



March 2026

Report

Checkbooks vs. Textbooks: Big Money and the Crisis in the College Sports

Andrew Perloff

Executive Summary

College sports are a uniquely American institution, combining athletics and academics in a system that has shaped campus life for more than a century. Today, however, that system faces mounting pressures. College athletics remain enormously popular—generating roughly \$19 billion annually and drawing record television audiences—but that success rests on an increasingly unstable foundation.

The recent commercial success of college athletics was made possible, in part, by a series of legal and policy changes that have transformed the system. Court rulings limiting the NCAA’s regulatory authority and the legalization of compensation through name, image, and likeness (NIL) deals have created a new marketplace for college athletes. Players can also more easily transfer between schools, creating a growing market for student-athlete talent.

These developments have created opportunities for athletes but also placed enormous strain on universities and athletic departments. The revenue gap between the richest athletic programs and smaller schools has grown wider than ever, threatening the viability of athletics at many institutions. Rising player compensation and revenue-sharing also pose a threat to nonrevenue sports, which depend on football and basketball income to survive. At the same time, universities face increasing pressure to allow athletes to bargain collectively or to classify them as employees—changes that could fundamentally reshape the relationship between athletics and academics.

About Us

The Manhattan Institute is a community of scholars, journalists, activists, and civic leaders committed to advancing economic opportunity, individual liberty, and the rule of law in America and its great cities.



These tensions have prompted widespread concern that the current model is unsustainable. This report examines how college sports reached this point and explores potential reforms—from revenue sharing and collective bargaining to changes in broadcasting law—that could help preserve athletics as part of the university system while adapting to its new economic reality.

Introduction: The State of Play in College Athletics

College football television ratings once again reached a record high in 2025, up 9% over the previous year, according to Nielsen.¹ With the value of live sports on television continuing to rise, schools in the most powerful athletic conferences are negotiating highly lucrative deals for football and basketball. *The Economist* estimated that college sports generated \$19 billion in 2024.² Of all the professional sports leagues, only the NFL earns more.

This commercial success comes on the heels of a fundamental change in college sports. Beginning in 2021, college athletes gained the right to profit from their name, image, and likeness (NIL) without losing their eligibility to play intercollegiate sports. Starting in 2022, players were allowed to transfer schools without losing a year of eligibility. Together, these rule changes ushered in a new arms race for revenue-generating sports like football and basketball. College quarterbacks started signing multimillion-dollar contracts that rivaled those in pro leagues. Students regularly switch schools in search of playing time or more lucrative contracts; according to the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), more than 10,000 football players across Division I, II, and III entered the 2026 transfer portal, the official database for students seeking a new school.

Salaries for coaches and athletic directors have grown tremendously. A 2023 report revealed that college football coaches are the highest-paid public employees in 31 states.³ Donors have pumped millions into improving facilities, many of which outshine professional sports teams' buildings.

Rising costs threaten athletic departments and non-revenue-generating sports programs. And NCAA's ability to enforce its guidelines has deteriorated after a series of high-profile losses in court.⁴

Long-term, systemic issues loom over college sports, with no immediate solution in sight. Conferences realign regularly to maximize football revenue, with little regard for geographic or historical considerations. Questions about how to equitably share revenue with women athletes in accordance with Title IX remain unanswered. And the gap between the high-revenue athletic programs and smaller schools continues to grow.⁵

In a 2025 poll conducted by the Knight Commission on Intercollegiate Athletics—a nonprofit group of college leaders focused on reform—and Elon University (North Carolina), 80% of university presidents and chancellors at Division I schools believe that the division is headed in a negative direction. And 78% are concerned about athletic programs needing institutional funds and student fees to avoid a deficit.⁶

The transfer portal and a legitimate means of paying players are relatively new phenomena, but the challenges facing college sports began to develop long ago. The increased expenses of college sports, NCAA's limited oversight, and the growing imbalance between academics and sports can be traced back to choices made decades ago by athletes, coaches, administrators, politicians, and judges.



This report will highlight four notable individuals in the history of college sports—a Supreme Court justice, a high school basketball star, an energy billionaire, and a food-service worker with a jump shot—whose stories provide perspective on how colleges reached this pivotal moment and what the possible next steps are.

Byron White: “Both Clark Kent and Superman”

Supreme Court Justice Byron “Whizzer” White understood the value of college sports as no other national leader could. An All-American halfback at the University of Colorado and a Rhodes scholar, White credited the lessons he learned on and off the field for shaping his remarkable career. In 1937, he set a record for all-purpose yards per game at the University of Colorado that lasted until future Hall of Famer Barry Sanders broke it in 1988. White went on to lead the NFL in rushing while studying law at Yale University. Fellow Justice Potter Stewart described his former Yale classmate as “both Clark Kent and Superman.”⁷

In 1984, White found himself in a position to shape the future of college sports when the antitrust case *NCAA v. Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma* reached the high court. At the time, NCAA oversaw the distribution of games on television, and it limited the available inventory in order to protect stadium ticket purchases. In 1977, after schools had formed the College Football Association in order to negotiate their own contracts, NCAA responded with sanctions. The University of Oklahoma and the University of Georgia brought suit, arguing that NCAA’s control of television rights was an unfair restraint of trade. The Court ruled 7–2 in favor of Oklahoma, claiming that NCAA operated as a “classic cartel.”⁸ Schools and conferences soon began to negotiate their own contracts, opening the floodgates of television revenue.

In dissent, Justice White warned about the danger of removing guardrails in college sports: “By mitigating what appears to be a clear failure of the free market to serve the ends and goals of higher education, the NCAA ensures the continued availability of a unique and valuable product, the very existence of which might well be threatened by unbridled competition in the economic sphere.”⁹

The *Raleigh News & Observer* described the case as “a line of demarcation in college athletics, a before and after.”¹⁰ Before 1984, NCAA tried to give as many teams as possible a chance to be on the air, and such top teams were televised only once or twice a year. After 1984, elite programs would gain more visibility and grow in popularity; cable television was growing, and networks like ESPN needed programming.

