The Evolution of Sports Athletes as Brands in the United States

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Abstract

This research paper focuses on the evolution and history of sports marketing and the branding of athletes who are building successful media empires based on their personal brands. Through the examples of Michael Jordan, Serena Williams, the players in the National Basketball Association, and Livvy Dunne, the paper explores the evolution of media platforms and the importance of athlete representation from the early 20th century until today while highlighting technological developments, such as the emergence of the internet, social media sites, and digital marketing. The findings show that the rise of digital media and changing NIL policies shifted the power from media institutions towards athletes, who now operate as self-managed brands with multiple income streams, direct communication with the fans, and influencers of social trends and contemporary culture.

Keywords: athlete brand, sports marketing, NIL, digitalization, monetization, NCAA, NBA, Michael Jordan, Serena Williams, Olivia Dunne

Athletes as Brands: The Evolution of Sports Athletes as Brands in the United States

Introduction

Sports have the unique ability to unite people, build communities, and create presence in the fast-paced world. According to Boston College professor Michael Serazio, sports are the new religion that creates a special bond between people through a shared passion, and gives them a reason to hope and look forward to the future. Serazio said, "sports represents one of the last institutions of unifying mass ritual – bringing together enormous audiences, focused on the present, live moment" (p.4). Sports are part of the everyday life of Americans, whether they play, watch, or talk about games. The global sports industry revenues were expected to reach $512 billion in 2024, which is about 4.5 times bigger than the global film and entertainment industry (Serazio, 2019), which proves its current cultural and economic power. According to the Pew Research Center's 2022 study, 48% of Americans played competitive sports at the high school or college level, with a higher level of men participation (56% male players compared to 41% female athletes based on each gender) (see Figure 1). Most players believe that their athletic background led to more confidence and self-esteem, better physical health and even more job opportunities. Furthermore, approximately every four in 10 Americans follow professional or collegiate sports in the media regularly, and for some superfans, sports are part of their everyday life, topics, and interactions (Hatfield, 2024). These statistics highlight how crucial sports are in people's lives and how they shape their identities. For many fans, sports represent belonging, pride, and aspirations. Because of the strong emotional attachment, many fans invest in the "ideal" financially as well (through merchandise and ticket sales), which businesses realized.

Sports marketing plays a huge role in the global economy by blending the industries of sports, business, communications, and media, as well as shaping the perception of the audience.

Sports marketing can be defined as the "activities designed to meet the needs and wants of sports consumers through exchange processes. Sport marketing has developed two major thrusts: the marketing of sports products and services directly to the consumer of sport, and the marketing of other consumer and industrial products or services through the use of sport promotions" (Thorne et al., 2002, p. 74), which refers to the promotion of the sport and the promotion of the players as well. Agencies use fandom, the idea of collective identity, and the human need to belong as the base of their campaigns. These organizations choose famous athletes to promote a product and manipulate customer purchase decisions (Clark & Horstmann, 2013). By associating brands with athletes, companies use psychological tools to get more brand recognition and increase the value of the product. This psychological bond creates a strong connection, which drives demand, deepens trust and brand loyalty, and makes athletes the communication channels between businesses and customers. Today, the main platform of communication is social media, which also serves as a marketing platform. Athletes no longer have to rely on third-party sources and publishers; they can directly share messages with their audiences, state their truth, and even stand up for social issues. This way, they create a more direct and personal connection with the fans, who engage with their content and can get a more authentic version of the athletes, who, through the television screen, might seem unapproachable.

In the past century, sports marketing transitioned from traditional advertising (billboards, broadcasts, printed media) to digitalized athlete branding, which is the strategic development of an athlete's public image. According to Su et al. (2020), "an athlete's personal brand is one of their most valuable assets" (p. 33) since having a strong brand can lead to higher salaries, more sponsorship opportunities, increased media coverage, and even more play time. Another important element is the hierarchy between the leagues and players. According to the architecture framework of athlete branding, each athlete is considered the sub-brand of a team or league, which is the master brand (Su et al., 2020). It is a two-way relationship in which the reputation of an athlete can affect the perception of the team and vice versa. For example, in February 2025, five-time All-Star NBA player Luka Doncic got traded from the Dallas Mavericks to the Los Angeles Lakers. According to the data from Nielsen Media Research, his debut game against the Utah Jazz averaged 2.01 million viewers with a peak number of 2.55 million viewers. Compared to the NBA's average national viewership in the 2024-2025 season, which was 1.53 million viewers per game, a 34% increase on Doncic's opening night (Gould, 2025). Sports franchises gain income from viewership; therefore, the 34% increase equals $0.51 million in additional revenue for the Lakers (Friedman, 2025). The team did not have to change anything; it simply received a new player whose fame and likeness brought a new audience and paying customers for the franchise.

