

REVIEW ARTICLE

If You Build It: A Structural Analysis of the NIL Impact on Women's College Sports

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Abstract

This manuscript analyzes the evolving impact of Name, Image, and Likeness (NIL) on women's college sports in the United States. Since the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) changed its long-standing policy on student-athlete compensation in 2021, collegiate athletes have been granted the ability to profit from their personal brand. This change dismantled the outdated amateurism model and opened doors for student-athlete empowerment. The NIL era has also introduced a complex web of challenges, particularly for female athletes. We examine how NIL has both exposed and exacerbated gender disparities in college athletics. This manuscript explores how opportunities to monetize NIL are influenced not just by athletic ability, but also by societal expectations tied to appearance and femininity. We investigate how athletes in both aesthetic and contact sports are differentially affected by the NIL market and the influence of social media. In addition, this manuscript situates the NIL landscape within the broader historical and legal context of gender equity in sport, particularly Title IX. We discuss the implications of recent legal settlements in addition to the NCAA's new revenue-sharing model set to begin in Fall of 2025. By combining legal precedent, sociocultural analysis, and analyses of economic trends, this manuscript sheds light on the dual-edged nature of NIL in women's sports. NIL could offer new pathways for recognition and financial support, but it also risks replicating older inequalities in new, more subtle ways. Therefore, a proactive and equitable approach is critical to ensuring NIL contributes to the long-term growth, representation, and success of all athletes, including women in college athletics. Without intentional structural reforms in college sport, NIL could further exacerbate existing gender disparities instead of addressing and potentially correcting them.

1. Introduction

The landscape of college sports has changed drastically in the past few years and is currently evolving at an even faster rate, with a number of legislative changes shaking up the status quo. One of the most impactful changes was that the National Collegiate Athletics Association (NCAA) allowed their student-athletes to profit from their name, image, and likeness (NIL). The arrival of this NIL policy change in 2021 marked a drastic pivot, with the NCAA's amateurism model previously prohibiting student-athletes from earning money above and beyond the scholarship they are

awarded, despite the NCAA's billion-dollar empire (Kemming, 2025). Because of the massive revenue produced by college sports, there's a valid argument that student-athletes deserve to be paid and share in the income they are generating; however, the rollout of the NIL era has been messy, disorganized, and imbalanced, creating systemic concerns about the sustainability of the current structure of college sports (Harthun, 2025).

Amidst the many chaotic elements of the early years of NIL, one prominent issue that has arisen is gender disparities in compensation. Male student-athletes

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have been compensated at a rate much higher than female student-athletes (Capstone, 2024), despite increased recent attention paid to women's sports (e.g., Caitlin Clark's impact on WNBA and NCAA women's basketball). It is important to study this dynamic of disparity because NIL represents an integral revenue stream that can support the continued development of women's collegiate sports. Not fully understanding nor addressing this dynamic can be detrimental to growth of women's college sports and continue to increase the inequitable gender opportunity divide that exists. Furthermore, amidst the sweeping structural changes in college sports (i.e., Transfer Portal, NIL, Revenue Sharing), Title IX considerations are still legally binding. As a result, college programs can be in legal jeopardy if they don't maintain a balance of gender equity, even when changes may result in new models of structuring collegiate athletic departments.

Subsequently, this manuscript attempts to address this emerging dynamic by examining NIL opportunities within women's college athletic programs. We will lay out the background and evolution of NIL and then address differences in men's and women's engagement with NIL in their respective collegiate sports. Next, we will break down different structural components of women's collegiate sports that may contribute to differential engagement with NIL—doing so can help organize structures and create lenses through which future analyses and empirical examinations into this issue can be conducted. Finally, we will talk about economic implications that arise and unintended consequences that may emerge if NIL proceeds on its current trajectory of gender imbalanced opportunities to access these revenue streams.

2. Background on Name, Image, & Likeness (NIL)

Since the NCAA was formed in 1906 to provide oversight and guidance to intercollegiate athletics, the primary principle that this organization has operated on is amateurism (NCAA, 2025). An amateur is defined by the NCAA as “someone who does not have a written or verbal agreement with an agent, has not profited above his/her actual and necessary expenses or gained a competitive advantage in his/her sport.” (NCAA, 2025). The amateurism principle was intended to prioritize the student aspect of the *student-athlete* moniker, but with any good policy, there are always unintended consequences. And in this case, by denying student-athletes the ability to be compensated for their athletic performance--despite massive revenue being generated by the performance

of these athletes--the unintended consequence is that the NCAA has been perceived as insensitive to the needs of their student-athletes and, in some cases, perceived to be even obtuse and greedy.