TV contracts have proved extremely lucrative for college sports programs. In 2020, amid a live sports boom, the Southeastern Conference signed a 10-year, \$3 billion deal with ESPN. Two years later, the Big Ten conference signed a seven-year, \$7 billion media rights deal with several networks. In 2024, the College Football Playoff, which is managed by conference commissioners, signed a six-year, \$7.8 billion contract with ESPN.¹¹ White, who resigned from the Court in 1993 and died in 2002, might not recognize the multibillion business that is today’s college football.

As White would perhaps have predicted, these developments have come at the expense of academics. A *Sports Illustrated* story on Penn State quarterback Drew Allar revealed that he was taking only one class (online) during autumn 2025—which was presented as a positive because it meant that he could focus on football.¹² North Carolina State basketball coach Will Wade even lambasted his own team for focusing too much on academics: “We’ve got a lot of nice guys. . . . Got great



Checkbooks vs. Textbooks: Big Money and the Crisis in College Sports

team GPA, got all that stuff, over a 3.0. It's wonderful—if we were running a daycare.” Wade faced only light criticism for these comments, likely because they reflect an attitude common in college basketball today.¹³

At all levels of college sports—not just for athletes who receive NIL money—the time and energy required to perform on the field can be difficult to balance with academic study. But as Byron White explained in an interview later in his life, the balance had swung decisively toward athletics: “There weren’t anywhere near the pressures on people [in] those days to devote [their] heart and soul to athletics. . . . I don’t think a football coach, especially if you were on scholarship, ever would let you do [what I did]. You wouldn’t have the time.”¹⁴

In 1984, around the same time the Supreme Court was debating the future of college sports, Grambling State University (in Louisiana) head coach Eddie Robinson, the all-time wins leader in college football history, was visiting Congress to gain more visibility for historically black universities. He, too, was worried about the direction of college sports, warning that “the tail is about to wag the dog. It is television now. It will be recruiting tomorrow. It will be academic standards after that. It will be buying athletes next until the whole college athletic structure tumbles down.”¹⁵

White and Robinson both warned about the perils of chasing television dollars. Courts and Congress mostly ignored the fact that college sports exist to educate and shape future leaders. Now, as Robinson said, the tail is wagging the dog. Money drives most major decisions. The need for universities, lawmakers, and the courts to redirect college sports is more urgent than ever, partly because of missed opportunities over 40 years ago.

Ed O’Bannon: The NIL Pioneer

Diehard college basketball fans knew about Ed O’Bannon before he ever stepped onto the Pauley Pavilion court at UCLA. A standout forward at Artesia High School in Lakewood, California, O’Bannon was a McDonald’s All-American and was named *Basketball Times* National High School Player of the Year in 1990.¹⁶ He was considered by many a more talented prospect than future NBA Hall of Famers Grant Hill and Penny Hardaway.¹⁷

O’Bannon originally committed to the University of Nevada–Las Vegas to play for legendary coach Jerry Tarkanian. But after NCAA placed UNLV on probation because of recruiting violations, O’Bannon switched his commitment to UCLA, where he was a two-time All-American and led the Bruins to the 1995 national title.

O’Bannon’s pro career was not as successful as his college career. Despite being taken ninth overall by the New Jersey Nets in the 1995 draft, O’Bannon played just two seasons in the NBA. He played basketball overseas for several years but did not make nearly as much money as everyone expected that he would. In a popular list of players who went from “NCAA Riches to NBA Rags,” O’Bannon was at the top.¹⁸ For perspective, the top basketball player in the class of 2025, A. J. Dybantsa, reportedly signed a \$7.1 million NIL deal after committing to play for Brigham Young University.¹⁹

In 2009, years after retiring, O’Bannon, then a car salesman in Las Vegas, saw a friend’s son play as a classic UCLA team in the EA Sports video game *March Madness*. “The game noticeably didn’t have my name,” O’Bannon noted, “but it had everything else: Number 31; 6’8”; 222 pounds. Power forward. Left-handed. It was very cool. Ironically, my friend mentioned that he paid \$60 for the game. I had no idea that this likeness was created, because no one from EA Sports contacted me to ask for my approval or to use my NIL. And I definitely didn’t receive a dime.”²⁰



Checkbooks vs. Textbooks: Big Money and the Crisis in College Sports

Around the same time, a powerful force in basketball was looking for a fight with NCAA.²¹ Sonny Vaccaro, a marketing executive at Nike and later Adidas, exerted enormous influence at every level of basketball. (The 2023 film *Air* stars Matt Damon as Vaccaro recruiting Michael Jordan to Nike.) Vaccaro's animosity toward NCAA stemmed partly from the organization's treatment of his close friend Tarkanian, who, as mentioned above, had once recruited O'Bannon.²² In 2009, Vaccaro urged a group of lawyers to consider a class-action suit against NCAA for taking advantage of student athletes. He just needed the right player as plaintiff.

According to the *New York Times*, Vaccaro was considering several options when O'Bannon happened to call to tell him about his encounter with the video game.²³ O'Bannon became the lead plaintiff, alongside basketball icons such as Oscar Robertson and Bill Russell, in a suit against NCAA, EA Sports, and the Collegiate Licensing Company. EA Sports and Collegiate Licensing settled, leaving NCAA alone to defend its amateurism policy.

After five years of litigation, O'Bannon prevailed: in 2014, District Court Judge Claudia Wilken ruled that NCAA's amateurism rules violated antitrust law, and she ordered the association not to enforce any rule "that would prohibit its member schools and conferences from offering their FBS football or Division I basketball recruits a limited share of the revenues generated from the use of their names, images, and likenesses in addition to a full grant-in-aid."²⁴

NCAA fought for years to have the ruling overturned on appeal. ESPN's Dan Wetzel explained: "Instead of accepting the need for a new way of doing business, the NCAA just got more entrenched. Rather than share the revenue from the video game, the game was canceled. College sports embraced a hard line, continuing to pour millions into ill-fated legal defenses and, later, Washington lobbyists who gladly cashed checks and sold the pipe dream that Congress would save them."²⁵

Although NCAA was able to get the ruling in the O'Bannon case partially overturned on appeal, the lawsuit opened the doors to similar challenges. In 2021, the issue reached the Supreme Court in *NCAA v. Alston*, in which the Court ruled unanimously that NCAA was not immune from antitrust rules.²⁶

