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How Name, Image and Likeness “Fit” in Sport Partnerships

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Sponsorship opportunities in college athletics have shifted dramatically as athletes have rights to name, image and likeness (NIL). NIL assets, once illegal for college athletes, are prime avenues for brands to reach college sports fans, the largest and most avid sports fan base in the US (Dosh, 2021). Our purpose is to evaluate how these changes “fit” into the overall sponsorship landscape and what will come next. With the impact on brands, properties and consumers over time, we narrow our discussion around “fit,” the most prevalent factor in academic sponsorship research (Wakefield et al., 2020). Among other ways, consumers see the sponsor and property as a better fit when the sponsor:

1. Serves a function (e.g., Frito-Lay supplies fans at concession stands and couches),
2. Has a related image (e.g., Rolex and professional golf tournaments bring similar prestigious associations to mind; Gwinner & Eaton, 1999), or
3. Shares values, mission or target audiences with the sponsored property (Becker-Olsen & Hill, 2006).

We consider and share examples of how some NIL deals have a good fit (a) at the local, regional and national levels, and (b) in groups rather than as individual athletes. We conclude with an emerging entity in NIL agreements, third party fan sites. TexAgs, a fan site serving followers of Texas A&M University athletics, creates exclusive content series for brands to sponsor. This allows the site to better serve the audience and to build attractive assets for brands hesitant to work directly with athletes.

NIL Partnerships that Fit at the Local, Regional and National Level

While the importance of congruence as a moderator of the effectiveness of athlete endorsements is well-established, fit and authenticity may be manufactured or created by brand marketers. A local tire repair shop or fried chicken franchise may not seem to fit as a sponsor of an elite college athletic program. However, supporting an endorsement agreement with a current student-athlete with an activation platform integrated throughout the marketing mix can influence consumer perceptions of both authenticity and congruence.

Following are three case studies of current NIL partnerships at the local, regional, and national level that showcase how endorsement agreements with student-athletes leverage a variety of sponsorship strategies.

Local

Chapel Hill Tire is an auto repair shop with 13 locations in Chapel Hill, North Carolina that consistently advertises on the Tar Heel Radio Network. The chain made the decision to partner with one of the most successful student-athletes in her chosen sport, Erin Matson, a two-time national player of the year in field hockey. Matson scored a game-winning goal in overtime of a national championship game for UNC, the most successful field hockey program in history, including three consecutive national titles (2018-2020).

Chapel Hill Tire activates the partnership via radio advertisements spotlighting their “Drive Happy” slogan. In the ad, Matson explains that she balances a busy life committed to academics and athletics. She appreciates that if she has car trouble or needs new tires, Chapel Hill Tire will pick up her vehicle, perform the necessary repairs and drop it back off at her apartment afterwards, without having to adjust her schedule. The messaging connects the ease of tire repair with the demands of students, athletes or otherwise, who value time and convenience.

Regional

Bojangles has been a consistent sponsor of the Atlantic Coast Conference (ACC) and top programs within the conference, including Clemson University and the University of North Carolina. Headquartered in Charlotte, Bojangles has sponsored the ACC as the exclusive chicken, biscuits, and iced tea of the ACC since 2015. In arenas around the conference when the home team approaches 100 points, the scoreboard and LED advertising proclaim, “It’s Bo Time.” Fans receive a two-for-one biscuit deal if the home team scores 100 points and wins.

In 2021, Bojangles added agreements with the quarterbacks at Clemson and North Carolina, D.J. Uiagalelei and Sam Howell. The players’ social media audience was utilized to solidify the connection between Bojangles and college athletics throughout the season. Fried chicken and biscuits by itself may not represent a natural pairing with college sports. But the longtime pairing of the ACC and individual schools with Bojangles, supplemented by individual NIL endorsement agreements, helps to spotlight what most ACC fans would consider to be an authentic partnership.

National

Market leader Coca-Cola is an NCAA Corporate Champion with more than 90 school agreements. Rival soft drink Dr Pepper is an official sponsor of the College Football Playoff (CFBP) and promotes the national sponsorship platform with its large scale creative “Fansville” campaign, now in its fourth season starring Brian Bosworth. Dr Pepper creates a more authentic partnership with college football with an integrated campaign and consistent messaging focused on the sport. According to MarketCast, Coca-Cola’s brand recognition as an official NCAA sponsor declined by 14% compared to its three-year average last year, while Dr Pepper’s (incorrect) recognition increased by two percentage

points (Broughton, 2021).

In 2021, the Fansville campaign featured Uiagalelei in commercial spot. “Every time I turn on the TV every Saturday, I always see a commercial with Dr Pepper,” Uiagalelei said in an interview with *Sports Illustrated*. “When they reached out to me, it was a no-brainer” (Dellinger, 2021, p. 6). Dr. Pepper was second only to fellow CFBP sponsor Allstate in advertising spending during college football broadcasts, spending more than \$1.1 million across 378 primetime spots through early September, with the spot featuring Uiagalelei leading all brands with more than 120 million ad impressions (Smith, 2021). As noted by Dellinger (2021, p. 19), “a carbonated, sugar-loaded soda isn’t necessarily on his dietary plan as a major college football player.” However, through consistent, integrated activation Dr Pepper is perceived to be an integral part of the fabric of college football fandom.

The preceding case studies feature different types and levels of activation platforms, ranging from a local radio campaign and vertically integrated sponsorship platforms inclusive of multiple local and regional sponsorships. Tire repair shops, fried chicken, and sugary soft drinks became more congruent with the sport of college football through integrated activation platforms featuring student-athletes to communicate the brand-property linkage in a way consumers perceive as authentic.