Over the past few decades, the NCAA has seen a massive increase in revenue from college sports events, with their most profitable event being the men's basketball tournament, *March Madness*. In 2022, Turner Sports and CBS, two of the world's largest sports media entities, extended their original 2010 deal with the NCAA through 2032. The deal includes the broadcast of the Men's *March Madness* tournament as well as live coverage for all NCAA Division 1 Men's basketball championship games across any platform within Turner and CBS Sports (Norlander et al., 2016). The new deal also has a rights deal of \$8.8 billion, extending the previous 2010 agreement valued at \$10.8 billion (Norlander et al., 2016). This means that the NCAA will earn almost \$20 billion across 22 years from *March Madness* alone. Joseph Castiglione, Director of Athletics at University of Oklahoma since 1998 and past Chair of NCAA Division I Men's Basketball Committee, said that having this deal ensures that *March Madness* will remain an important part of televised sports (NCAA, 2016). This amount does not even include other revenue from ticket sales and merchandise, which also accounts for millions of dollars annually.

In addition to basketball, football is another primary force in generating NCAA revenue, specifically the College Football playoff (CFP) system. The CFP generates over \$600 million annually from its broadcast deal with ESPN (Dinich, 2024). The NCAA, though not directly involved with the CFP deals, also earns hundreds of millions more dollars each year via ticket sales, sponsorships, licensing and the broadcasting rights for baseball, softball, wrestling and women's basketball championships. Women's basketball has also recently seen huge growth. ESPN signed a \$920 million 8-year deal in 2024 to cover women's sports, specifically the women's *March Madness* tournament, which last year drew 9.9 million views (NCAA, 2024). The deal includes domestic rights to 21 women's and 19 men's championships and has an average value of \$115 million (NCAA, 2024).

This growth in revenue across multiple collegiate sports in the NCAA has led to many people wondering where all the money is going and who is really benefiting, putting the NCAA under more pressure. The NCAA has stated that over 90% of revenue from the contract will be put towards services, programs and

distributions to its member institutions (NCAA, 2016). However, as the NCAA revenue increased, tension among student-athletes under NCAA amateurism rules has also been growing. And that is important to note, because these massive sums of money have been coming mostly from the athletic performance and unpaid labor of those amateur college student-athletes.

This conflict of distribution of revenue came to a head with the O'Bannon vs. NCAA court case. Ed O'Bannon, a former All-American Basketball player at UCLA, discovered an avatar of himself with his UCLA jersey number on an *EA Sports* video game. The issue was that O'Bannon did not consent to--nor was he compensated for--the use of his image and likeness that contributed to millions of dollars being generated through this video game. So in 2008 he sued the NCAA, arguing that the amateurism rules that prohibited student-athletes from receiving compensation for their NIL were illegal restraints under Section 1 of the Sherman Act (McLeod, 2015).

Ultimately, in September 2015, the 9th Circuit Court denied the NCAA's claim that amateurism rules were exempt from antitrust law, affirming that student-athletes' labor, including NIL, was a form of commercial activity because both the athlete and the NCAA derive economic benefits (McLeod, 2015). The Circuit Court also ruled that the NCAA was not required to allow NIL compensation for student-athletes to preserve the historical amateurism of collegiate sports. Even though the outcome was not the most desirable for the student-athletes involved in that case, this decision paved the way for future challenges to the NCAA's amateurism model.

In 2021 a Supreme Court case, *Alston vs NCAA*, took place that stood on the shoulders of the O'Bannon decision and other cases that arose in the time between. Alston argued that the NCAA was violating antitrust laws by limiting the education-related benefits that athletes could obtain. Prior to the Alston settlement, the aforementioned amateurism principle meant that NCAA rules limited compensation for athletes to the cost of attendance, meaning they restricted both benefits related and unrelated to education. The settlement included \$200 million dollars to be distributed to eligible current and former college athletes that qualified for the Alston Award for academic achievement (Harvard Law Review, 2023). This settlement was able to undermine the NCAA by setting a new precedent that the NCAA's rules could violate antitrust laws. This ultimately opened the door

for more legal changes by pressuring the NCAA to loosen its rules to avoid more cases like the Alston settlement. This set the groundwork for new NIL restrictions to be lifted on July 1 of 2021, quickly after the Alston settlement in June (Harvard Law Review, 2023).