Purpose

The purpose of this paper is to show the impact of sports on the population and how athletes, as brands, merged industries, blended roles, and had a cultural and economic impact on the world. With the technological developments and the shifts in media, the presence and voice of athletes are more important than ever. Social media no longer restricts access to star players, which makes them relatable and more accessible. Moreover, it allows them to build their own brands, not only through their own sports performance on the court, but through fashion, lifestyle influencing, and social advocacy as well. As the founder of IMG, Marc McCormack said, "Sports was helping to make television and television was helping to make sport," (Serazio, 2023, p. 43). The goal of this paper is to show how athletes used the evolving media platforms, from print publications and linear television to digital networks and social media, to build their name, image, and likeness and become global brands. This way, they redefine what a modern athlete is: a high-performance player, entrepreneur, model, influencer, and trendsetter.

Structure

The research paper follows the historical timeline of media development. By breaking it down to time periods, each section offers a better understanding of the main media platforms and explains how each era affected athlete branding. These periods also include case studies of athletes to show how they leveraged media to build their personal brand, gain notoriety through various communication methods, and ultimately become global icons.

The first era explains the media platforms in the early 1900s and the first athlete endorsement featuring Lou Gehrig. The second period focuses on the late 20th century, the increased popularity of televised sports and the globalization of athlete brands. This section studies Michael Jordan's Air Jordan line and analyzes Nike's marketing strategies on how they turned Jordan into a global icon that is still well-known today. The third era shifts to the millennium and innovations it brought in the media, such as digitalization, and the creation of specialized networks that focus on a niche audience. In this period, athletes relied on media outlets that controlled their narrative; however, in the case of Serena Williams, it can be seen how athletes broke down barriers and expanded their roles outside of their sports. The fourth time period highlights the emergence of social media sites in the early 2010s, and explains how athletes turned into cultural trendsetters through content creation. This section explains how athletes started to blend industries and have multiple professions, which is shown through the example of the NBA tunnel. The final case focuses on the past decade's developments, the legalization of the NIL and student-athletes' rights to publicity, as well as the phenomenon of the influencer culture. The case study analyzes LSU gymnast Livvy Dunne's social media performance and strategy, and the evolution of her influencer career. The research paper concludes with the discussion of future predictions on athlete branding and player monetization through varying platforms, and the possible expansion from the physical to the virtual world.

The History of Sports Marketing and Athlete Branding

1910-1975: Print Media and First Sponsorships

The history of sports marketing shows how sports organizations and athletes grew together over time to build mutually beneficial relationships. Marketing agencies realized the value in fandom and started to center campaigns around a person and the story behind them. This collaboration between corporations and athletes focused on three elements: influence, visibility, and customer trust. According to Clark and Horstmann, using famous figures in advertising increases the value of a product, especially if it is marketed on the national level (Clark et al, 2013). In other words, athletes are powerful marketing figures because they represent excellence, discipline, and authenticity through their everyday lifestyle and achievements, which makes them relatable to customers and more credible as ambassadors.

The first athlete to appear in a sports advertising campaign was professional baseball player Lou Gehrig, who became the face of General Mills' 1934 advertisement campaign, "Wheaties, Breakfast of Champions" (Clark et al, 2013, p. 1607). The Wheaties marketing campaign was the first time in history that an athlete's notoriety was used to generate revenue and increase sales for a company. As sports became a bigger part of everyday life, sports coverage in printed media spread with the launch of new magazines, newspapers, and publications. For example, *Sports Illustrated* was established in 1954 by Henry Luce. Initially, the magazine focused on elite sports, then widened its topics and increased the quality of its journalism and photography, making it one of the most well-known sports magazines even today ("Sports Illustrated," 2025).

1975-2000: Television Marketing and Athlete Brand Globalization

The 1980s and 1990s completely changed the world of sports marketing through increased television coverage, the commercialization of celebrity culture, and the normalization of athlete endorsement. During this time, sports became not just entertainment but a global business, where companies started to focus solely on the athlete and the personality they built around them. In 1964, Phil Knight and Bill Bowerman founded Nike, which became one of the biggest and most successful sports brands in the world. What put Nike on the map was its partnership with Michael Jordan in 1984 and the creation of the Air Jordan line. Moreover, the launch of ESPN in 1979 as the first 24-hour sports network changed sports negotiations, media rights, and opened new opportunities for marketing and advertising. The network initially started as a linear broadcast channel, focusing on game highlights, interviews, and analysis of multiple sports, which was unusual at the time.

The Birth of Air Jordan: Michael Jordan and Nike

In 1984, the partnership between rookie NBA player Michael Jordan and Nike became a turning point not only in sports marketing and sponsorship methods, but it also affected basketball rules, athlete endorsement, culture, and fashion as well. The creation of the Air Jordan brand redefined economics, business models, marketing, and transformed athletes into global fashion icons and entrepreneurs. Furthermore, it reorganized the relationship between companies and athletes by thinking of it as a mutual partnership, rather than a hierarchy.

