

## SPORTS

## Market 'dormant' one year into Yale-NIL partnership

NIL FROM PAGE 1

an NIL paradox inside the Ivy League, where NIL opportunities have been more theoretical than real. While other Division I programs offer six- or seven-figure contracts through revenue share and pay-for-play models, at Yale, small, local deals and the school's official partnership with the digital marketplace Opendorse define the NIL landscape.

Crippled by strict Ivy League rules, limited demand for athletes' services and minimal Yale Athletics advertising of athletes, NIL deals at Yale can be hard to find. As the NIL environment continues to evolve, the Ivy League's commitment to amateurism is increasingly leaving its athletes and programs behind.

The Ivy League's approach: tradition first

Since the presidents of the "Ancient Eight" adopted the NCAA's 1948 Sanity Code banning athletic scholarships, the conference has conducted its business under strict amateurism.

But in 2025, the League reversed a longstanding agreement that had barred its football teams from competing in the playoffs.

In September, the league added another restriction: Athletics departments must sign "attestations of independence" for NIL deals over \$2,000, on top of the NCAA's requirement to report deals over \$600 through NIL Go, a clearinghouse run by Deloitte.

Sports attorney Richard Kent said this additional layer of restriction, which requires the institution to sign a legal document claiming that it played no role in brokering the deal between the student-athlete and an outside company, is part of the Ivy League's self-image.

"It's important for the Ivy League to say directly or by inference that 'we're different, we're better, we're different, we're better,'" Kent said in an interview. "We are pure!"

But Kent argues that the landscape has changed, and the Ivy League no longer stands alone as the only prestigious academic and athletic model.

"There are a bunch of legitimate universities by the name of Stanford, Vanderbilt, Northwestern, in which there's plenty of NIL," Kent said. "There's full opt in of rev-share, and has that brand, from an academic perspective, been tarnished even one scintilla? No."

**Yale's bet on Opendorse**

On Feb. 10, 2025, a month after opting out of revenue share, Yale Athletics announced its new partnership with Opendorse, a leading NIL marketplace.

"Partnering with Opendorse allows us to provide best-in-class NIL resources that empower our student-athletes to make the most of the opportunities available to

them in this evolving landscape," Director of Athletics Vicky Chun was quoted as saying in a Yale Athletics press release in February.

But one year later, interviews with student-athletes across the football and men's basketball teams, as well as with a sports attorney, paint a different picture. Shallow deal flow, minimal awareness and an Ivy League regulatory structure all but ensure NIL remains modest at Yale.

"There are some good opportunities in there, but you just kind of have to look around," Yale men's basketball forward Riley Fox '28 said. "But then there's a lot of stuff that's kind of not worth it at all."

"While Yale Athletics embraces evolving NIL opportunities and innovative platforms, the primary focus remains the student-athlete experience, ensuring all NIL engagement aligns with the values and expectations of Yale, the Ivy League, and the NCAA," Colleen Murphy, the assistant athletic director for strategic communications, wrote in an email to the News.

While Yale joined the national trend on paper, the Ivy guardrails are hindering the marketplace for athletes at the eight institutions. NIL at Yale remains dominated by the athletes with the time, savvy or personal connections to seek deals independently.

**Unfulfilled promises**

Opendorse advertises itself as the industry leader, boasting more than 100,000 athletes and partnerships with major brands like EA Sports, Pepsi, Toyota and Capital One.

But for Yale student-athletes getting little visibility, the platform has not lived up to its promises.

"I've only done one deal on Opendorse," Kamara said. "Opendorse is nice but most of the deals that I've gotten have been from me reaching out and connecting with owners of companies."

A major obstacle for Ivy student-athletes stems from a lack of institutional education, support and resources on NIL. Three Yale student-athletes told the News that their entire NIL education consisted of one compliance meeting at the start of the year.

While student-athletes interviewed by the News said that Yale makes it easy to submit and get approval on NIL deals, learning how to seek out deals, understand and negotiate contract terms and monetize their brand falls on the athletes themselves.