This new era is also altering the decision-making process in recruitment and career progression. Now, athletes are able to consider and prioritize the money they can make playing their sport in college. They are looking for the best opportunities to capitalize on NIL in any way they can. This includes the use of the Transfer Portal. Many athletes have used the Transfer Portal before to gain more playing time or have a better chance to win a championship. However, since NIL has become a factor, more athletes are transferring for financial reasons. These new opportunities to profit from their game have caused athletes to look at their situation more like businesspeople (Harthun, 2025). Athletes are evaluating their college choices through the lens of business strategy. Opendorse estimated the top 100 college athletes in the U.S. could collectively earn up to \$1 billion per year from NIL deals (Hale, 2023).

In addition to the changes in student-athlete mobility and tenure, this financial boom has also intensified competition among colleges. Schools are doing everything they can to position themselves as the best destination for top recruits, athletically and financially. Athletes are looking for the best opportunities to make money from their sports, and colleges are fighting to prove they are the best choice. They want those top athletes to choose to play at their school. They are doing this because having those bigger-name athletes brings in more money to their college through NIL deals and viewership. Colleges are investing in NIL infrastructure, partnering with third-party collectives, and securing alumni donations to build lucrative NIL packages. With no national cap on the amount of money that boosters and donors can contribute, schools with greater resources have a significant advantage (Harthun, 2025). This has the potential to erode league parity, giving wealthier programs a disproportionate edge in acquiring elite talent. If left unregulated, NIL could widen the gap between Power 4 schools and smaller programs, potentially destabilizing the competitive balance on which college sports currently rely (O'Rourke, 2025).

In summary, this revolutionary new NIL policy change means that each student-athlete can have the opportunity to profit from the use of his/her name,

image, and/or likeness for public consumption, a break from over a century of non-compensated amateurism in college sports. NCAA student-athletes have always had their name, image, and likeness in the public sphere, but NIL rules now allow student-athletes to be directly compensated for this use. This is a part of each college athlete's personal brand. With the new rules, college athletes are able to profit from their NIL without losing their NCAA eligibility. Before July 1, 2021, the NCAA prohibited college student-athletes from profiting off things like autographs, social media influencing, brand endorsements, and a host of other activities. Now with the restrictions lifted, college student-athletes all over the country are using NIL to earn money, build careers, and gain recognition. However, not all NIL deals are the created equally, and there are many differences, most prominently differences between men and women's NIL opportunities in college sport.

3. Differences in Men's and Women's Sports (NIL and Otherwise)

The way sports are organized and perceived has often reflected underlying assumptions about gender in society. Men's sports have been institutionalized and funded far longer than women's, which has allowed these men's sports to build up a stronger infrastructure, fan base, and financial support system. There are physical differences that can contribute to this imbalance as well. Biologically, men generally have more muscle mass and produce higher levels of testosterone, which contributes to greater strength and speed (Handelsman et al., 2018). These traits can translate into more explosive or physically intense athletic performances. As a result, men's sports have historically received higher viewership, sponsorships, media coverage, and, in turn, more income (Leonard, 2022). This higher revenue stream is a commonly used argument to justify the significant pay gap between male and female athletes, but it is important to critically assess and address the context within that narrative that allows that pay gap and other gender-based disparities to exist.

The biological and revenue-producing rationales behind a perceived preference for watching men's sports fails to account for historical and systematic barriers that women's sports have faced and continue to face. Women were not widely allowed to participate in competitive sports until well into the 20th century, and for much of that time, they were discouraged from doing so under the belief that sports were too aggressive or inappropriate for women (Feilds, 2000).

It wasn't until 1972 that legislation (i.e., Title IX) was passed in the United States that required equal access to opportunity within sports and education programs regardless of gender (Harvard Law Review, 2023). This law marked a major turning point for women's sports, leading to increased participation, funding, and support. However, the development of the necessary infrastructure takes time to build, and with men's sports already well developed and building on that development, the gender gap in sport continued to widen even after the passing of this legislation.