The movie, *Air,* directed by Ben Affleck, perfectly captures the moment when Sonny Vaccaro risked Nike's entire basketball budget ($250,000) on Michael Jordan, who got offered a

$2.5 million contract by the Chicago Bulls. Signing a rookie was a brave decision from Vaccaro, who was willing to take the risk and had faith in the player and his future. In the movie, this faith and vision of immortality can be seen in Vaccaro's pitch to Jordan's mother, Deloris, when he said, "Forget about the shoes, forget about the money. A shoe is just a shoe, until somebody steps into it. Then it has a meaning" (Affleck, 2023). However, Deloris' answer expressed the shift in sports economics from pure business to human emotions and personal interest. She said, "A shoe is just a shoe until my son steps in it" (Affleck, 2023). This mentality made Nike a pioneer in athlete endorsements as they realized that the driver for sales is not a team, it is the person and the narrative they build around them and communicated in the media. By having an athlete who can become the face of the brand, their fans would become the new target audience and customer base for the company.

The Air Jordan shoes were designed by Peter Moore and marketed by Rob Strasser, who broke the former economic and aesthetic standards. At the time, the National Basketball League (NBA) had strict rules about the appearance of the players. The basketball shoes had to be 51% white in order to maintain professionalism and create uniformity among players and teams (Randall, 2025). The Air Jordan was specifically created for Jordan in black and red, to represent the colors of his new team, the Chicago Bulls. However, the colors violated the NBA's rules, which led to a $5,000 fine for each game. Strasser proposed that Nike could turn the penalties into a marketing campaign, and the media coverage of the "banned shoe" would be the advertising plan that puts both Nike and Jordan on the map. As Vaccaro said in the movie, "You are remembered for the rules you break" (Affleck, 2023). This way, Nike turned a penalty into a cultural statement, and by April 1985, the company made over $100 million in sales (Kunkel, 2023).

These shoes are not only important from an economic point of view, but they also became the symbol of self-expression. At the time, shoes were "commonly perceived as mass-produced commodities within hegemonic systems of mass production and consumption. However, they have been habitually re-inscribed by the individuals who wear them" (Miner, 2009, p. 74). In other words, customers give meaning and set the value of the shoes, based on the athlete who promotes them. Wearing them becomes a symbol of collective identity, and people align themselves with the values that the athletes represent. Furthermore, the sneaker line created social visibility and empowerment for the middle-class black community, who considered the shoes as "must-have" items, representing their dreams and hopes for a better status in society (Wright, 2016).

Overall, the Air Jordan is not just a basketball shoe; it is the symbol of talent, confidence, and ambition. The narrative in Nike's marketing campaign creates a special connection between the fans and Jordan (who is objectified through the shoes), and represents the hopes and aspirations of the customers, inspiring them that anything is possible. Today, Jordan earns approximately $400 million annually as passive income from his royalties with Nike (Affleck, 2023). Nike's human-focused strategy led to a major shift in athlete-brand relationships as it redefined the partnerships and allowed athletes to renegotiate contracts, fight for partial ownership, and have a right and say in designing their own collections.

2000-2010: Specialized Networks and New Athlete Identity

The millennium is considered the beginning of a transitional period in sports marketing and athlete representation. On one hand, television advertising, press coverage, billboards, and printed media still served as the major advertising and communication formats. However, with the emergence of the internet, more companies started sharing content online, making the platforms user-friendly and targeted for a niche audience. Tennis Channel launched in 2003 with the goal to only broadcast tennis-related content. As the network explains, it operates through "different-but-complementary linear television, subscription video-on-demand (SVOD), online and free ad-supported streaming television (FAST) platforms. It produces and airs more live hours of sports annually than any other network, and provides tennis matches and storylines to seven countries outside the United States" ("Tennis Channel," 2023). According to a 2023 press release, Tennis Channel owns 93% of sports rights to the men's and women's games (ATP and WTA). Ken Solomon, president of the channel, stated, "The original linear network, the SVOD platform and FAST channel combined give you a tennis experience that's never been available in history" ("Tennis Channel," 2023). Besides live broadcasts of the games, the network also offers pre- and post-game interviews, analysis shows, and player documentaries with the goal to entertain, educate, and engage fans. This approach of blending SVOD (subscription video-on-demand) and FAST (free ad-supported television) platforms allowed the network to reach a wider audience, which includes both the traditional viewers of cable television and digital audiences.

By creating communication channels for a niche audience, media companies gained more power in shaping stories about players and influencing the public perception about them. As a result, many athletes, especially women and people of color, were underestimated and overlooked in the media. One of the athletes who broke these walls and challenged prejudice was Serena Williams, who used her voice against biases and built a brand by being her true self.

