

## Media Framing and Sources Quoted in Coverage of the Name, Image, and Likeness Debate

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Student-athletes competing at NCAA institutions acquired the ability to profit from the use of their name, image, and likeness (NIL) on July 1, 2021. The time period leading up to this point was marked by contentious debate about college student-athletes and “amateurism” in the sports media. To better understand the nature of this mediated debate, the current study investigated framing in media coverage of NIL rights with a particular focus on the types of sources quoted by journalists during a two-year period from 2019-2021. A total of 113 print and online media articles were identified for analysis through keyword searches of Internet and news databases. NCAA officials were the most consistently quoted sources in this media coverage, appearing in 59.3% of articles. Overall, media coverage often privileged the NCAA’s viewpoint that any disruption to the amateur “collegiate model” would be detrimental to the future of college sport. In contrast, current student-athletes were quoted in just 5.3% of articles. Although other sources, such as politicians (quoted in 47.5% of articles), often spoke on behalf of student-athletes about the rights they should be entitled to, the actual voices of student-athletes themselves were largely absent from this mediated debate. The exclusion of student-athletes’ voices is relevant given ongoing discussion about amateurism and the rights of college student-athletes.

On July 1, 2021, thousands of student-athletes throughout the National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) gained the ability to earn money through the use of their name, image, and likeness (NIL) due to a combination of new state laws and NCAA rule changes (Murphy, 2021). That date marked a watershed moment in the loosening of strict amateurism requirements in college sport dating back to the initial years of the NCAA (Ashfar, 2014; Crabb, 2017). The process leading to student-athlete NIL rights, however, was long and often contentious, with fierce debates playing out in the media. Given the prominent nature of discussions about this topic in the sports media, the current study examined media coverage of the NIL debate during a two-year period in which numerous states passed laws concerning NIL rights, the NCAA frequently responded in opposition to such laws, and an abundance of politicians, administrators, and other commentators weighed in on the issue.

To provide context, we begin the manuscript with an overview of some key events that led to the era in which college student-athletes acquired NIL rights. The issue of amateurism has long been contested in college sport (Ashfar, 2014; Crabb, 2017), and debates about amateurism are ongoing even in the post-NIL era. Sport media producers have heavily covered debates about amateurism in college sport, and the media serve an important role with respect to whose voices and perspectives are heard (and not heard) in public discourse about an

issue. Through the process of framing, which involves selecting and emphasizing certain aspects of an issue to make them more salient to media consumers, journalists can exert a substantial effect on media consumers' understanding of an issue (Entman, 1993; Yoo et al., 2013). Given this background, the purpose of the current study was to provide insight about the process through which NIL rights for college student-athletes progressed by examining ways in which the media framed the issue. As discussions about the rights of student-athletes and structure of college sport continue to evolve, it is important to understand how the media have framed issues such as NIL rights, given the potential of media coverage to shape public and political debate. In this vein, the current study adds to the existing literature on media framing in sport, providing particular insight about how journalists use sources to frame controversial issues occurring in the context of college athletics.

## Review of Literature

### NCAA Amateurism and the Emergence of NIL Rights

Participation in U.S. collegiate sport has long been restricted to "amateur" athletes. During the early years of college sport, the NCAA adopted a definition of *amateur* as "one who participates in competitive physical sports only for the pleasure, and the physical, mental, moral, and social benefits directly derived therefrom" (Afshar, 2014, p. 107). Since this time, NCAA rules have largely prevented

college student-athletes from receiving compensation beyond what is part of the athletic grant-in-aid (i.e., “scholarship”), including a prohibition on remuneration related to their name, image, and likeness. However, a series of events during the past two decades has helped pave the way for student-athletes to capitalize on their NIL rights.