Women's sports have achieved major advances over recent years, but the pay gap has yet to catch up to what is becoming a shrinking performance gap: "The gender gap in sport, although closing, remains, due to biological differences affecting performance, but it is also influenced by reduced opportunity and sociopolitical factors that influence full female participation across a range of sports around the world" (Capranica et al., 2013, p.1). Thus, these performance gaps between male and female athletes are often exaggerated. While it is true that biological differences can impact speed, strength, and endurance, this does not make women's sports less entertaining or less competitive. Fans of women's sports appreciate different styles of play, such as enhanced teamwork, technical skill or strategic finesse. There is much more to sports than just brute strength. The growing audience for events like the Women's World Cup and the WNBA proves that once they are given the commensurate exposure and support, women's sports can be just as compelling and exciting to watch as men's sports, and thus deserve to be treated as such, both financially and societally.

The U.S. Women's National Team is a great example of this issue. The women's team has consistently outperformed the Men's National Team in international competitions, winning four FIFA Women's World Cups and multiple Olympic gold medals (Murray, 2022). Despite this elite performance, the women have historically been paid significantly less than the men's team, which has had a much weaker performance record, with no World Cups nor any Olympic medals-ever. This hypocrisy and inequality sparked legal action and widespread public debate, resulting in a \$67 million lawsuit and corresponding claim for equal pay (Murray, 2022). This led to landmark 2022 agreement in which U.S. Soccer committed to equal pay for the men's and women's national teams moving forward (*U.S. Soccer Federation*, 2022). While this was a major step, it remains an exception rather than the norm regarding gender equality across sports.

Despite this progress, a significant wage gap remains across other sports. Male athletes, depending on the sport, receive 15% to over 100% more compensation than women in the same field. In 2022, tennis star Naomi Osaka was the highest-paid female athlete with earnings of \$51.1 million, while soccer star Lionel Messi topped the men's list at \$130 million. In professional basketball, the average NBA salary is \$10.8 million, compared to just \$113,000 for players in the WNBA. In hockey, the average NHL salary is around \$9.5 million, while players in the newly formed Professional Women's Hockey League (PWHL) make about \$80,000 on average (Oliveira, 2024). These examples demonstrate massive gender pay gaps at the professional level, but in the rapidly changing landscape of college sports, NIL has become an integral part of funding, supporting, and building athletic programs. As a result, NIL has the potential to balance the scales at the collegiate level. However, there are differences within women's sports that need to be taken into account to effectively understand the nuances of the gap that present obstacles to this. Structural differences in women's sports create different ways that they are perceived and societally positioned, which has an impact on NIL opportunities and revenue streams for the female athletes who participate in different types of college sports.

4. Structural Analysis of Women's Sports and NIL Opportunities

This section explores how social media engagement and subsequent NIL financial opportunities among female athletes is shaped not just by gender expectations but also by the type of sport they play. Different categories of sports (e.g., aesthetic sports, contact sports) have contrasting dynamics in not just how women perform in their sport, but also how these athletes experience online visibility and branding. Social media has opened up new pathways for self-promotion and NIL opportunities; however, this has also introduced complex pressures for female college athletes that are tied to appearance and femininity that have societal implications connected to objectification and sexualization. Female athletes in sports traditionally viewed as more "feminine" (e.g., gymnastics) often benefit from content that aligns with beauty-centric social media norms. Those in more physically aggressive or traditionally masculine sports (e.g., hockey) must navigate the tension between showcasing athletic strength while still conforming to visual expectations. The result is an uneven playing field where social media visibility--and the corresponding financial opportunities that

come along with it--often depend as much on how athletes look as on how they perform. This dynamic reinforces broader gender norms and highlights how digital spaces--despite offering new freedoms--can also reinforce older forms of gender inequality in more subtle ways.

4.1 Structural Categories of Sports

The analysis within this manuscript will be based on structurally breaking down women's sports into two categories: Aesthetic sports and Contact sports. Sports such as gymnastics, diving, synchronized swimming, dance, ballet, and others are categorized as *aesthetic sports* (Ackland et al., 2012; Beals & Manore, 2002; Gorrell et al., 2021; Smolak et al., 2000; Sundgot-Borgen, 1994). These are types of sports where performance is judged not only on technical skill and execution, but also on visual appeal, grace, and fluidity (Gorrell et al., 2021; Thompson & Sherman, 2010). Aesthetic sports blend athleticism and artistic expression. With an emphasis on optimal performance and technique, the aesthetic sport culture tends to favor athletes with slender and thin builds (Cereda, 2023). Furthermore, the uniform choice for aesthetic sports typically involves more revealing uniforms which accentuate body shapes, which can create issues for participants whose body type may not conform to this ideal (Steinfeldt, Zakrajsek, Bodey, Middendorf, & Martin, 2013).