In a concurring opinion, Justice Brett Kavanaugh, a former junior varsity basketball player at Yale, explained: "Nowhere else in America can businesses get away with agreeing not to pay their workers a fair market rate on the theory that their product is defined by not paying their workers a fair market rate. And under ordinary principles of antitrust law, it is not evident why college sports should be any different. The NCAA is not above the law."²⁷

Meanwhile, several states had already passed laws allowing college athletes to profit from their own name, image, and likeness and were awaiting the Court's ruling before implementing them. On July 1, 2021, college athletes were able to monetize their marketing rights for the first time. At that time, there was bipartisan support for paying student athletes. Democrats claimed that the ruling was a victory for players' rights;²⁸ Republicans supported it on free-market principles.²⁹ While there was apprehension, especially within athletic departments, there was also optimism that a new system would help students.

O'Bannon's chance encounter with a video-game version of himself set off a chain of events that led to today's NIL market. But neither O'Bannon nor most people in the industry knew just how fast that market would grow or about the consequences that it would have for college athletics.

Cody Campbell: The Man with



the Plan

At first, NIL contracts were relatively modest. On July 1, 2021—the first day that players could enter such contracts—University of Miami quarterback D'Eriq King made headlines for his deals with a moving company and a local auto dealership worth \$20,000 combined.³⁰

But the value of NIL contracts quickly grew, thanks partly to the growth of NIL “collectives.” According to college sports website *On3*, these collectives pooled “funds from a wide swath of donors to help create NIL opportunities for student-athletes.”³¹ The Court’s ruling had required only that student athletes be allowed to monetize their marketing rights, but collectives—often founded by “prominent alumni and influential supporters” eager to help their teams—began making offers well above market value of those rights. After its loss in the Supreme Court, NCAA was hesitant to act as an enforcement arm on player compensation.³²

In August 2024, the *New York Times* reported that 80% of that year’s projected \$1.7 billion in NIL transactions would come through collectives. Prices skyrocketed. University of Texas starting quarterback Quinn Ewers earned nearly \$2 million, while his backup, Arch Manning, made deals worth over \$3 million. University of Iowa basketball superstar Caitlin Clark was pulling in \$3 million as well, and LSU gymnast Livvy Dunne was capitalizing on her social-media fame with contracts worth \$3.9 million.³³

While players are not required to disclose their actual earnings, the rapid increase in rates was alarming to schools and NCAA.³⁴ *NCAA v. Alston* enabled athletes to earn money from their names, images, and likenesses. Football and basketball players were signing contracts with little connection to marketing. With no guardrails, teams entered bidding wars over players, with no limit as to what wealthy boosters would pay to field a great team.

The power of the collectives would eventually be limited, after NCAA opted to settle a class-action lawsuit brought by Arizona State swimmer Grant House. After litigating the case for five years, NCAA reached a settlement in the *House* case and two other class-action lawsuits that included all Division I athletes in July 2025.³⁵ Under the settlement, NCAA agreed to provide \$2.8 billion in back pay for athletes without access to NIL. More important, it agreed to a new revenue-sharing agreement that would allow colleges to pay athletes directly.

The *House* settlement set up a new world order in college sports. Division I schools would have a cap of \$20.5 million to compensate all their athletes. The agreement aimed to remove collectives as the primary payment source. Students could still profit from their NIL, in addition to the revenue-sharing income, but could only sign marketing contracts that represented an appropriate market value. NCAA would create a “College Sports Commission” to ensure that deals were legitimate. The settlement removed a limit on athletic scholarships, while limiting the roster size of programs.

NCAA president Charlie Baker said that the settlement was necessary to protect college sports from future litigation. “Blame whoever you wish to blame,” he said. “But the simple truth is clear: College sports’ collective inability or unwillingness to change years ago put the entire enterprise at risk. Is the settlement disruptive? Very much so. But it is an opportunity for the [Division I] community to pay for back damages over 10 years, instead [of] triple that amount all at once. And it creates a future that comes with choices, instead of bankruptcy.”³⁶

Baker realized that the new system would place a strain on athletic departments. They were now required to provide up to \$20.5 million to cover current roster payments and fulfill the back-pay obligations outlined in the settlement agreement. Questions remained about what to do with the collectives that had been paying players over the last few years. For most college football leaders, making the new financial structure work presented problems. Others saw it as opportunity.



Checkbooks vs. Textbooks: Big Money and the Crisis in College Sports

Cody Campbell was an offensive lineman at Texas Tech University (2001–05) under coach Mike Leach, whom *60 Minutes* labeled “The Mad Scientist of Football.” Leach was known for innovative strategies that enabled his teams to compete with more established teams.³⁷

Campbell, an all-Big 12 player and Academic All-American, went on to become a billionaire after cofounding Double Eagle Energy. He remained engaged with his alma mater, serving on the Texas Tech Board of Regents and running the school’s top collective. When Campbell set out to help his alma mater’s football team, he devised a plan that Leach would have been proud of. “In the summer of 2024 we felt like [*House v. NCAA*] was in a place where it was probably going to eventually get settled,” Campbell told *POWERS Pod*:

What we identified was that there was this gap period between the time that we knew we were going to have revenue sharing with the athletes pursuant to the *House* settlement, but for a period of time we were still going to be able to pay NIL with basically no rules. We essentially decided to take advantage of that little window. That is the strategy that we presented to several boosters and donors. We said, look guys, this is our one big opportunity. . . . We can get as much money front-loaded as possible and then we can also utilize promises of revenue share in addition . . . and we can go out and acquire as much talent as we want.³⁸

Campbell’s plan succeeded. Texas Tech, which had never finished in the top 10 of the Associated Press poll, climbed to no. 4 at the end of the regular season, before falling 23–0 to Oregon in its opening College Football Playoff game. But Campbell was not discouraged. After the loss, he told *USA Today* that the program would “double down” on trying to build a champion team.³⁹

In addition to helping build the Texas Tech program, Campbell was thinking more broadly about how to repair college sports. His experience had given him a close-up view of how athletic departments functioned and why they were struggling. And Campbell—a member of the America First Policy Institute, a nonprofit associated with Donald Trump—knew where to bring those issues.⁴⁰

“I’ve been in conversations with President Trump for quite some time now,” Campbell told *USA Today* in 2025. “The one thing I can tell you is he cares very much about preserving and maintaining college sports. Not just football, but women’s sports and Olympic sports, and the opportunities they provide. It’s one of the best things we have culturally in this country. I don’t want to see it die. And we can all see it’s dying.”⁴¹ Campbell was part of a group that helped the White House craft the “Saving College Sports” Executive Order on July 24, 2025,⁴² which called for the end of the collective system.