A watershed event in the progression toward NIL rights was the case of *O’Bannon v. NCAA*. In the case, originally filed in 2009, former UCLA basketball player Ed O’Bannon alleged that the NCAA unreasonably restricted competition by fixing college student-athletes’ income at “zero” for the use of their names, images, and likenesses (Grimmet, 2014). Further, O’Bannon argued that the NCAA unreasonably restrained trade and commercially exploited former student-athletes by continuing to sell products using their images well after they graduated (Sheets, 2016). Specifically, the case centered on NCAA Form 08-3a, which all college student-athletes were required to sign, and which authorized the NCAA or a third party acting on its behalf to use student-athletes’ names or likenesses to promote NCAA events, activities, or programs (Crabb, 2017). In defense of these practices, the NCAA argued that restrictions on compensation in college athletics were justifiable because they were “necessary to preserve its tradition of amateurism, maintain competitive balance..., promote...academics and athletics, and increase the total output of its product” (cited in Sheetz, 2016, p. 875).

At the same time the O’Bannon case was proceeding through the legal system,

a similar challenge to NCAA amateurism restrictions was launched by former Arizona State University quarterback Sam Keller in *Keller v. Elec. Arts Inc.* In the case, Keller filed a class action lawsuit against the NCAA and EA Sports—the company that produced the popular NCAA Football video game—claiming that they “engaged in unjust enrichment through unconsented misappropriation of student-athletes’ likenesses, thus violating their right of publicity” (Afshar, 2014, p. 124). Ultimately, *Keller v. Elec. Arts Inc.* was consolidated with *O’Bannon v. NCAA* in a pretrial move due to the similarities and connections between the two cases. Prior to trial, however, the NCAA announced it had settled with Keller, awarding \$20 million to Division I men’s basketball and football players who competed during the years in which the video games were sold (Afshar, 2014).

Following the settlement, the two previously consolidated cases were then deconsolidated in order to proceed with the antitrust claims of O’Bannon, which went to a bench trial before the district court (*O’Bannon v. NCAA*, 2015). During the trial, numerous factors were raised by the parties involved in the case, including the college education market, the group licensing market, amateurism, anticompetitive effects, procompetitive purposes, and competitive balance. A key argument advanced by the NCAA was that amateurism had been “one of the NCAA’s core principles since its founding” and was “a key driver of college sports’ popularity with consumers and fans” (O’Bannon, 2015, p. 9). Ultimately, the district court’s decision in the O’Bannon

trial had profound effects on the future of NIL rights in college sport, as the court rejected the NCAA's key arguments for restraining trade.

As a result of the *O'Bannon* case, the U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California provided an injunction that ultimately halted the NCAA's ban on student-athlete compensation (Sheetz, 2016). A particularly key component of the court's ruling was that the NCAA is not exempt from a prohibition on schemes that restrain student-athletes' ability to engage in trade (Gerrie, 2018). Specifically, the court held that NCAA regulations precluding student-athletes from receiving a share of revenue from their own names, images, and likenesses violated Section 1 of the Sherman Act antitrust legislation (Sheetz, 2016).

Moreover, *O'Bannon v. NCAA* proved to be the first federal appellate court case that challenged the NCAA's unreasonable restraint of trade on collegiate student-athletes (Mitten, 2017). This decision both changed the fabric of intercollegiate athletics and simultaneously set up a pathway for student-athletes to receive compensation via NIL marketing rights. Considering the repercussions of the *O'Bannon* case outcome at the time of the decision, Lush (2015) expressed, "While the NCAA may be reluctant to adjust its rules regarding student athletes' NIL, the *O'Bannon* decision proved that the U.S. judicial system is a viable means of relief for student athletes" (pp. 779-80). Following the *O'Bannon* decision, concerns about the experiences, sacrifices, and value of college student-athletes contin-

ued to be highlighted in public and media debates. As Gerrie (2018) remarked shortly after the decision:

The average value of a student-athlete at a top 25 ranked school is \$487,617 and they are essentially performing the equivalent of two jobs. Today, the average student-athlete spends 43.3 hours per week on athletics, and 37.3 hours on academics. Their summer breaks are 10 days, instead of 10 weeks, and any optional activities are effectively mandatory if they wish to keep their spot on the team. (p. 116)

Commentators noted that the financial restrictions on student-athletes were particularly egregious given the massive revenue generated by college sports at the time of the *O'Bannon* case, "The NCAA reported \$989 million in revenue and \$665 million in net assets. Of this massive financial windfall, about \$681 million came from multimedia, marketing, and licensing, all of which use student-athletes' likeness" (Gerrie, 2018, p. 115). Since the time of the *O'Bannon* decision, the marketability, popularity, and revenue generated by the NCAA and its member institutions have continued to grow, prompting sustained debate about the rights and financial restrictions placed on student-athletes.