Athletes in aesthetic sports are judged on a variety of components beyond technical execution. Although that remains a key element, these athletes must also consider additional criteria. They are evaluated on elements like posture, rhythm, flow, and synchronization, while points may be deducted for visible strain or a lack of elegance. Aesthetic sport athletes are subjectively evaluated by judges, leaving room for bias, inconsistency, and potential unfairness based on not only how they perform, but also how they look while performing (Gorrell et al., 2021; Thompson & Sherman, 2010). This creates a need to look both strong and graceful, which is a dual demand not typically faced by athletes in more traditional contact sports, where outcomes are determined by objective measures like goals scored.

The other category of sports we will address are *contact sports*, which are sports that involve physical engagement between players. Sports such as hockey, soccer, lacrosse, wrestling, basketball, and softball are examples of these contact sports. Contact sports are scored in an objective and measurable way, where competitors win based on points, distance, time, or

goals. Unlike aesthetic sports, contact sports don't score appearance, fluidity, grace or form. Therefore, there is not an artistic element nor subjective judging in these sports. As a result, the absence of aesthetic judgment often reinforces masculine ideals of performance and consequentially these sports are often viewed traditionally as 'appropriate for men' (Feilds, 2000). In place of this aesthetic aspect, these sports involve direct physical interaction between players where contact is allowed or essential to the game. These sports often promote toughness, strength, endurance and athletic power with little to no concern for the aesthetic appeal when performing. Instead, the objective is to score the most points or win a fight or race. With this, these athletes are looking to build muscles by making them as strong as they can to perform well. Although these athletes aren't judged on criteria such as appearance, female athletes especially are expected to be strong and competitive yet also maintain a certain level of attractiveness. This tension can influence how female athletes train, dress, and, most salient to this analysis, how they present themselves as they navigate the gendered paradox of muscularity and femininity (Steinfeldt, Carter, Benton, & Steinfeldt, 2011).

5. Historic Context Differentiating Aesthetic and Contact Sports for Women

Gender plays a significant role in how athletes in contact sports are perceived. Boys' participation has long been normalized and encouraged as a symbol of masculinity: "...the need for a masculine preserve, a space in which boys could learn to be men away from the interference of their mothers..." (Fields, 2000, p. 7). When playing these types of contact sports, traits like aggression, physicality and power are expected and often rewarded. In contrast, however, when girls exhibit similar behaviors, they are often criticized for being unfeminine or overly aggressive. Historically girls have faced much backlash towards playing sports in general, specifically those categorized as contact sports. Over time, many different views have been proffered on why girls shouldn't be allowed to participate in these types of sports: "Girls were more likely than boys to be physically injured while playing a contact sport" (Fields, 2000, p. 28). Even doctors have given medical justifications: "the medical profession warned of uterine displacement and other female reproductive failures if women jumped excessively or exerted themselves too vigorously because they believed women to be physically different from men and much more frail" (Fields, 2000, p. 8). Yet others

took a cruder approach, saying "Exercise in excess or of the wrong sort could ultimately lead, some segments of society warned, to female athletes who were 'muscle molls' and lesbians" (Feilds, 2000, p. 9).

While girls were systemically discouraged from participating in rough physical play associated with contact sports, they were often instead steered toward aesthetic sports like gymnastics or figure skating which were considered activities that emphasized grace, beauty, and poise rather than strength or dominance. These sports aligned more comfortably with conventional ideas of femininity and allowed women to compete, but only within a narrowly acceptable gender framework. When Title IX was initially passed in 1972, it specifically excluded contact sports from its scope (Fields, 2000). So from this, it is understandable that the infrastructure for women's sport participation would continue to drastically lag behind that of male athletes, particularly in contact sports. The long-standing gender divide not only shaped participation but also influenced the types of sports deemed appropriate for women, an influence that continues today, particularly through the lens of aesthetic expectations and the role of social media in the lives of athletes.

5.1 NIL and Social Media

As the visibility of women's sports continues to evolve, social media has emerged as a powerful platform that not only amplifies athletes' voices but also shapes how different sports—and the women who play them—are perceived and promoted. Over recent years, social media has seen a boom in engagement, especially with the growth of TikTok and the opportunity that comes with that platform. People are now able to monetize themselves and financially gain from their posts. With NIL sunsetting the amateurism model within the college sports world, NCAA student-athletes are now able to take advantage of these opportunities provided by platforms such as TikTok and Instagram to make money and promote their image. These college athletes can now profit from their personal brand through endorsements, brand deals and appearances.