For Campbell, however, broader reform is needed. Revenue sharing for athletes, which Campbell supports, places financial strain on athletic departments. To help schools raise more revenue, Campbell is pushing for a change to the 1961 Sports Broadcasting Act, which gives pro leagues like the NFL and NBA an antitrust exemption so that they can pool the teams’ broadcasting rights and sign deals as a single unit. College sports are not included in the act; thus, conferences negotiate their own deals.⁴³ Campbell points out that NBA has half the viewers of college sports but makes twice the revenue because it can negotiate as a single entity. If schools could do the same, Campbell argues, they could generate an additional \$7 billion in revenue.⁴⁴

In a TV ad that he created to lobby for the reform, which first aired during the opening weekend of the 2025 college football season, Campbell stands on an empty football field and warns that college football is in trouble: “Dramatic changes are causing nearly every athletic department in America to operate in the red, forcing cuts. Putting women’s sports and Olympic dreams in immediate danger. . . . The solution? Congress must modernize the Sports Broadcasting Act. That single change will generate the funding needed to protect all sports at all schools.”⁴⁵



The conferences and networks currently in multibillion-dollar contracts are against amending the old law. FOX and ABC refused to air the ad at first. Big 12 commissioner Brett Yormark, a former television executive, warned that Campbell was on the wrong path: “There are unintended consequences to amending the [1961 Sports Broadcasting Act] that Cody and his team need to better understand.”⁴⁶

While Campbell, Trump, and college leaders continue to debate how to repair college sports, a significant voice is sometimes missing: What about the students?

Cade Haskins: Organizing on Campus

The Dartmouth College men’s basketball team was a surprising candidate to become the first collegiate team to vote to unionize, in March 2024. Compared with its Ivy League peers, Dartmouth has a somewhat conservative reputation. The *New York Times* stated that Dartmouth “does not have a rich history of rabble rousing like the University of California, Berkeley.”⁴⁷ Politics aside, Dartmouth is known more for its ski team than for basketball. The Big Green men had not reached the NCAA Tournament since 1959 and generated only modest ticket sales and television revenue.

But in the 2020s, union activity increased on Dartmouth’s campus. In the aftermath of the Covid-19 pandemic, students who needed to work were concerned about conditions and their ability to earn. Food-service workers organized and achieved a higher hourly wage and Covid sick pay. Dartmouth junior Cade Haskins, a 6-foot-6 forward from Minnesota who worked at night in the campus snack bar, saw his hourly pay jump from \$13.25 to \$25.⁴⁸

Earlier efforts to organize college athletes had failed. Northwestern University’s football team tried to unionize in 2015, but the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) ruled against the players. NLRB’s office of public affairs released a statement:

In the decision, the Board held that asserting jurisdiction would not promote labor stability due to the nature and structure of NCAA Division I Football Bowl Subdivision (FBS). By statute the Board does not have jurisdiction over state-run colleges and universities, which constitute 108 of the roughly 125 FBS teams. In addition, every school in the Big Ten, except Northwestern, is a state-run institution. As the NCAA and conference maintain substantial control over individual teams, the Board held that asserting jurisdiction over a single team would not promote stability in labor relations across the league.⁴⁹

Despite the issue of uniformity between public and private institutions, NLRB under President Biden appeared more open to granting union status to athletes by 2021. NLRB general counsel Jennifer Abruzzo stated that college athletes “perform services for institutions in return for compensation and [are] subject to their control. . . . Thus, the broad language of . . . the policies underlying the NLRA, Board law, and the common law fully support the conclusion that certain [college athletes] are statutory employees, who have the right to act collectively to improve their terms and conditions of employment.”⁵⁰

Motivated by the dining-hall workers, Haskins talked to his teammates about creating a union so that they could be compensated for their practice and playing hours. In September 2023, they signed union authorization cards to join Service Employees International Union (SEIU) Local 560. Haskins, along with teammate Romeo Myrthil, explained: “We deeply appreciate the opportunity



Checkbooks vs. Textbooks: Big Money and the Crisis in College Sports

that we have to study at Dartmouth, but the business of college sports is different today than it was a few years ago. Recently, college athletes began to stand up and challenge the conditions under which they participate. This action, which we understand has the potential to begin the transformation of college sports, is in keeping with the values and mission of our institution.”⁵¹

Dartmouth immediately fought back. In a hearing before NLRB that October, the school argued that the players were not employees. “Our guiding principle is that students are scholars first and athletes second,” Dartmouth associate vice president for communications Diana Lawrence said after the NLRB ruling.⁵²

In February 2024, NLRB’s Boston regional director Laura Sacks ruled that the basketball players were indeed “employees” and could vote to form a union. Sacks explained that Dartmouth was in a different situation from Northwestern because all Ivy League schools were private and would be subject to the same labor rules unlike Northwestern which played in a conference with public schools.⁵³ A month later, the players voted 13–2 to join SEIU Local 560.⁵⁴ “I think this is just the start,” Haskins said. “[Our vote] is going to have a domino effect on other cases across the country, and that could lead to other changes.”⁵⁵

Many believed that Dartmouth would catalyze the formation of larger football and basketball organizations. “These young men will go down as one of the greatest basketball teams in all of history,” SEIU international president Mary Kay Henry said. “The Ivy League is where the whole scandalous model of nearly free labor in college sports was born and that is where it is going to die.”⁵⁶

In fact, what happened to the Dartmouth basketball team illuminates the challenges facing the labor movement in college sports. The college refused to negotiate with the players, instead forcing the issue into federal court. Moreover, before the players could officially join a union, they would need another approval from NLRB, whose membership was set to change after Trump’s election in November 2024. By December, the players had dropped their effort to unionize.