Serena Williams' Media Representation and Fight for Equality

Serena Williams revolutionized not only women's tennis but also created global conversations about gender, race, and women's representation in sports. She was one of the most successful athletes of her generation, who used her power and influence in the worlds of fashion, entrepreneurship, and social activism. Since the beginning of her career, Williams strategically built her own brand and public persona by using a straightforward and unapologetic voice, which made her seem powerful and unquestionable. For example, during the post-match conferences, she often used self-characterization, did not always cooperate with the journalists, and often took control over the interview to position herself in a more dominant position. In her research paper, Karolina Sznycer (2010) explained that athletes often use this strategy to maintain their public image and authority, and make sure that, instead of scandals or controversies related to their personal lives, their successes are highlighted. According to the author, there are four self-presentation strategies among female tennis players in post-match interviews, which can have either a positive or negative impact on their media representation. The first one is noncooperation or impoliteness, where the player pays no attention, ignores questions, and might even refuse to answer them. The second one is constant disagreement, in which the player repeatedly corrects the interviewer and tries to change the roles and dynamics. The third option is confrontation, in which the player might get aggressive and show a threatening behavior. And finally, persuasive self-characterization, which Williams followed (Sznyer, 2010). In this case, the players want to control the interview and show power, whether they won or lost. Consequently, they can keep their undefeatable image in both the media and on the tennis court, which is a psychological manipulation technique and a message for future opponents.

During her career, Williams won 23 Grand Slam titles and four Olympic gold medals, which made her one of the most successful athletes of all time. In 2003, she signed a $60 million deal with Nike, which was the largest endorsement contract a female athlete had ever received (Prakash, 2022). This partnership is considered a milestone in sports marketing and feminism as well, since it proved that female athletes are just as worthy of sponsorships and recognition as their male counterparts, and their commercial value should be the same. Over the years, her partnership with Nike strengthened and she became one of the main faces of the brand, representing women in sports and cultural diversity in advertising. In 2018, she was the narrator for Nike's "Dream Crazier" campaign, which highlighted female athletes and celebrated their successes. This advertisement raised awareness about social and gender-based limitations. In a research paper, Liu Xiaotong highlighted that "Athletes who have triumphed over their opponents and achieved great success, are labelled 'madwomen'. In the public eyes, women are usually 'delicate' and meanwhile conform to rules and regulations; any woman who breaks this impression is regarded as madness" (Xiaotong, 2024), which shows how Williams redefined success and proved that women are not limited to only one role. Thus, the advertisement was crucial to raise awareness about social and gender-based limitations and served as a call to action to change these beliefs.

Over the years, Williams became the ambassador of many brands (Gatorade, Wilson, Audemars Piguet), and in 2018, she started her own clothing brand called *S by Serena*. Creating an athlete's own brand can be considered a passive income source, which blends their passion and creativity with their notoriety and past achievements. In the same year, Williams got a lot of media coverage when she walked out to the court in an all-black catsuit at the Roland Garros tournament. Many people criticized her outfit choice for disrespecting the sports and tournament since tennis is a classy sport where women are expected to wear feminine outfits, especially skirts. However, the pantsuit had a medical purpose: Williams gave birth to her daughter the previous year, so the outfit was designed to prevent blood clots (Davies & Grez, 2024). This scandal raised more awareness about Williams in the fashion industry, which was a marketing opportunity for her brand as well. Moreover, this outfit became a symbol of motherhood and femininity, showing that women can excel in different roles; they can be mothers, athletes, and social activists at once.

2010-2015: Digitalization and the Emergence of Social Media

The first decade of the 21st century led to the creation of contemporary social media sites. With the launch of Facebook in 2004, Twitter (today X) in 2006, and Instagram in 2010, the world of branding completely changed as athletes finally took control over their own narratives. By writing posts and captions, uploading photos and videos, they were able to connect directly with their audiences, create more engagement, and state their own opinions. In other words, they no longer relied on third-party media companies, fearing what the reporters and journalists would write about them and how that would influence the fans' perception of their favorite sportsman. Seeing this new direction, traditional media outlets started to digitize their content as well, creating websites and apps, and uploading materials on the web and social media accounts, hoping for a bigger reach and easier accessibility of the content. This shift in roles and responsibilities turned athletes into content creators, brand strategists, and global influencers who could build their own brand and public image and expand their roles outside of their sports.

The NBA Tunnel Turned Into a Runway Via Social Media

For decades, sports have been reflecting the ongoing social and cultural issues, trends, and values of everyday life. Sports in the United States shape society and serve as a trendsetter when it comes to language, behavior, appearance, and fashion. Today, the worlds of sports and fashion merge since athletes are now important cultural figures whose styles and behavior inspire millions worldwide.

One of the most outstanding examples is the NBA tunnel, which turned from a simple walkway from the locker room to the court into a fashion show. As Friedman observed, “the tunnel walk has become a runway, now routinely chronicled on social media – and not just for players in the NBA but also in the NFL, the WNBA, and even the WTA” (Friedman, 2024). Today, the focus of athletes seems to shift from performance and “team mentality” to self-expression and individuality. The walks before the games are now a major part of the players’ media strategies, where each outfit is a statement and message to the world. Millions of followers are able to see the outfits through social media, so the fashion choices become promotional opportunities for brands and luxury labels. McGinn highlighted that “NBA players [are] turning up the dial on their tunnel style, and new and younger fans are tuning in” (McGinn, 2024), which shows that a new audience is reached through social media, especially Gen Z, who engage with the fashion content. Platforms, such as Instagram and TikTok (which focus on visual content, aesthetics, and engagement), are now “the main stage” where these short-form videos and pictures go viral. The difference and transition between traditional media and digitalization is obvious; traditional media is communicated through written text, while today, the attention of the audience has to be grabbed visually, within just a few seconds.