Another advantage of social media is that it allows these athletes to reach people all around the world, increasing their ability to share their stories globally. Social media is also a self-run platform, meaning that the content on these apps is mostly unregulated and the people using the app are the ones creating the content. This is different from traditional media that is regulated and controlled by the person paying the athlete for the advertisement. Social media also

provides a space for underrepresented groups, such as women's sports, to potentially level the playing field. Platforms like these give female athletes direct control of their content and narrative, something they can't find as easily elsewhere. These athletes are no longer just athletes—they also become influencers, role models and businesspeople. They are able to showcase their training, personalities, lives, and great athletic achievements and abilities. And through this, athletes are building communities of engaged fans by direct interactions and humanizing themselves using social media.

These platforms are being used to increase visibility to women's sports through short videos and women athletes sharing their stories. This has led to an increase in their fan base and growth of the sport overall, which has also allowed female athletes to stand up against unfair pay. One example of this is the recent protest led by WNBA players at the 2025 All-Star game. Players wore shirts during warm-ups saying, "Pay us what you owe us." Because of social media, this protest went viral and reached audiences all over the world (Andrews & Philippou, 2025). The result of that protest had a huge impact societally, but we will have to wait until the next WNBA collective bargaining agreement to see how it impacts their paychecks.

While social media has many positive effects on women's sports, these platforms and opportunities also come with their share of drawbacks. The most prominent drawback is that social media reinforces potentially harmful beauty standards, placing immense pressure on athletes to meet the demands of these standards. Many female athletes struggle with the pressure of social media to appear both athletic and conventionally attractive online (Vidotto, 2021). It is admirable that female athletes are getting more attention on social media while promoting their sport, but with this gain also comes negative attention. There is a demand for these high-level college athletes to show their body in ways that aren't relevant to their sport. This objectification and sexualization process can cause insecurities among these athletes where they feel they are not attractive or fit enough, even though they know their body is functional within their sport (Vidotto, 2021). As a result, many female athletes feel the need to tone down their athleticism—and dial up their sexuality—to maintain those societal expectations of femininity (Vidotto, 2021). Social media acts as a site of constant surveillance where likes, comments, and algorithmic engagement reinforce narrow standards of beauty and femininity.

This can erode the confidence of athletes, causing them to compare themselves to unrealistic societal demands.

6. Paradox of Female Athlete Branding: The Roles of Athleticism and Objectification

As NIL grows and more female athletes promote their game on social media, there is opportunity for growth, but also exploitation, of these athletes. Currently, the NIL environment still tends to reward female athletes who present themselves in traditionally feminine ways. This gives these female athletes more brand deals, sponsorship and recognition (Kim, 2014). So it is impressive that women are receiving NIL opportunities, but it is unfortunate that these opportunities are skewed to favor those who meet conventional standards of beauty beyond their athletic ability. As an example, Haley and Hanna Cavinder are twin sisters who played college basketball for the University of Miami. They were reported to have a combined NIL valuation of \$1.7 million while they were playing (Bharucha, 2025). While they are good college basketball players, neither were All-Americans nor did they achieve at an athletic level commensurate with the best NCAA women's basketball players they played against. However, both of the Cavinder twins are blonde and considered beautiful by American societal standards, and both often post social media pictures of themselves in swimsuits and other comparably revealing garb that shows off their physique and female form. While playing college basketball certainly drives their fame, it is easily interpretable that their looks contribute mightily to their massive NIL monetization. The twins even chose to forgo their final season of college basketball to pursue their NIL careers (Marie, 2023).

Beyond this example, the type of sport plays a distinct role in female athletes' social media and NIL earning opportunities. Female athletes in aesthetic sports often find that their content naturally aligns with the visual demands of platforms like Instagram and TikTok, making it easier to gain followers, engagement, and sponsorship opportunities. Since aesthetic sports are already curated to be visually appealing, their posts fit neatly within the dominant beauty ideals celebrated online (Kim, 2014). Although they still struggle and feel the pressure to meet the demands of social media, it comes more naturally, because of the way their sport is structured on visual appeal, grace, and elegance (Gorrell et al., 2021). Furthermore, female athletes in aesthetic sports are often outfitted in more revealing and shape-fitting uniforms (Thompson & Sherman, 2010), which align with societal mechanisms of sexualization and objectification

that often drive monetizing efforts on social media. However, because their sports tend to expose more of their body, it can easily lead to body image issues, including the development of eating disorders and body dysmorphia (Miller 2024; Murnen et al., 2000).