The union chapter’s president, Chris Peck, told NPR that this group of players weren’t up for the fight. “With the change in the NLRB,” Peck said, “it created a problem because . . . we’re probably going to have judges in there that will not recognize this. And what we would do is probably bottleneck what’s going to possibly or probably happen in the next couple of years.”⁵⁷

A major challenge to unionization efforts is the transient nature of students. Most Dartmouth players would not be on the team for the duration of the legal battle. A large majority of athletes have a four-year sports career, at most, and cannot risk a work stoppage. Professional sports labor associations in NFL, MLB, NBA, and NHL have all had strikes—albeit none in recent years. But many of their members have careers of five to 10 years. In the NIL era, college athletes might have a year or two to capitalize on their earning potential, while balancing academics, extracurricular activities, and work. Furthermore, top-level players are already cashing huge checks, so they have little motivation to alter the existing system.

Still, efforts to organize students continue. Advocacy groups like the College Football Players Association and Athletes have presented pathways for athletes to protect their rights. While their efforts have been met with resistance, they have recently gained unlikely allies: college administrators.

Former Notre Dame athletic director Jack Swarbrick was known for his refusal to follow the crowd. During a period when colleges were scrambling to land in a conference, he refused to give up Notre Dame’s independence. In 2023, he spoke to a Senate committee about the rising cost of NIL payments and proposed the following: “It’s a fairly radical notion, but if we could find a way to reach binding agreements with our student-athletes, most of this goes away,” Swarbrick said. “We don’t have a mechanism to [collectively bargain] without them becoming employees. It would require a new mechanism that would recognize the rights of student-athletes to negotiate for the



Checkbooks vs. Textbooks: Big Money and the Crisis in College Sports

terms and conditions of their participation as athletes without being employees. I think it's worth considering. . . . The concept would 'mirror' a collective bargaining system seen in professional sports, but without stripping student-athletes of their student status.⁵⁸

Giving students collective bargaining power without employee status would be complicated. Swarbrick told *Yahoo Sports* that it would require "legislation that recognizes the rights of students who are athletes to enter into binding agreements with something."⁵⁹ In other words, finding a solution that could satisfy all parties would be a job left to Congress.⁶⁰

University of Tennessee athletic director Danny White has been adamant about the need for collective bargaining. "It's the only solution," White said in an interview with Tennessee chancellor Donda Plowman.⁶¹ His plan calls for the top college football schools to form a single private company—because, in some states, employees of public institutions cannot form unions—to bargain with players. White compared his solution with how universities work with dining-service companies like Aramark.⁶²

In an interview with ESPN, White even embraced the possibility of granting student athletes employee status: "I don't understand why everyone's so afraid of employment status. . . . We have kids in our athletic department that are also students here that work in our equipment room, and they have employee status. How that became a dirty word, I don't get it."⁶³

Other administrators believe that employee status goes too far but are supportive of collective bargaining. Ensuring that athletes did not have employee status was a key component of the Student Compensation and Opportunity through Rights and Endorsements (SCORE) Act, legislation for which NCAA and conferences heavily lobbied but which failed to come to a vote in Congress in 2025. Schools have expressed concern about employment-related issues like insurance and tax implications for the students. Their scholarship status would need to be considered.

Jill Bodensteiner, athletic director at St. Joseph's University (Philadelphia), explained the costs of collective bargaining for a midsize sports program like hers to the House Committee on Education & Workforce in 2024:

None of our 21 sports generates a profit. . . . We currently have 480 student athletes at St. Joe's. The infrastructure of human resources, the bargaining personnel to manage potentially 21 bargaining units and 480 employees would be extensive. . . . If there are wages now involved, at institutions like mine, what does that do to the financial aid? I think that's where the money would have to come from. I worry that the access to college would be decreased at some institutions.⁶⁴

While collective bargaining has worked well for professional leagues, the wide range of college sports programs presents different challenges. Certain sports could break off and negotiate their own deals, which would further complicate the role of revenue-generating programs on campus.

"We have to give our athletes a bigger voice in all of this," Ohio State athletic director Ross Bjork told the Associated Press. "You have state law. You have private universities and public universities. These students are not employees. They're student-athletes, so employment compensation, you set that aside. Structurally, it's really, really complicated. No one has come up with the panacea. Everybody's got all these proposals. It's not that straightforward."⁶⁵

Every pathway forward faces significant obstacles. NCAA is hesitant to act because of its dismal record in the courts. Lawmakers' efforts have stalled. Players'-rights groups have made little headway. Yet the money keeps pouring in. In December 2025, the University of Utah became the



first university to accept private equity funds—a \$500 million investment from Otro Capital.⁶⁶ College sports are big business, and decisive actions are needed to keep them functioning as part of the university system in a recognizable way.

Possible Solutions

“We have screwed up college sports for 1% . . . 1% of players who probably make all the money, but we’re going to end up screwing up the 99% who actually need college [sports] to get a free education.”

—Charles Barkley⁶⁷

“*Every fix creates a problem.* I’m not smart enough to figure out the fix. I just know it’s not a kids’ problem; it’s an adult problem. The adults started the problem and somehow kids are getting dragged into it.”

—Arizona State University football coach Kenny Dillingham⁶⁸

Finding the right answer to a problem starts with asking the right questions. What is the purpose of college sports? To maximize earnings for players, coaches, and administrators? For rich donors to celebrate their alma mater winning national championships? To create a feeder system for professional sports leagues and the U.S. Olympic team? While these are real-world goals, they seem disconnected from the ideals put forth by Justice White and many other national and college leaders through the years. The role of sports needs to be understood as part of the university’s larger mission and goals.