Why Sponsoring Groups of Athletes Can Be Better than Individuals

College players’ performances come and go quickly. They do not have extensive performance track records compared to professional athletes. A preseason Heisman favorite can be benched before midseason and hit the transfer portal by Christmas. A superstar on the court can leave to be a professional after spending less than two semesters at the school. Finding an image-based fit with a single athlete is problematic for brand strategies, which are best served over the long term. Virtually every sponsorship with Power Five athletic programs (and professional sports) includes contracts of three or more years. What college athlete can deliver for three straight years? The risk-reward of focusing on single athletes is questionable.

A strategic way to reduce the risk around the performance of single athletes and to better cultivate a brand’s image over time is to strike NIL agreements with groups of athletes. NIL agreements with groups of athletes can also work within a larger campaign. Denny’s “All-Pancaker Team” includes four offensive linemen known for serving up the best pancake blocks, representing Power Five schools and Historical Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs). Better still, they will be paid in all the pancakes they can eat at Denny’s during their careers. The players are featured in Denny’s digital, social, and commercial messages. Instead of relying on individuals that can become transfer portal material almost overnight, Denny’s is setting the blueprint for creative use of NIL in integrated campaigns.

Outback Steakhouse introduced the TeamMATES Program with seven quarterbacks, running backs or wide receivers at big-name schools Ohio State, Michigan and Florida. Of these, A.J. Henning (36 receiving yards) and Anthony Richardson (392 passing yards) don’t add much to the party, but the other five (CJ Stroud, Chris Olave and Garrett Wilson of OSU; Blake Corum, Michigan, and Emory Jones of Florida) have panned out on the field. Students at these schools get 10% off their checks with student IDs. Outback plans to add other schools and athletes to the TeamMATES program during the winter and spring sports seasons. In this way, the strategy does not center around the performance of one or two projected stars but can still benefit from those who do give outstanding performances.

Some argue that with NIL opportunities brands may shift sponsorship spending from traditional professional and collegiate properties to individual athletes. Some budgets might shift, but the brands risking six figure deals on individual collegiate players will be the exception rather than the rule.

A New Role for Fan Sites to Attract Sponsors

NIL athlete endorsement agreements have been prolific and issues surrounding who brokers, manages, and markets the agreements has not been widely discussed or explored. Deals may be managed by individual agents for the players and marketing agencies on behalf of brands. But it's early in the NIL game to clearly paint the landscape for managing NIL student athlete endorsements. NCAA member institutions are prohibited from providing such management and oversight. These NCAA rules have done little to provide direction or processes for companies brokering NIL agreements between student athlete endorsers and brand partners.

TexAgs.com, a Texas A&M fandom new media company has generated 32 million page views and reaches over 400,000 unique visitors each month (see Bennett, 2017). It provides an interesting case of filling the gap with the assets sponsors want by brokering deals between college athletes and businesses.

TexAgs customers are college sports fans visiting the media site based on fandom of the Aggie football team. With over 50 message boards, *TexAgs* produces an abundance of social media content, traditional radio and television broadcasting media options, and podcasts. *TexAgs* has produced documentary movies, short films, commercial videos, and supplied/ event travel planning and execution (Bennett, 2017). Thus, *TexAgs* provides an a unique platform for companies to develop portfolios to reach fans via NIL endorsement agreements. Following the June 30, 2021, move by Division 1 Board of Directors to approve the new name, image and likeness (NIL) policy, the firm has actively managed NIL endorsement deals with A&M football players.

TexAgs made national news in July 2021 when it brokered a deal with local GreenPrint Real Estate Group to pay two football athletes \$10,000 each for exclusive interviews that fans could only view via their website (Wilson, 2021). GreenPrint partnered with *TexAgs* to use their platform to manage, produce and deliver the interviews to the target audience. In turn, *TexAgs* paid the athletes for the interviews. The firm garnered national media attention by managing the deal and because “news organizations typically do not pay for interviews of players” (Wilson, 2021). Preliminary data indicates around 181,000 impressions from social media (Twitter, Facebook and Instagram) and the two articles written about the interviews.

After the initial GreenPrint agreement, *TexAgs* added additional corporate partners willing to fund and underwrite exclusive weekly interviews of seven different football players at \$1,000 per interview per athlete. The Jaylon Jones & Robinson Team Realty partnership included two interviews generating nearly 60,000 impressions across platforms. *TexAgs* built an integrated marketing platform for each interview to maximize reach across Facebook, Twitter, and the website's graphics packages.

While *TexAgs* has marginally profited from NIL deals with A&M athletes, the firm strategy moving forward is intriguing as a potential model for other schools. Initial strategy has been to broker deals based on the potential to (a) drive support of the other *TexAgs* products, (b) create and maintain goodwill between the company and the university, and (c) develop positive sentiment from football recruits to sustain ongoing success. As the NIL business progresses, sponsors will have even more inventory to consider.

Conclusion

The influx of NIL assets tied to college athletes offer new and different opportunities for brand sponsors. Sponsors at the local, regional, and national levels can utilize NIL agreements to cultivate or create a good fit. Some with longstanding marketing campaigns with intercollegiate athletics can augment campaigns with individual athletes. Others may reduce the risk of aligning with individual athletes by creating campaigns for groups of athletes. Fan sites, such as *TexAgs*, may play a unique role as broker and owner of assets sold to sponsors. These

shifts broaden the available inventory for brand sponsors. Expect to see more collegiate athletes NIL included as part of larger activation platforms, campaigns focused on groups of athletes rather than any one individual, and new media fan sites.

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