"Yale, specifically, doesn't provide people that help us with understanding contracts," Kamara said.

In the rare cases where Yale student-athletes do secure more substantial or nationally recognized NIL deals, those opportunities tend to come from outside the Uni-



Liza Kaufman, Photography Editor

versity's NIL infrastructure.

Fox's Opendorse deal with Vuori is one exception. Fox, however, had help from an outside NIL agent.

"He would do everything, which was nice. I didn't have to get any deals on my own. He would find them and send me ideas," Fox said of his NIL agent. "Then he would fill out the paperwork and send it to the athletics department."

But most student-athletes don't have that option. And even when student-athletes do manage to obtain deals on their own, the money is small, they say.

**A dormant marketplace**

Unlike at Power Four schools, where NIL activity can define the student-athlete experience, NIL has yet to develop a strong presence on Ivy League campuses.

"NIL activity at Yale is dormant," wide receiver Mason Shipp '25 said. "It does not exist."

Kent said he tried to secure a sponsorship for Yale basketball players at a local bank.

**The response?**

"UConn, UConn, UConn," Kent said. The bank opted to sponsor the Huskies, instead.

Yale men's basketball team has enjoyed much success in recent years, including back-to-back NCAA tournament appearances, a 2024 upset victory over No. 4 Auburn at March Madness and Ivy League titles in 2022, 2024 and 2025. The Yale football program has also had recent success, claiming the Ivy title in 2022, 2023 and 2025.

Yale student-athletes are aware of the visibility gap.

"We don't have the same exposure as bigger schools. Yes, we're an Ivy League. Yes, we have influence on social media, but it's not as strong and as exciting as a school like Alabama or a school like Georgia," Kamara said.

Among Yale's primary revenue-generating sports, engagement with Opendorse remains uneven. Publicly available Opendorse data shows that 61.7 percent of Yale football players have active Opendorse profiles. Of those 63 players, most of their profiles lack personal biographies or customized branding, and many rely on Opendorse's automated pricing system rather than athlete-set rates.

The men's basketball team has the highest level of participation, with 71.4 percent of players on the platform, but even there, pricing largely followed Opendorse's default formulas. Women's basketball lagged behind at 42.9 percent, while men's hockey had profiles for just 20.7 percent of players. One notable outlier was the women's lacrosse team, a consistently successful program, where 60 percent of athletes have Opendorse profiles.

Without consistent deal flow or institutional guidance, optimizing a personal NIL marketplace often feels like wasted effort, athletes said. According to student-athletes, rather than serving as a catalyst for NIL activity, Opendorse at Yale functions more as a listing service, one that rarely results in tangible opportunities.

Shipp, nevertheless, said that students who choose to pursue athletics at an Ivy League institution know that academics come first.

"You know what you're getting into," Shipp said. "You sign up to get your education. You're not signing up for active NIL and

scholarships."

If NIL is driven by attention, exposure and brand visibility, then the lack of visibility for Yale's athletes makes it difficult for them to get deals.

Growing up two blocks from the Yale Bowl, Kent spent his weekends in the portals of the historic stadium cheering on the Bulldogs, he said. The team once regularly played before packed crowds with up to 70,000 fans every weekend, according to Kent.

Now, those numbers couldn't be more different. According to the box score from Yale Athletics, the football team's 2025 home opener against Holy Cross only drew 4,469 fans. That number remained roughly consistent across games. The only game of the season that drew more than 4,500 fans was the 141st playing of The Game, which drew 52,497 fans.

"They play in anonymity," Kent said. "It's laughable," he added, referring to the low attendance.

**Effects on recruitment and retention**

NIL has already started to impact college coaches' conversations with recruits, according to Kent.

"I've talked to many Ivy League coaches," Kent said. "It's a very early question they get asked," he said, referring to NIL deals.

Kamara, however, argued that while NIL is becoming part of recruits' considerations, a degree from an Ivy League school still carries more weight than the money other schools might offer.

"I think it's something that recruits consider, but overall, I think when recruits come here, they come because they love the game of football," Kamara said.