The immediate challenges are pressing: keeping non-revenue teams alive and balancing athletic department budgets. Otherwise, only bigger schools and revenue-generating sports will be able to give students the opportunity to compete. Even now, financial disparity between schools places the future of college sports at risk. A 2025 Senate report painted a bleak picture: “The revenue gap between power conference schools and other schools increased 584% from 2002 to 2023, and more than doubled (129%) during 2014–23. In real dollar terms, a revenue gap that was approximately \$6 million per school per year in 2002 has grown to over \$43 million per school per year in 2023.”⁶⁹

While Cody Campbell’s solution of increasing revenue would certainly ease athletic departments’ financial burden in the short term, the arms race would continue. More money means higher salaries for players and coaches, gaudier facilities, and additional administrators. The staffs of top college football programs rival those of NFL organizations. The 2024 national champion Ohio State employs 67 people as coaches and support staff.

Most public attention has focused on proposals to reduce player salaries. In December 2025, for example, Trump told reporters: “Colleges cannot afford to be paying the kind of salaries you’re hearing about. You’re going to have these colleges wipe themselves out. Something ought to be done, and I’m willing to put the federal government behind it.”⁷⁰ But the players alone did not throw the books off kilter. Athletic departments had grown accustomed to receiving huge checks from television networks and not having to share the money with athletes. The old system led to reckless spending habits that continued into the NIL era.

In October 2025, Representative Michael Baumgartner (R-Washington) introduced the Correcting Opportunity and Accountability in Collegiate Hiring (COACH) Act, which would cap the annual compensation of any athletics department employee at no more than 10 times the college’s in-state costs for an undergraduate student. Baumgartner admitted that it would be difficult to pass such a law but defended its goal: “There is no greater societal benefit to have a coach make \$10 million



versus \$200,000. The college sports arms race has really only been to the benefit of people who put roller coasters in locker rooms and high-powered agents for coaches who can overwhelm the abilities and incentive constraints for presidents and athletic directors.”⁷¹

In pursuit of winning, schools have not been able to help themselves. ESPN college analyst and former Duke basketball star Jay Bilas took direct aim at college leaders for poaching coaches from other schools with enormous salaries: “The NCAA cognoscenti decry portal windows, ‘tampering’ with players not under contract, and player compensation guidelines. . . . The real issue is how college presidents, while lecturing us all about integrity and ethics, repeatedly interfere with fellow members’ employee contracts.”⁷²

At the end of 2025, with the SCORE Act stalled, congressional leaders lacked a clear path forward. Republicans will not budge on granting athletes employee status, and Democrats do not want to give NCAA antitrust exemptions. In June 2025, Michigan athletic director Warde Manuel expressed pessimism that the legislative path would work: “The idea they’d come together and say, ‘They can collectively bargain!’ You’re losing half of Congress. If you say, ‘Well, we want antitrust protection,’ you’re losing most of the other half.”⁷³

Another hurdle to reform is apathy. Under the status quo, enough people are getting rich to prevent significant momentum toward change. However, if no action is taken, expenses will keep increasing, and even the highest-earning institutions may encounter significant budgetary challenges.

College sports leaders must confront reality and explore new, sometimes uncomfortable, solutions. Athlete advocates, athletic directors, and coaches have expressed support for legislation that would create a mechanism for collective bargaining without classifying athletes as employees. Without collective bargaining, any cap on athlete compensation will face substantial legal challenges. As for those who want to classify athletes as employees, the tax implications and other hidden costs could hurt students and bankrupt smaller programs. Labeling athletes as employees also weakens their connection to academics—possibly leading to a world in which players may still wear the school’s uniform but not be enrolled as students.

Schools of different sizes will have to explore different leadership solutions as well. NCAA comprises more than 1,000 schools, only 67 of which are in “Power 4” conferences (ACC, Big Ten, Big 12, and SEC).⁷⁴ Ideally, those schools—which generate most of the television revenue—would be fully integrated with the rest of the college world. But ignoring those schools’ separate realities is impossible. The economic pressure trickles down to smaller programs, pushing them to spend even if they know that they will not be on an ESPN prime-time Saturday night game.

One solution—and a very possible outcome—is to let the college sports market play out and course-correct to some degree. Wealthy alumni may start to question their investments in players that go above and beyond the revenue-sharing model. Former NFL star Troy Aikman was one of the first NIL investors to publicly question the process. After giving money to a UCLA athlete, Aikman told *The Athletic* that “he was there a year; he left after the year. I wrote a sizable check, and he went to another school. I didn’t even get so much as a thank you note. So, it’s one of those deals, to where I’m done with NIL.”⁷⁵

Any reform should also take into account the connection between college sports and the future of U.S. Olympic athletics. The U.S. is the only nation that funds its Olympic development partly through college sports. Most other countries with Olympic aspirations directly fund those teams through government funds. Why should football players—who face long-term health issues because of concussions—be asked to help fund the U.S. gymnastic team? Indeed, American college sports also help develop Olympic athletes from other countries. NCAA boasted on its website that more than 800 international athletes from its ranks competed in the 2024 Paris Olympics.⁷⁶ Surely an Alabama linebacker is not responsible for supporting an aspiring Swedish pole vaulter.



Checkbooks vs. Textbooks: Big Money and the Crisis in College Sports

Compelling arguments exist for turning some intercollegiate sports into “club activities” and removing them from the sphere of national governing bodies like NCAA or NAIA (National Association of Intercollegiate Athletics). Club sports are typically student-run and may not rely on the university to exist. Club sport athletes do not receive NIL deals or scholarship offers; but for some lower-level sports, those types of benefits will not be a reality. Club sports do, however, give students the chance to compete against other local colleges without undue pressure on other aspects of college life.

To repair college sports, all parties have to see the bigger picture without letting individual motivations cloud various paths toward solutions. All spending—both on athletes and college employees—deserves examination. It is also important to agree on the purpose of college sports: Is the primary goal to win games and sign record-breaking broadcasting deals, or to develop young men and women with a strong connection to academic institutions? Any legislation or NCAA policy that does not fit the larger educational purpose will ultimately fail.

College sports did not become a revenue-generating juggernaut overnight. The decisions that led to today’s challenges occurred over a long period. Righting the ship could take several years. Unfortunately, letting the current fiscal situation play out could mean the elimination of some teams, robbing students of the chance to compete. Political compromise, financial sacrifice, and honest conversations about priorities are all necessary. Sports programs are supposed to teach athletes how to become leaders. College administrators and politicians must show their own fortitude to steer athletics through a challenging time. The alternative is a future in which there is no place for sports in schools—which would be a great loss.