This cultural shift reorganized the hierarchy among celebrities as well. Friedman (2024) stated that brands no longer rely on actors, singers, and models; athletes are the new superstars and household names. As the CEO of Moet Hennessy Louis Vuitton, Bernard Arnault explained, “We all do sports or have the chance to do sports. We cannot all sing and cannot all act” (Friedman, 2024). This approachability and relatability make athletes the perfect subjects in advertisements and lead to major collaborations between athletes and luxury fashion brands. For instance, LeBron James wore Louis Vuitton’s Spring/Summer collection, Dwayne Wade was the face of Versace's eyewear campaign, and Shai Gilgeous-Alexander walked the runway for Thom Browne during the Paris Fashion Week (Friedman, 2024; McGinn, 2024).

A major driving factor behind these collaborations is the power of fandom, the emotional connection and loyalty fans have for their favorite athletes. Businesses see how this emotional power can be monetized, so they convert engagement into commercial value in their marketing plans. They sponsor athletes with products, services, and extraordinary experiences in exchange for social media posts and digital promotions. This way, the companies get access to the platform of the athlete and their following, which increases their reach and potential customer base while raising brand awareness. Consequently, athletes are no longer only seen as competitors; they are becoming fashion icons, influencers, and marketing figures who, through the fast speed of the internet and the unlimited boundaries of social media, shape culture by creating global trends.

2015-2025: Influencer Culture, NIL Deals, and Player Monetization

The world of collegiate athletics has undergone one of the most significant and innovative transformations since the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) lifted the amateurism rule for student-athletes. The ruling allows players to use their own name, image, and likeness (NIL) to market themselves, get deals and sponsorship, and consequently, generate personal income while playing college sports and getting their higher-level education and degree.

The NIL rule originated from the 2014 case, when UCLA's basketball player Ed O'Bannon challenged the NCAA's restrictions on an athlete's right to publicity. His main claim was that the NCAA violated the antitrust law by not allowing athletes to gain financial benefits when other companies use their name and notoriety. He filed a lawsuit after finding out that his image was used in an EA (Electronic Arts) Sports video game without his consent or any compensation (Glazier, 2014). The court stated that the NCAA did not act lawfully and ordered education-based compensations for the players, such as additional scholarships and stipends. In 2019, California was the first state to allow student-athletes to gain full profit from their NIL rights (Fair to Play Act, 2019), followed by Florida (Intercollegiate Athletic Compensation and Rights Act, 2020). In 2021, the NCAA finally suspended its amateurism rule completely (which was in effect for almost a century). Consequently, the NIL era began, and athletes were no longer prohibited from making money for their media presence. This decision completely changed the economics, marketplace, and media industry surrounding college athletics (Rukstalis, 2023).

As it can be seen in Figure 2, showing Openedorse's annual report, the total spendings on NIL products and services reached $918 million in its first year, rose to $2.26 billion by 2024, and is predicted to become a $3.1 billion industry by 2028. The first year was labeled the "NIL Gold Rush," when brands were competing with each other to sign athletes and get partnerships. In the following years, with more athletes joining, the NIL became a nationwide phenomenon, and schools started to build internal departments and expand their budgets to match with the new economic structure of collegiate athletics. However, after the release of the EA Sports College Football video game, some legal questions were raised about additional compensation and licensing rights for athletes (Opendorse, 2025). The statistics prove how rapidly NIL became a crucial part of sports economics and athletics, which impacts not only the sports and business worlds but partnerships, content creation, and social media consumption as well.

The NIL redefined what it means to be a student-athlete. Players are no longer required to win trophies at world championships, Olympic medals, and national titles; what matters more is their online brand and social media presence. Louisiana State University (LSU) was one of the first colleges to build a department within athletics to help student-athletes navigate through brand deals, get partnerships, and teach them how to handle media coverage ("Mission

Statement," 2025). There are two types of NIL deals: brand deals and collective deals (Kunkel, 2024). Brand deals refer to a direct partnership between the athletes and the companies, such as Livvy Dunne's collaboration with Vuori. On the other hand, collective deals are often sponsored by a group of donors who financially support athletes at a specific institution, such as the Bayou Traditions at Louisiana State University, which supports its student-athletes by connecting them with brands. Amazon Prime's 2024 docuseries, *The Money Game*, demonstrates the day-to-day life of LSU athletes and how they juggle their responsibilities as full-time students, athletes, content creators, and social media influencers. The series features Angel Reese, Flau'jae Johnson, Jayden Daniels, and Olivia Dunne (Cooper, 2024). The show portrayed how student athletes, with enough social media presence and engagement, were able to get millions of dollars and have multiple revenue sources and careers outside of their sports.

