams at a tiny fraction of institutions generate significant revenue."⁵⁰ It did matter. In denying this fact, the ACE ignored an important legacy from its own 1980 book *The Money Game: Financing Collegiate Athletics*, written by Robert Atwell, Donna Lopiano, and Bruce Grimes. One conclusion was that intercollegiate athletic policy had become dominated by big-time program interests.

The commercialization that the ACE team identified 40 years earlier had intensified. In a 2015 case addressing broadcasters' use of players' names and likenesses, District Court Judge Kevin H. Sharpe wrote that "College basketball and football, particularly at the Division I and FBS [Football Bowl Subdivision] levels, is big business. Of that there can be little doubt." Whereas in 1980 the ACE was a leader in reforming college sports, by 2020, it was a follower.⁵¹

The ACE brief was correct in stating that no college sports program was a “for profit” activity. However, Division II and III were not expected to make money. The report should have addressed how the commercialized business model affected schools differently *within* Division I. Related to this challenge, institutions often highlighted non-revenue sports, including women’s athletics, as the reason for financial stress. Were women’s sports to blame for the budget shortfalls at Division I programs? In probing that question, college and university officials should have looked at both legal and financial responsibilities. The “Olympic” sports were relatively inexpensive, and institutions needed to comply with federal law when looking to cut expenses. Using women’s sports as a convenient place to cut expenses probably would have put the athletics department out of compliance with Title IX, placing the entire university’s federal funding in jeopardy, including research grants to academic programs and medical centers. It also would have risked the university’s eligibility to receive Pell Grants and other federal student financial aid. Paying for women’s athletic scholarships was not merely a nice thing to do; it was the right and legal thing to do. The “nonrevenue sports” were not the major source of budget shortfalls for Division I programs.

A weakness in the Division I business model was that sports, supposed to be the “golden goose,” often ran a deficit. Only a fraction of Division I football programs boasted a surplus. Even schools in big-time conference, such as Virginia Tech, still charged students athletics fees. Big-time college football may have been good at generating revenues. It was even better at generating expenses. In many NCAA Division I conferences, such as the Mid-American Conference, mandatory student fees provided more than half the income for athletic department operating budgets.⁵² This came at a time when many of these same universities were cutting tenured professors.

Financial problems extended into the Big Ten and the PAC 12. Rutgers University reported a shortfall of \$45.2 million for its intercollegiate athletics budget for 2018–19. It relied on \$14.5 million in university funds, \$12.1 million in student fees, \$15.4 million in internal loans, and \$3.2 million in direct state to balance its budget. Rutgers athletics was “losing to win,” with \$121.5 million in internal debts.⁵³ There were similar stories for men’s basketball. In 2015, a third of the 68 men’s basketball teams in the NCAA tournament failed to generate an annual surplus. These 68 teams represented the most successful programs, and one finds that most lost money. The NCAA President, Mark Emmert, emphasized to ESPN, “this is the right time to consider decentralized, deregulated college sports.”⁵⁴

The “Wild West” during the Name, Image, Likeness Era

Without strategic guidance from the NCAA, The *Alston* decision opened new challenges. Boosters created “collectives” to raise funds to pay players in NIL deals. Within a year of the decision, more than 100 collectives were in operation, and the new organizations generally remained outside the athletic department structure and operated outside university control. Rather than a legitimate business paying an athlete to appear in a television commercial or promote a

specific product, collectives could engage in “pay for play”—that is, promise a player money to play for a specific team, even though such inducements were prohibited.

The *NCAA v. Alston* case reinforced the need for regulation. In 2022 amidst COVID disruptions, realignments altered historic regional conferences. After Texas and Oklahoma arranged to join the Southeastern Conference, the Big Ten altered its geographic identity by adding the University of Southern California, UCLA, Oregon, and Washington to increase its market share. The change decimated the historic PAC-12 conference, leaving only Oregon State and Washington State as members. Curiously, Stanford and Cal Berkeley on the Pacific coast became members of the Atlantic Coast Conference. This coast-to-coast geography implied that revenue remained more important than academics and player welfare.