About the Author

Andrew Perloff is a writer, editor, and radio host who currently serves as a contributor to Athlon Sports. He was most recently the co-host of the nationally syndicated Maggie and Perloff Show on CBS Sports Radio. Previously, Perloff spent over a decade as an on-air personality and writer for the television and radio program the Dan Patrick Show, where he contributed to four Sports Emmy nominations between 2017 and 2020.

Perloff was formerly an editor and writer for Sports Illustrated and is a contributor to the journal Education Next. His body of work extends across multiple platforms as an author and contributor to books, television productions, and film.





Endnotes

- ¹ Austin Karp, “College Football Rides Wave to New Audience Records for the Sport,” *Sports Business Journal*, Dec. 8, 2025.
- ² “A \$19bn Industry Is About to Pay Its Workforce for the First Time,” *The Economist*, Aug. 28, 2025.
- ³ David Evans, “Complete List of the Highest-Paid State Employees: College Coaches Dominate Top Earning Public Sector Workers,” *Sports Daily*, July 15, 2023.
- ⁴ Jordan Howard, “10 Numbers Breaking Down the 2026 College Football Transfer Portal,” *NCAA.com*, Jan. 16, 2026.
- ⁵ U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, and Transportation, “College Sports Revenue Gap Between Power Conference Schools & Everyone Else Increased Nearly 600% Since 2002,” press release, Sept. 10, 2025.
- ⁶ Elon University News Bureau, “Knight Commission / Elon Poll: College Sports Are at a Crossroads,” *Today at Elon*, Oct. 9, 2025.
- ⁷ “Ex-Justice White Eulogized at Service,” *New York Times*, Apr. 20, 2002.
- ⁸ *NCAA v. Board of Regents of the University of Oklahoma*, 468 U.S. 85 (1984).
- ⁹ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁰ Andrew Carter, “‘It Changed the World’: How a 1984 Supreme Court Decision Still Shapes College Football,” *Raleigh News & Observer*, Aug. 9, 2022.
- ¹¹ Ralph D. Russo, “ESPN, College Football Playoff Agree on 6-Year Deal Worth \$1.3 Billion Annually,” Associated Press, Feb. 13, 2024; Emily Caron and Anthony Crupi, “ESPN Signs \$3 Billion Deal for SEC Football as CBS Era Nears End,” *Yahoo Sports*, Dec. 10, 2020; Adam Rittenberg, “Big Ten Completes 7-Year, \$7 Billion Media Rights Agreement with Fox, CBS, NBC,” ESPN, Aug. 18, 2022.
- ¹² Mark Wogenrich, “Penn State’s Drew Allar Delivers Personal Defense of James Franklin,” *Sports Illustrated*, Oct. 8, 2025,
- ¹³ Brendan Marks, “NC State’s Will Wade Criticizes Team After 8–4 Start,” *The Athletic*, Dec. 18, 2025.
- ¹⁴ Paul Tagliabue, “A Tribute to Byron White,” *Yale Law Journal* 112, no. 5 (2003): 1002.
- ¹⁵ Kyle T. Mosley, “HBCU Commissioners Challenge White House, Congress on Proposed NIL Legislation,” *Sports Illustrated*, Dec. 9, 2023.
- ¹⁶ Southern California Basketball Hall of Fame, “Ed O’Bannon, 2020.”
- ¹⁷ Chris Chase, “NCAA Riches to NBA Rags: No. 1, Ed O’Bannon,” *Yahoo Sports*, June 25, 2009.



Checkbooks vs. Textbooks: Big Money and the Crisis in College Sports

- 18 Ibid.
- 19 Mike Chiari, “Report: AJ Dybantsa’s BYU NIL Deal Worth ‘Close’ to \$7M After Commitment,” *Bleacher Report*, Dec. 10, 2024.
- 20 Ed O’Bannon, “Ed O’Bannon on the Return of EA Sports College Basketball,” *Sportico*, July 3, 2025.
- 21 Jon Solomon, “How Sonny Vaccaro Accidentally Created the Ed O’Bannon Case,” CBS Sports, June 6, 2014.
- 22 Joe Nocera and Ben Strauss, “A Reformed ‘Sneaker Pimp’ Takes on the N.C.A.A.” *New York Times*, Feb. 14, 2016.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Steve Berkowitz, “Judge Releases Ruling on O’Bannon Case: NCAA Loses,” *USA Today*, Aug. 8, 2014.
- 25 Dan Wetzel, “How College Basketball Ended Up Signing NBA Draft Picks,” ESPN, Dec. 31, 2025.
- 26 *National Collegiate Athletic Association v. Shawne Alston*, 594 U.S. 69 (2021).
- 27 Paul Myerberg, “Justice Brett Kavanaugh Rips NCAA, Foreshadows More Issues in Court,” *USA Today*, June 21, 2021.
- 28 U.S. Capitol Historical Society, “Paving a New Future for the NCAA in Congress: The Implications of the SCOTUS Decision Backing Payments for Student-Athletes,” Aug. 17, 2021.
- 29 Dan Murphy, “Bipartisan Federal NIL Bill Introduced for College Sports,” ESPN, Sept. 24, 2020.
- 30 Ross Dellenger, “‘It’s All Surreal’: D’Eriq King Kicks Off NIL Era with Big Payday,” *Sports Illustrated*, July 2, 2021.
- 31 Pete Nakos, “What Are NIL Collectives and How Do They Operate?” *On3*, July 6, 2022.
- 32 Ibid.
- 33 Joe Drape and Allison McCann, “NIL Money and the NCAA,” *New York Times*, Aug. 31, 2024.
- 34 Dennis Dodd, “Boosters, Collectives in NCAA’s Crosshairs, but Will New NIL Policy Be Able to Navigate Choppy Waters?” CBS Sports, May 10, 2022.
- 35
for Players to Be Directly Paid,” *The Athletic*, May 23, 2024; In re Coll. Athlete NIL Litig., No. 4:20-cv-03919-CW, Opinion Regarding Order Granting Motion for Final Approval of Settlement Agreement, Dkt. 978 (N.D. Cal. June 6, 2025).
- 36 Dan Murphy, “Settlement Helps NCAA Stabilize, Avoid Bankruptcy,” ESPN, Jan. 22, 2026.