Livvy Dunne: Student-Athlete Turned Millionaire on Social Media

LSU gymnast Olivia "Livvy" Dunne is considered a pioneer in the NIL era, who was brave enough to take control of her page, share content, and become the content promoter and the product itself that she is marketing. Journalism futurist Jeff Jarvis called this phenomenon "the process of becoming the product" (Serazio, 2023, p. 81). On her social media sites, she built a persona around her athletic performance in gymnastics, the everyday struggles of student athletes, the life of a girl in her twenties, and the challenges of early adulthood. Instead of building a perfect picture, she uploaded spontaneous and funny videos. The unfiltered content and constant content generation made her relatable to the viewers, who established an emotional connection with her and transitioned from viewers to followers and fans. Today, Dunne has over 5 million followers on Instagram and 8 million followers on TikTok, while having partnerships with the biggest brands worldwide (*Instagram*, 2025; *TikTok*, 2025).

Dunne joined LSU's gymnastics team in 2020 and was a crucial member of the team, leading to the National Championship title in 2024. She documented her journey on her social media sites since the beginning of her collegiate career, blending humor and personality in her videos. Her main platform is TikTok, which is one of the most popular social media sites today, where the algorithm drives the content and reach of the videos. The main format is short-form video production, which must have an attention-grabbing beginning (so-called "hook"), which grabs the attention of the viewers and prevents them from scrolling to the next video. One of the most popular video formats is the "Get ready with me" and "Behind the scenes" videos, which show an aspect of life or business that only a limited number of people are allowed to experience first-hand, creating a sense of uniqueness in the audience and making them feel exceptional. Furthermore, the platform rewards consistency, following trends, and using certain aesthetics, which leads to more reach (recommendations on the "For You" page), more engagement (likes, comments, reshares), and therefore, more income to the user (Scovel, 2025). By using social media monetizing tools, brands no longer need million-dollar marketing budgets; they can simply use their social media sites for advertising and widen their target audience through influencer marketing and CGC (customer-generated content). What makes Dunne stand out from other content creators is the authentic and reliable way of storytelling and her strategically chosen partnerships. Dunne's niche target is women like her, college students, student athletes, and young females. Thus, her content satisfies the needs of this specific niche, too.

Despite the fact that her content seems easy and relatable, Dunne uses conscious product placement in the videos and interviews to meet the set criteria for the sponsorship contracts and deliverables (Cooper, 2024). After the legalization of NIL, Dunne became the face of Vuori, American Eagle, Forever 21, and Body Armor. Brands realized the value of followers and that through partnership, they gain access to the athlete's followers as well, leading to a new customer base and more brand awareness. In other words, they are paying for the athlete to use their social media sites as an advertising platform. This strategy could be the reason behind Dunne and Home Depot's partnership. By creating funny and entertaining content in a mostly male-targeted store, women feel related to the stereotypes and are able to see the humor in the everyday situations that Dunne's videos portray. Moreover, her 2023 debut on the cover of the *Sports Illustrated* magazine and her appearance on the runway during the 2025 Miami Fashion Week further prove that athletes are no longer limited by their original professions. Through her content, Dunne is constantly showing that with strategic branding, anyone can reach a certain level of fame, which is a status many people yearn for.

Conclusion

Future Predictions on Athlete Branding and Monetization

With the constant technological developments, more and more platforms and tools are available for athletes and teams to expand their notoriety and increase their revenues. Due to the transition from cable television to streaming services and cord-cutting, many fans prefer watching sports games from home or choose to replay games and see highlight videos afterward. For this reason, many media and technology companies are looking for new ways to elevate the sports experience, even from the comfort of someone's home.

To solve this issue and create a more immersive fan experience, Meta signed a contract with the NBA in 2023 to bring basketball into the metaverse. According to the official announcement on the NBA's website (2023), this collaboration allows fans to watch games in the Meta Horizon Worlds, which is a virtual metaverse platform. To access the content, fans have to purchase an NBA League Pass, which allows them to join the game virtually. This innovative approach is unique since the fans can get a courtside experience, watching their favorite players, only by wearing a VR headset (such as the Meta Quest). Vice president of the NBA Jennifer Chun said that this partnership "provides more immersive and innovative ways to experience the NBA," while Meta's director of sports media Rob Shaw stated that this VR technology "opens new opportunities for fans to engage and interact with their favorite NBA teams" (*NBA*, 2023). The partnership shows that there are still unused platforms in sports media. Virtual reality and the metaverse create new commercial opportunities for companies and leagues, and can elevate the "game experience" of the audience. Despite the popularity and opportunities that the partnership foreshadowed, in 2026, Meta announced that they are shutting down their Horizon Worlds network so they can transform into a mobile-only experience (McCaskill, 2026).