Yale and other Ivy League schools offer a "4-for-40" model, athletes said. By choosing to play in the Ivy League for four years, the logic goes, student-athletes prepare themselves best for the next 40 years of their careers.

"The ball's going to stop bouncing eventually, and this is going to set you up for long-term success in the future," Fox said.

But as Yale continues to rely almost entirely on Opendorse and student-driven outreach, some Ivy peers are beginning to test the limits of the conference's restrictive rules.

This fall, Penn became the first Ivy to see an alumni-driven donor collective take shape around its men's basketball team. The group funds paid internships for players, a workaround that was designed to comply with the League's ban on "pay-for-play," according to The Daily Pennsylvanian.

The emergence of Penn's model highlights a widening divergence inside the Ivy League: While Yale relies on a hands-off marketplace, some peers are quietly building systems that provide student-athletes with stable financial pathways.

For student-athletes and experts like Kent, these developments signal that donor collectives are already happening in practice, even if the Ivy League publicly maintains opposition.

While the effects on recruiting cannot be conclusively determined in these early stages of the new NIL environment, the effects on retention are already obvious, particularly in men's basketball.

Penn's collective came after the program lost three players to schools with donor collectives. Jordan Dingle transferred to St.

John's, Tyler Perkins left Penn for Villanova and Sam Brown took his talent to Davidson.

Yale, Harvard and Princeton have also seen top players leave and gain access to greater visibility and NIL money.

Danny Wolf, once a member of Yale's class of 2026, transferred to the University of Michigan after his 2023-2024 season. As a student-athlete there, he gained access to Michigan's \$30 million NIL collective, and the following summer he was selected as the 27th overall pick in the 2025 NBA Draft. At Harvard, Malik Mack played for the Crimson for one season before making the move to Georgetown. Xaivian Lee, a former Princeton Tiger, transferred to the University of Florida after he was offered \$6 million from NIL and a shoe deal, according to the sports media outlet On3.

**Pursuing local deals**

Farnam Realty has positioned itself as an option for Yale student-athletes looking to make a little NIL money. A big Yale sports fan, Horsford has embedded herself and her company into Yale sports culture.

Kamara's NIL deal with Farnam came about after he spent last summer working as an intern for the company.

As the landlord of the off-campus basketball house, Horsford maintains a unique relationship with the student-athletes.

"She comes to all the basketball games, and she is in touch with the assistant coach a lot about ways to help us out," Fox said.

While deals with Farnam give Yale student-athletes a chance to dip their feet into NIL, the money is modest, often used to help pay for rent and food, athletes say. The sums they earn are far less than the life-changing deals that athletes at Power Four schools are signing.

Nevertheless, the local partnership shows a possible future for NIL in the Ivy League.

Kent, the sports attorney, advised Ivy schools to lean into the NIL era by revolutionizing the way that they market their athletes, specifically on a local level.

"How about a big billboard on I-95 like you see with Sacred Heart and Fairfield University?" Kent said.

On the player side, Fox pointed to the disparities in revenue share when looking at teams' records and argued that the Ivy League should pay its athletes.

While Shipp agreed that revenue share would be great, he pointed out that the Ivy League is not bringing in revenue like Power Four schools.

Instead, he believes Yale should help cultivate relationships between student-athletes and local businesses, similar to the Farnam partnership.

"Yale could cultivate better relationships with companies like Chipotle or smaller ones like Tomatillo," Shipp said. "Popular restaurants in New Haven like Geronimo's or BAR pizza or Sally's or Frank Pepe's. Yale creating relationships with these companies would surely enhance the student-athlete experience more than NIL social media deals."

Yale's athletic department is headquartered in Ray Tompkins House.

Contact

LIZA KAUFMAN at  
liza.kaufman@yale.edu.

Ivy League student-athletes have scarce name, image and likeness opportunities, while academic rival schools use revenue share and donor collectives to attract and retain talent. / Liza Kaufman, Photography Editor



Liza Kaufman, Photography Editor