In contrast, female athletes in contact sports frequently feel pressure to modify their presence to appear more traditionally feminine because their sports are not already designed in that way. Despite their athletic success, many of these athletes report needing to balance or downplay their strength by posting beauty content, fashion photos, or carefully curated images. They do this to attract attention and remain marketable in the eyes of followers, consistent with the aforementioned example of the Cavinder sisters. Female athletes in these sports often believe that if they do not meet societal standards of femininity, they would be less likely to be promoted, recognized, or monetized (Kim, 2014). Although there are still athletes in contact sports who receive recognition for their performances who are not considered conventionally attractive, it is much harder to achieve this and even impossible for some: "Contact sport athletes often found that performance alone was insufficient. Those who built a social media brand around their lifestyle or activism fared better in NIL rankings" (Kim, 2014, p. 80).

The result is a social media landscape that privileges conformity to narrow beauty standards over authentic athletic representation, offering visibility and commercial success more readily to those whose appearance fits the mold. Some high performing female athletes, such as rugby player Ilona Maher, are using their strong muscular physique to break this mold and bring more awareness to different body types and the relevance of their body's physical functionality within their sport. While all female athletes face pressures online, the expectations differ sharply based on the perceived femininity of them and of their sport, leading to unequal digital experiences and opportunities. However, on the other hand, aesthetic sports don't receive as much support and attention on mainstream broadcast media as contact sports. In this way social media does provide a way for them to level that playing field (e.g., Kim, 2014), but it comes at a potential cost.

7. Economic Perspectives and Future Directions of Women's College Sport

As we've discussed, NIL has fundamentally shifted the economic and regulatory structure of college athletics. Now, athletes have gained the ability to

monetize their NIL: "In its introductory year, NIL has generated \$1 billion in revenue for the NCAA (Boston, 2023) and has seemingly continued to pick up momentum" (Andrada, 2023, p.16). But despite the potential benefits of this new era, athletes are navigating a new and chaotic world of collegiate sports with little to no infrastructure or regulations to guide or protect them. They are no longer just athletes, but instead they are also businesspeople managing roles as influencers building their brand: they concurrently exist as entrepreneurs looking for deals while also existing as competitors fighting for athletic opportunities. They manage sponsorships, brand partnerships, social media engagement, scholarship considerations, and more. Around the country, high-profile athletes like Caitlyn Clark, Angel Reese, and Livvy Dunne are making a name for themselves through NIL. They are signing multimillion-dollar contracts and brand deals with major companies like Nike, Gatorade, StockX, and others. Dunne's NIL endorsements reportedly generate approximately \$4 million annually, highlighting the commercialization of individual athletic brands (Harthun, 2025).

As the NIL landscape rapidly evolves, women's sports are emerging as one of NIL's biggest growing sectors. In just 3 years, women's sports revenue has grown by 300% (Giorgio, 2024). This has led to an increase in the visibility of women's sports as a whole: "According to a recent Deloitte-commissioned survey, 99% of brand decision-makers say they have increased investments in women's sports over the past five years" (Giorgio, 2024, p 2). NIL is a major factor in the increase in popularity of women's sports, enabling athletes to monetize their platforms while promoting their sports to new audiences. (Pulliam, 2024). Athletes like Paige Bueckers and Caitlin Clark have become digital influencers in addition to athletic stars, generating national buzz and engagement. Caitlyn Clark was able to use social media to showcase her skills and gain a tremendous following, and through that, she brought many more fans to women's basketball. Due to Caitlin Clark's success in her college basketball career at University of Iowa, tripled ticket prices for the women's college basketball Final Four from the previous year and even doubled that of the men's Final Four (Harthun 2025). Women's sports are proving to be a highly valuable and expanding market, despite the historic obstacles they have been forced to overcome.