Another innovation in the merged worlds of sports, media, and technology are NFTs, Non-Fungible Tokens, which can serve as another revenue source for athletes and brands. According to Deloitte Global, NFTs are "unique digital identifiers that use blockchain to record ownership of media, are now letting them do just that". Deloitte Global predicts that NFTs for sports media will generate more than US$2 billion in transactions in 2022, and they further predicted a 4-5 million NFT purchases globally from sports fans (Ajadi et al, 2021). The data proves that NFTs are changing the traditional athlete-media relationships since they allow athletes to create and sell digital assets. These items are especially important in the gaming world. Some video games offer play-to-earn systems where players can win NFTs or buy special items that can be traded or sold for real value. These virtual goods include artwork, trading cards, videos, in-game items, and upgrades (Connock, 2023). NFTs are more popular among sports with huge fan bases since they create "an opportunity to enhance relationships with fans. Rights holders should consider how best they could apply NFTs to enhance the fan experience by enabling them to acquire and display NFTs of their team" (Ajadi et al., 2021). This way, athletes can use their creativity to create "limited edition" outfits, weapons, equipment for the characters, and fans can support their favorite players by investing in these upgrades and buying the digital items.

It is obvious that artificial intelligence (AI) is impacting the whole world, especially media and content creation. While tech companies create breathtaking designs, graphics, and animations in the gaming world and metaverse, AI can help athletes directly in the content creation, marketing, and influencer responsibilities The usage of optimization tools (such as automated captioning, content personalization, and analytics) can make the process of content creation and strategy more efficient, leading to a bigger reach and more engagement. According to Rostamina and Moradi, "AI's role in content creation and management is multifaceted. It includes automated editing, real-time analytics, and the use of AI for generating immersive experiences. For instance, AI can automate the creation of virtual sets and assist in the editing process, significantly reducing the time and effort required for production" (Rostamian & Kamreh, 2024). Consequently, marketing agencies, broadcasters, and content creators are using AI to analyze data and feedback, make predictions, and specifically create future content to meet those expectations with the maximum engagement possible. For example, athletes can use AI tools to create highlight videos with narration or see statistics about the most effective times to post on their social media sites, together with the recommended types of content.

Overall, with the constant technological innovations, more opportunities appear in both the physical and virtual worlds. With the existence of virtual reality, non-fungible tokens, and the metaverse, athlete representation no longer requires the person's physical appearance, only a virtual copy of them. This shift might raise some legal concerns (as mentioned previously about

NIL and EA sports games). However, expanding into this innovative, still unknown, market can enhance the athletes' popularity, income, and overall brand.

While new technological developments and the implementation of artificial intelligence foreshadow exciting opportunities for athlete branding and monetization, their long-term success will depend on the openness, demand, adoption, and perceived value from the consumer side. Not every innovation will become widely known and mainstream, especially since there is a decline in the usage and engagement of certain metaverse platforms (such as Horizon Worlds). Innovations that provide real value and genuine fan engagement will remain on the market and are more likely to stay relevant and shape the future of the sports industry and athlete branding strategies.

Final Conclusion

All things considered, the evolution of sports marketing and athlete branding shows how inseparable the worlds of sports, media, and business are. The transformation of media platforms (from print publications, billboards, and television advertisements to the emergence of the internet, digitalization, social media, and the development of the influencer culture) led to the need for the redefinition of athletes as well (who transitioned from sportsmen to brand ambassadors, models, entrepreneurs, and global icons). This shift from traditional media outlets to digital content gave the power of communication back to the athletes' hands and they no longer had to rely on third-party media outlets to write their stories and shape their narratives. With the uncensored communication on social media, these athletes regained autonomy in communication. Content creation enables athletes to be their true, authentic selves, build personal connections, and create a supporting and engaging fan base that can transition into a paying customer base. By focusing on fandom, companies partner with athletes to gain access to their fans and platforms to promote their products and gain brand awareness.

In conclusion, the evolution of branding through media shows how athletes use different platforms to establish their own voices, build credibility, and expand their influence outside of their sports. Thus, they are able to commercialize not only their own but also the product and the brand's value, reaching a bigger audience and impacting the everyday life of fans and followers. Athletes are becoming icons who have a direct impact on the global economy, marketing methods, cultural habits, and social trends. This is the evolution of athlete branding and the portrayal of how athletes shape society through their media presence.