Detailing the possible influence of *O'Bannon v. NCAA* on the future of intercollegiate sport shortly after resolution of the case, Sheetz (2016) explained:

Although *O'Bannon's* ultimate impact on the NCAA is still un-

known, it did not hold the death sentence for amateurism that many anticipated it would. It is, however, indicative of the need for a drastic change to the NCAA and its relationship with athletic conferences, universities, and student-athletes. (p. 893)

Thus, while it was clear the *O'Bannon* decision had created certain progressive changes with respect to student-athletes' rights, it was also apparent that many of the long-running issues related to the restrictive nature of the NCAA's amateur collegiate model still remained.

Following the momentum created by the *O'Bannon* decision, NCAA amateurism restrictions saw a new challenge in the form of California Senate Bill 206 passed in September 2019. According to Senate Bill 206, State of California Education Code Section 67456 (2019):

A postsecondary educational institution shall not uphold any rule, requirement, standard, or other limitation that prevents a student of that institution participating in intercollegiate athletics from earning compensation as a result of the use of the student's name, image, or likeness. Earning compensation from the use of a student's name, image, or likeness shall not affect the student's scholarship eligibility. (sec. 2)

Following California's lead, nearly 20 additional states passed legislation to grant college student-athletes the ability to profit from their NIL rights, several of which were scheduled to take effect

on July 1, 2021 (Berkowitz, 2021). On the eve of the July 1 deadline, however, the NCAA ultimately approved a new policy that allowed student-athletes to take advantage of NIL rights regardless of the state in which their university was located, culminating a long and highly-contested process (Murphy, 2021).

Although July 1, 2021, certainly represented a watershed moment related to amateurism in college sport, restrictions on student-athletes' ability to receive compensation for their athletic performance remain, and debates about the labor rights of student-athletes continue. For example, in December 2022, the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) found merit in an unfair labor practice charge seeking employee recognition for football and basketball players at the University of Southern California (Lubit, 2022). If the case is not settled out of court, it would go before an administrative law judge, setting up a ruling that could potentially usher in a new era of labor rights for student-athletes. By examining the ways in which a notable recent debate about amateurism (i.e., the NIL rights debate) was framed in the media, the current study will provide useful insight when interpreting ongoing debates about amateurism in college sport.

### **Media Analysis in Sport**

The analysis of popular media documents is valuable, as it produces unique perspectives and insight with respect to understanding controversial issues in sport (Yoo et al., 2013). The importance of studying sport media is further un-

derscored by the fact that the media have a powerful role in shaping the reality of sports consumers (Eitzen, 2016). Sport media research has grown in recent decades, as mediated and commercialized sport culture occupies an integral part of social life in contemporary society, in turn drawing special attention from scholars (Yoo et al., 2013). As a key component of cultural formation and cohesion, the media “provide a collective experience for members of society, contributing to their socialization and serving to integrate persons into that culture” (Eitzen, 2016, pp. 157-158). Overall, sport media can be a fruitful area for investigation when seeking to understand topics of controversy and change in sport.