Adding to the financial complexity of the NIL era, there is also a new revenue-sharing model to take into account. Starting Fall of 2025, the NCAA will be

implementing new rules under the upcoming revenue-sharing provision from the recently finalized House v. NCAA settlement. Schools will now be allowed to directly compensate athletes, with a starting pool of \$20.5 million annually (O'Rourke, 2025). This new rule will create a sort of salary cap in order to promote parity in spending across programs. However, that pool of money is allocated for all sports--men's and women's--in each University program. This new policy will favor athletes in revenue-generating sports, such as football and men's basketball. Many estimates indicate that programs will allocate around \$14 million for football and \$4 to 5 million for men's basketball, leaving the remainder of that \$20.5 million pool to be distributed across all other sports (O'Rourke, 2025). NIL will still exist, but the NCAA has created a clearinghouse to approve of all deals so that these deals represent compensation for athlete name, image, and likeness (e.g., social media influence, an Arby's commercial) as opposed to a payment for an athlete to play for their institution. The intent is to revert NIL back to its original intended form, as opposed to the de facto 'pay for play' mechanism that NIL had inadvertently morphed into in its three short years of existence, as an unintended consequence.

With the NCAA's new revenue-sharing model set to roll out in 2025, it is now more critical than ever to promote and protect the importance of women's sports. Thanks to NIL opportunities and social media, athletes such as Livvy Dunne and Ilona Maher are doing exactly that. While their approaches to presenting themselves and their sports differ, both bring significant visibility to women's athletics. A competitor in an aesthetic sport, Livvy often embraces traditional femininity and portrays a body image that aligns with societal norms, yet her platform still celebrates women's gymnastics and her career at LSU. As of August 2025, @livvydunne has 5 million followers on Instagram and @livvy has 8 million on TikTok (Dunne *Instagram profile*; Dunne *TikTok profile*), showing her popularity and success as an influencer, and earning her close to \$4 million dollars in NIL deals yearly (Harthun, 2025). Through this reach, Livvy has built a career showcasing herself and the aesthetic sport of women's gymnastics to audiences around the globe.

Ilona Maher, on the other hand, takes a different approach to social media. As a top-performing female athlete in a contact sport, her broad-shouldered muscular build is central to her rugby performance, much as Livvy's traditionally feminine build is to her gymnastics performance. Ilona uses her platform

to challenge stereotypes about female athletes and normalize strong, athletic bodies. Though she often faces criticism for this, she doesn't let that negativity deter her. Instead, she channels it into motivation to reshape how people view women's sports and, in turn, women's bodies. She has over 4 million followers on Instagram making her the most followed rugby player in the world (Cox, 2025). She uses her reach and success to promote women's rugby. In her post Olympic medal winning interview, she talks about the need to watch, attend and invest more in women's rugby. Her efforts resulted in a \$4 million dollar donation to the US Women's Rugby Sevens Team (Cox, 2025). Ilona's portrayal of the paradox of muscularity and femininity (e.g., Steinfeldt et al., 2011) is inspiring to young female athletes whose bodies do not conform to societal standards of femininity. By seeing her, they can potentially find opportunities to excel in contact sports like rugby which require the functionality of their muscular yet still feminine form.

Whether you believe one approach is better than the other, both Livvy's and Ilona's strategies benefit them as athletes, as businesswomen, and most importantly to this analysis, both are leaders in the growth of women's sports, for both aesthetic and contact sports. The more women who share their sports journeys, the more curiosity they generate. And thanks to NIL and other mechanisms to monetize these female athletes' brands, that curiosity can be profitable. This growth matters, especially with the NCAA's new revenue-sharing model's potential to disadvantage smaller, less popular, and thus lower-revenue sports-categories that have historically included many women's sports.

In sum, the trajectory of college sports is still uncertain, as the NCAA scrambles to get a hold of the chaos it unleashed back in 2021. These developments make it critical that the NIL reforms and revenue-sharing models from the House settlement address fairness and gender equity in college sports. Title IX is still enforceable and looming over this emerging new model of college athletics. Money has always been the driving force of college sports, but athlete compensation now exists more above the table and in the public eye. In an ideal world, the US Women's Soccer Team would be the model template for compensation based on performance as opposed to outdated narratives that have driven the gender pay gap. In the case of the US Women's Soccer Team, we have female athletes in a contact sport who have demonstrated success that greatly exceeds the performance of their male counterparts, and they are

being compensated accordingly. It is noteworthy that even though they are drastically more successful on the pitch, these women had to fight long and hard to be paid equally—NOT more than—the men, despite the male soccer infrastructure existing for much longer and with much more support than the women's. The NCAA should take a lesson from that example, with a verbal assist from the classic sports movie *Field of Dreams*, by adhering to the adage (with pronoun adjusted), "If you build it, they will come." In other words, if you support women's sports, then the money, interest, engagement, and attention will follow.

8. References

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