Checkbooks vs. Textbooks: Big Money and the Crisis in College Sports

- 37 “Mike Leach: The *60 Minutes* Interview,” YouTube video, Dec. 13, 2022.
- 38 Chris Powers, “Saving College Sports, NIL, & a \$7B Opportunity—Cody Campbell,” *Powers Pod*, Nov. 18, 2025.
- 39 Matt Hayes, “Oregon Shows Texas Tech You Need More than Money to Win in CFP Orange Bowl,” *USA Today*, Jan. 1, 2026; Sports Reference College Football, “Texas Tech Red Raiders School History.”
- 40 Amanda Christovich, “The Texas Oil Billionaire Leading the Newest College Sports Lobbying Effort,” *Front Office Sports*, Aug. 19, 2025.
- 41 Matt Hayes, “Meet Cody Campbell, the Billionaire Texas Tech Booster with Plan to Save College Sports,” *USA Today*, July 8, 2025.
- 42 Lia Assimakopoulos, “How Cody Campbell Became the Face of a New Movement in College Sports,” *Detroit News*, Dec. 12, 2025.
- 43 Ibid.
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 Amanda Christovich, “Saving College Sports: Inside Cody Campbell’s Commercial Blitz,” *The Athletic*, Sept. 5, 2025.
- 46 Eddie Pells, “In College Squabble, Booster Rips Commishes, but They Say He Doesn’t Know What He’s Talking About,” Associated Press, updated Oct. 9, 2025.
- 47 Billy Witz, “‘Scary and Daunting’: Dartmouth Players Detail How Union Plan Came Together,” *New York Times*, Mar. 5, 2024.
- 48 Andrea Hsu, “A College Sports Earthquake? Dartmouth Basketball Union Vote Set,” NPR, Feb. 9, 2024.
- 49 National Labor Relations Board, Office of Public Affairs, “Board Unanimously Decides to Decline Jurisdiction in Northwestern Case,” press release, Aug. 17, 2015.
- 50 Steve Berkowitz, “NLRB Memo Says College Athletes Are School Employees,” *USA Today*, updated Sept. 29, 2021.
- 51 Romeo Myrthil and Cade Haskins, “Why We Are Unionizing,” *The Dartmouth*, Sept. 18, 2023.
- 52 Jim Kenyon, “Dartmouth Basketball Team Has Right to Unionization Vote, Ruling Says,” *Valley News*, Feb. 8, 2024.
- 53 Matt Bruenig, “Are College Athlete Unions Legal?” *NLRB Edge*, Mar. 6, 2024.
- 54 Jimmy Golen, “Dartmouth Refuses to Work with Basketball Players’ Union, Potentially Sending Case to Federal Court,” Associated Press, Mar. 18, 2024.
- 55 Hsu, “An Earthquake for College Sports? Dartmouth Basketball Union Election Set for March 5.”
- 56 Ibid.



Checkbooks vs. Textbooks: Big Money and the Crisis in College Sports

- 57 Leila Fadel, “The Dartmouth Men’s Basketball Team Ends Its Attempt to Unionize,” NPR, Jan. 2, 2025.
- 58 *Name, Image, and Likeness, and the Future of College Sports: Hearing Before the S. Comm. on the Judiciary, 118th Cong. (Oct. 17, 2023) (statement of Jack Swarbrick).*
- 59 Ross Dellenger, “Would Collective Bargaining Solve College Sports’ NIL Issues? Notre Dame AD: ‘You’ve Got to Create Something New,’” *Yahoo Sports*, Oct. 17, 2023.
- 60 Mark Heim, “Notre Dame AD Tells Congress It’s Time for Collective Bargaining in College Sports,” AL.com, Oct. 17, 2023; Teresa M. Walker, “Tennessee Athletic Director Says Collective Bargaining with Athletes the Only Solution amid Chaos,” Associated Press, May 22, 2025.
- 61 Donde Plowman, X post, May 22, 2025.
- 62 Ross Dellenger, “Could Collective Bargaining Be the Answer for College Sports? Some ADs Are Ready to Say the Quiet Part Out Loud,” *Yahoo Sports*, June 30, 2025.
- 63 Dan Murphy, “College ADs Consider Collective Bargaining amid Setbacks,” MSN, Sept. 12, 2025.
- 64 Committee on Education & the Workforce (@EdWorkforceCmte), X post, Mar. 12, 2024.
- 65 Mark Anderson, “CBAs Being Considered in College Sports as Executives Seek Financial Solutions,” Associated Press, Dec. 11, 2025.
- 66 Alex Sherman and Contessa Brewer, “CNBC Sport: Utah Breaks the Private Equity Seal with Historic \$500 Million Investment,” CNBC, Dec. 11, 2025.
- 67 OutKick (@Outkick), X post, June 10, 2024.
- 68 Blake Niemann (@Blakes_Take2), X post, Dec. 9, 2025.
- 69 U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science, & Transportation, “College Sports Revenue Gap Between Power Conference Schools & Everyone Else Increased Nearly 600% Since 2002.”
- 70 Ross Dellenger (@RossDellenger), X post, Dec. 13, 2025.
- 71 Daniel Libit, “Congressman Introduces Bill to Cap Total Annual College Coach Compensation,” *Sportico*, Oct. 28, 2025.
- 72 Jay Bilas (@JayBilas), X post, Dec. 1, 2025.
- 73 Dellenger, “Could Collective Bargaining Be the Answer for College Sports?”
- 74 NCAA, Football Standings, accessed Jan. 16, 2026.
- 75 Brandon Contes, “Troy Aikman Is ‘Done’ Funding NIL: ‘Didn’t Even Get a Thank You,’” *Awful Announcing*, Dec. 9, 2025.
- 76 Corbin McGuire, “NCAA Footprint at the Olympics,” NCAA, July 26, 2024.