One approach that is prevalent in popular media research is *framing*. In general, “framing theory refers to the active process involving the selection of certain aspects of an issue by the media and its effects on the understanding of a message by media consumers” (Yoo et al., 2013, p. 12). All media content is framed in one way or another, as journalists and others who produce media content must frequently make decisions about “what to emphasize and what to ignore or whitewash” (Eitzen, 2016, p. 162). As journalists frame a story or issue, they “select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (Entman,

1993, p. 52). In a study on the effect of sport commentator framing on viewer attitudes, Parker and Fink (2008) explained, “a frame refers to how information is organized, including what is made to seem important and what is left out or made to seem unimportant, when presented to an audience” (p. 117). The ways in which media members frame an issue serves a powerful role in defining a problem and shaping public perception (Sanderson & Cassilo, 2019). In particular, a framing theory approach is useful in sports media research because it enables researchers to examine the ways in which controversial issues are presented to, and understood, by the public (Karimipour & Hull, 2017).

As an example of the role that sport media can play in framing a notable issue in sport, Kian et al. (2015) examined media framing of Jason Collins coming out as the first active openly gay NBA player, emphasizing the importance of sport media in initiating conversations and shaping societal perceptions. Kian and Hardin (2009), meanwhile, investigated how the gender of sports writers influenced the framing of basketball coverage, highlighting the counter-narratives offered by female journalists that challenge traditional gendered media portrayals. Indeed, sport commentator framing can influence consumers’ attitudes with respect to such factors as the athletic ability and respectability of women athletes (Parker & Fink, 2008). In this way, sports media framing has a broader effect on audiences beyond mere entertainment, impacting a variety of attitudes and intentions (Lewis & Weav-

er, 2015). For example, the way in which news articles frame athletes who have been involved a crime appear to influence readers' perceptions of the athlete's culpability (Seate et al., 2010). Sanderson et al. (2016) further contributed to the literature by exploring media framing of NFL quarterbacks' injury decisions and their implications for public perceptions, raising questions about ideas of heroism and toughness. These studies collectively shed light on the multifaceted nature of media framing and its influence on public discourse and social attitudes with respect to issues ranging from gender to criminality.

An important component of framing involves the sources that journalists choose to quote when covering a particular topic or issue (Karimipour & Hull, 2017). By presenting certain sources as "experts" about a topic, while omitting other potential sources, media members give voice to some stakeholders involved with an issue, while marginalizing or silencing others. In an analysis of media framing of concussions in the NFL, Karimipour and Hull (2017) found that ESPN.com writers most frequently quoted players and coaches to frame concussions as an everyday football injury, while less frequently quoting medical professionals. White et al. (2022), meanwhile, found that journalists most frequently quoted an official medical source when covering the concussion of Liverpool goalkeeper Loris Karius following the 2018 UEFA Champions League Final. In media coverage about the issue of steroids in baseball, however, players

themselves were most frequently quoted in news stories about steroids, while governmental and sports officials were quoted strategically to provide authoritativeness about the issue (Kozman, 2017). The contrast between such results demonstrates the importance of considering which sources are quoted in media coverage of an issue. Ultimately, given the highly contested nature of NIL rights in college sport, the current study investigated how the issue was framed in the media with particular attention to which sources were quoted. Specifically, the study addressed the following research questions:

RQ1: Which types of sources were quoted most frequently in media coverage of amateurism and NIL rights in college sport?

RQ2: How were these types of quoted sources used to frame the issue of NIL rights for media consumers?

## Method

### Design

Following the approach of Altheide and Schneider (2013), the current study involved a qualitative media analysis of sources that were quoted in media coverage of amateurism and NIL rights in college sports in order to examine how the issue was framed for media consumers. Specifically, the study examined the ways in which quoted sources were used to frame the issue of amateurism and the question of whether college student-athletes should be able to profit from their NIL rights. In performing the study, the investigators searched for themes and

narratives present in the selected media articles. Following a qualitative media analysis approach guided by Altheide and Schneider (2013), we considered themes to be “general definitions or interpretive frames” and “the recurring typical theses that run through a lot of the reports” (p. 52-53). Ultimately, our aim was to identify the types of sources quoted and explore how these sources were used to frame issues of amateurism and NIL rights for media consumers.