Capping conference reconfigurations was establishment of a twelve-team NCAA Division I football play-off format. The College Football Playoff Board of Managers negotiated a six-year deal with ESPN for \$7.8 billion.⁵⁵ This new format immediately sparked discussions of expansion. In all cases, the driving force remained money. Even as lawsuits against NCAA members awaited adjudication in 2025, powerful institutions had unapologetically embraced commercialism.⁵⁶

With commercialism’s ascendance, questions remained unanswered. How much revenue would be shared with athletes, and how would player remuneration be delivered? These questions needed to be answered to put guardrails (and some sort of enforcement) on the “wild west” that had been created in the wake of no discernable plan from the NCAA. These concerns led The Drake Group in April 2025 to host a panel about Confronting Division I Sports Subsidization and Financial Stability. It urged higher education leaders to pay attention to educational priorities along with financial responsibilities to all students, including women as student athletes. They emphasized, “In the end, a system providing, for example, revenue sharing for athletes, must be viable over time. While the roughly 30 mega-programs at the top do make a profit on an operating basis, well over 90% of Division I schools do not. At present, athletic programs at dozens of D-I universities lose between \$20 and \$50 million every year.”⁵⁷

The same week that the Drake Group met at Howard University in Washington, DC, to discuss these challenges, a group of university presidents, NCAA representatives, and athletic directors, gathered a few miles away to lobby members of Congress. Big-time program administrators included national legislation that would supersede state NIL laws. Universities also wanted the law to define athletes as students rather than employees. Finally, the big-time sports lobby wanted the impending *NCAA v. House Settlement* “codified” into law.⁵⁸

The contrasting purposes of these two meetings illustrated growing differences among Division I members. Universities in powerful conferences announced their own proposals to assure the prosperity of their programs. In the Southeastern Conference, the University of Kentucky created a promotional partnership with a brewing company to launch “Kentucky Blue Light.” Posters announced, “Drink One for the Team!” noting that a portion of all Kentucky Blue Light sales helped fund the NIL efforts of all University of Kentucky sports programs.⁵⁹ Then, on April 24, 2025, the University of Kentucky made a decisive

move when its Board of Trustees approved the university president's plan to transform the athletics department into a Limited Liability Corporation (LLC) named "Champions Blue." It enabled the university to adapt to "a new climate of collegiate sports."⁶⁰

Although most marketing attention focused on major revenue sports, the Drake Group's meeting emphasized analyzing the past and present position of other conferences and institutions. A comprehensive policy analysis should include, for example, institutions in what had been known as the "group of five" or mid-major conferences. Our historical research suggests that mid-majors will not be able to keep up with the small number of big-time conferences. Illustrative of these financial challenges was Mountain West member University of Nevada at Las Vegas, which paid more than \$17 million to hire Dan Mullen as its new head football coach, followed by the announcement that the institution did not yet have the funds to cover the contract.⁶¹

As universities navigated the new NIL landscape, the NCAA and its Division I members faced additional legal challenges. Three lawsuits were consolidated into one class-action suit, *House v. NCAA* in which plaintiffs challenged the NCAA's amateurism principles and sought back pay for athletes who missed out on the largesse of the new NIL era. On June 6, 2025, the NCAA and representatives from the most powerful conferences signed a landmark settlement. Approved by Judge Claudia Wilken of the US District Court in Oakland, California, allocated nearly \$2.8 billion dollars in damages to be paid to college athletes over a ten-year period.⁶²

The *House* settlement provided legal precedent to change the way intercollegiate athletics operated at the Division I level. Along with scrapping previous scholarship limits in favor of roster limits, participating universities agreed to a new revenue-sharing model that allowed up to \$20.5 million per year to be distributed among its athletes. That amount was based on 22% of the average revenue of an athletic program in a "Power Five" conference, and it would increase by approximately 4% each year for a decade.⁶³ The revenue-sharing model enabled athletes to benefit from the money they helped generate on the field, court, or television. And, the more than \$20 million allocated set a benchmark that would be difficult for schools outside of the power conferences to maintain.

While the press highlighted monetary policies of the settlement, the power conferences agreed to establishment of a new enforcement agency: the College Sports Commission (CSC). A new era in college sports had arrived as the NCAA ceded enforcement authority in student financial matters. To help with enforcement, the CSC partnered with "Big Four" accounting firm Deloitte to operate the "NIL Go" portal where NIL deals over \$600 would be evaluated for compliance with the CSC's regulations.⁶⁴

An Unclear Conclusion: A Century of Continuity and Change

In the wake of the *Alston* decision and the *House* settlement, it was clear that athletes in big-time programs were unapologetically professional. From a policy

perspective, the *House* settlement had settled little else. After hiring Major League Baseball executive (and investigator) Bryan Seeley, the CSC published guidance regarding NIL deals for college athletes, stating that such funding needed to come from legitimate businesses with “valid business purposes.” In essence, collectives would be prohibited from NIL operations. After threats from the attorneys of the athletes in the *House* agreement, the CSC agreed to look at any NIL deals over \$600 dollars to ensure that athletes were promoting a good or service that was available to the public for purchase and that the amount paid to the athlete for the promotion was consistent with market value of “similarly situated individuals.” Collectives could find creative ways to pay athletes, although these would be regulated by judgements on a player’s market value and “range of compensation.”⁶⁵