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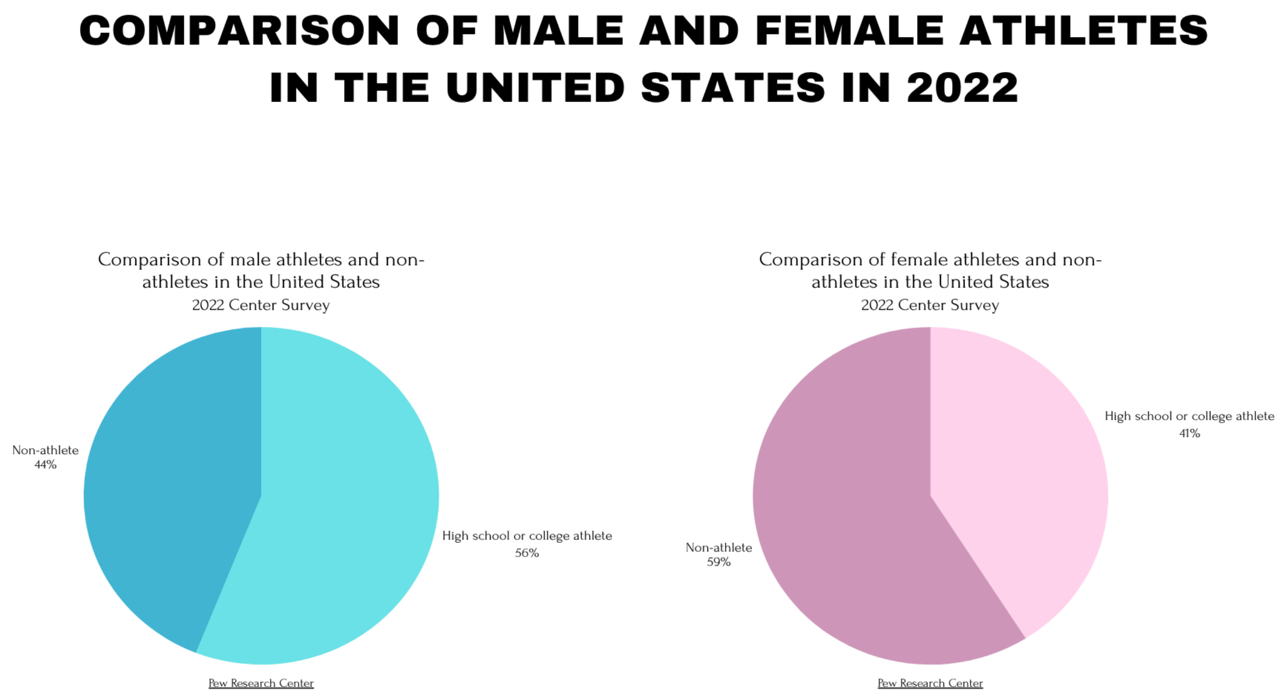
Figure 1.

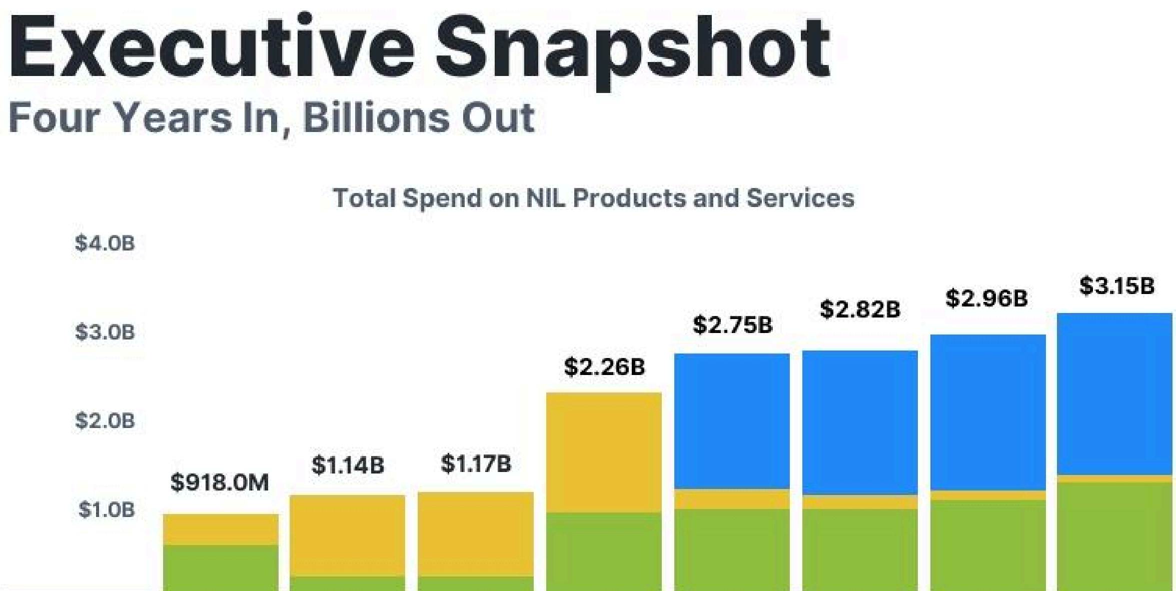
Pie Chart Comparison of Male and Female Athletes and Non-Athletes in the United States, Based on a 2022 Survey



Source: Adapted from Pew Research Center (2022)

Figure 2.

Bar Chart Comparison of the Evolution of the Total NIL Spending and Projections Between 2021 and 2029



Year	1 ('21-'22)	2 ('22-'23)	3 ('23-'24)	4 ('24-'25)	5 ('25-'26)	6 ('26-'27)	7 ('27-'28)	8 ('28-'29)
Commercial	$596.7M	$229.1M	$234.0M	$957.4M	$994.9M	$1.0B	$1.1B	$1.3B
Collective	$321.3M	$910.9M	$936.0M	$1.3B	$227.3M	$159.1M	$111.0M	$77.9M
Collegiate	$ -	$ -	$ -	$ -	$1.5B	$1.6B	$1.7B	$1.8B
Total	**$918.0M**	**$1.14B**	**$1.17B**	**$2.26B**	**$2.75B**	**$2.82B**	**$2.96B**	**$3.15B**

Source: Opendorse (2025)