Revenue sharing and NIL payments once again shine the spotlight on an old question: “Are college athletes employees of the universities where they study and play?” In 2024 the US Third Circuit Court in Pennsylvania rejected the NCAA’s motion to dismiss the *Johnson v. NCAA* lawsuit, which asserted that college athletes were employees of a university and should receive wages and other benefits under the Fair Labor Standards Act. Should the athletes win the case, which universities oppose, two potential outcomes are likely: the cutting of sports across all divisions of the NCAA and a small number of the most powerful teams pulling away from the rest of the NCAA and forming a separate super conference.⁶⁶

Gender-equity issues remained unanswered as well. A group of women athletes appealed the distribution of back payments in the *House* settlement due to differences in amounts being paid among male and female athletes. The agreed upon damages model provided 75% of the \$2.8 billion for football players, 15% for men’s basketball, 5% for women’s basketball, and 5% for all other sports. While waiting for that appeal to be adjudicated, it appears that some conferences and schools will be distributing far more funds to men’s revenue sports than female sports. This will lead to additional litigation, with plaintiffs suing based on failure to comply with Title IX and defendants arguing that the money shared is equitable in relation to the revenue (or market value) created by each sport.⁶⁷

While Congress was crafting legislation to govern intercollegiate athletics, President Donald Trump issued the executive order, “Saving College Sports,” on July 24, 2025. While having little influence, the Executive Order revealed the president’s priorities: protecting scholarships for women’s and Olympic sports, preventing collectives from “pay-for-play” schemes, and seeking National Labor Relations Board clarification on the employment status of college athletes—something Trump opposes. In sum, the Executive Order generally aligned with the lobbying efforts of big-time sports.⁶⁸

The US House of Representatives was scheduled to vote on the “Student Compensation and Opportunity through Rights and Endorsements” (SCORE) Act during the fall of 2025. With both bipartisan support and opposition, much remains unclear with the future of intercollegiate athletics. However, many have suggested that two super conferences will develop out of the Big Ten, SEC, and wealthiest programs from the Big 12 and ACC. In such a scenario, employee

status and collective bargaining agreements may truly separate a small minority of big-time programs from the rest of the NCAA.

What would happen to many Division I schools that could not compete financially with big time programs? The NIL may allow 90+% of Division I universities to move away from the “Up or Out” approach and work in ways that will help athletes as students who participate in athletics as an extracurricular activity. Even now, a small group of Division I schools have not (yet) agreed to join the *House* settlement. Federal legislation and additional court decisions may allow others to follow their lead.⁶⁹

How does this set precedents? In some cases, traditions established over a century ago continue to resurface today. During eras of reform in college athletics, policy changes have also included attempts by institutions to create a “level playing field” in which there is competitive equity among a group of institutions while simultaneously separating themselves from other “lesser” groups of schools. This is occurring again, as the NCAA (led by the Big Ten and SEC) are developing revenue-sharing plans. While policies will provide more regulation, it will also set a structure to keep a semblance of “fairness,” but only among athletic programs that can afford to share more than \$20 million in revenue with their players. This cap will preclude institutions like Texas and Ohio State from gaining too much competitive separation with other conference teams, but it will push the bottom rung of institutions in the other big-time programs from competing in the with upper echelon.

Given the importance of the NCAA as a regulatory entity, it is important to track its organizational dynamics. Over time, the NCAA has deliberately failed to act on important issues until there was a law or a court case that forced their hand. This is significant because the refusal of the NCAA to engage in any discussion about NIL created a scenario in which the “toothpaste is out of the tube.” The *House* settlement, with its creation of the CSC, revealed that the NCAA’s unwillingness to address financial realities and cling to its amateur myth has led to a loss of control that will not return.

An irony was that many “reforms” during the previous century had increased commercialism, even though college sports were supposed to be an educational activity. Changes in formal policies have had a complex, curious relationship with the American campus culture and with American popular culture, including mass media. The ideal of the amateur college student athlete coexisted with the reality of professional athletes whose status as students provided the players for commercialized college sports events and broadcasts. These inconsistencies and uncertainties have created an “American Dilemma” in the character of our colleges and universities and their intercollegiate sports programs.

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Cite this article: Thelin, John Robert and Moyer, Eric A. (2026). "Compensation for College Athletes: The American Saga of Commercialization in Intercollegiate Sports." *Journal of Policy History* 38 (2): 107–129, doi:10.1017/S0898030625100523