### **Data Collection**

The data collected for the current study included both print and online media articles published between January 2019 and January 2021. This two-year period encompassed a time in which debates about amateurism received substantial media coverage as numerous states passed laws promoting the ability of student-athletes to profit from NIL rights. The selected starting point of 2019 was chosen considering the excess of articles published in the given time frame, the continued progression of NIL publicity in recent years, the emergence of cases such as *Alston v. NCAA*, and newfound NIL legislation (e.g., California SB 208). Although the data collection period concluded prior to the final implementation of NIL rights in July 2021, numerous states had proposed and/or passed legislation pertaining to NIL by the time data collection ceased, providing investigators with two years of data during a key period leading up to implementation of NIL rights for NCAA student-athletes.

Potential news stories and articles were identified using an Internet search

engine (i.e., Google News), and a news database (i.e., Nexis Uni), and searches on specific news sites. Google was selected for use given its status as the most widely used search engine in the U.S., while Nexis Uni is an academic research database with access to more than 17,000 news and business sources (lexisnexis.com). To ensure a comprehensive search, articles were also identified by performing keyword searches on news sites of mainstream news and sport media outlets (i.e., *Sports Illustrated*, *The Washington Post*, *USA Today*, *ESPN*) (Deeb & Love, 2018). The search process was performed by combining the key search term “amateurism” with the terms “NCAA” or “student-athlete” as well as “name, image, and likeness,” “NIL,” and “pay for play.” Investigators reviewed the first 10 pages of results returned by each search query (i.e., 10 results per page) to determine if articles met the inclusion criteria of: (1) articles specifically discussing amateurism and/or NIL rights in collegiate athletics and (2) those quoting a specific source (e.g., coaches, administrators, lawmakers, student-athletes) in their coverage of the issue. The investigators stopped reviewing articles after 10 pages of search results because, at that point of the results, few articles met the inclusion criteria. After removing duplicate articles, the researchers identified 113 print and online media articles for inclusion in the current study.

### **Data Analysis**

The investigators analyzed the narratives from sources quoted in media coverage following the qualitative me-



dia analysis approach of Altheide and Schneider (2013). The data analysis was separated into four stages. First, the investigators read through all of the chosen articles to identify the particular sources who were quoted in each article, and how the quotations were used in each article. Second, the investigators extracted each identified quote from the articles and categorized them based on the type of source represented (e.g., coaches, administrators, student-athletes). These two stages addressed research question one—identifying which sources were most frequently quoted in the articles.

In the third and fourth stages, quotes were coded for meaning with a focus on the ways in which quoted sources were used in the articles to frame the issue of NIL rights and amateurism. Following Altheide and Schneider's (2013) approach to qualitative document analysis, investigators focused on discovery via constant comparison (Glaser, 1965). Constant comparison, which can be applied on any type of qualitative information (e.g., articles, documents, observations, interviews) is a systematic and iterative process that allows researchers to derive concepts and theories that remain close to the data itself (Coghlan & Filo, 2013). In the third step, investigators engaged in open coding during an initial reading of the data, while continually comparing “new” data to previously coded data (Saldaña, 2021). In the fourth step, investigators reviewed the data while engaging in axial coding, connecting subcategories of codes into broader categories (Saldaña, 2021). This process involved identifying similarities and differences

between codes, concepts, and categories, with the goal of developing more refined and nuanced understandings of the data (Glaser, 1965). During the coding process, investigators met regularly to discuss their individual interpretations of the data, comparing codes across source categories, and eventually reaching a consensus on major themes and sub-themes.

### **Findings**

Following the process outlined above, a total of 113 print and online media articles were identified and selected for analysis. The earliest article included in the sample was published on January 7, 2019, and the latest article was published January 20, 2021. Of the 113 articles, 41 articles were published in 2019, 62 were published in 2020, and 10 articles were published in 2021. Throughout the data analysis process, the investigators focused on which sources were quoted, how many times they were quoted in each individual article, and the ways in which these quoted sources were used to frame the issue of NIL rights for media consumers. It is important to note that different people in the same source category were counted multiple times if quoted in the same article. For example, two different federal legislators quoted in the same article were recorded as two quotes in the “politician” category for the specified article. Of the 113 articles, there were a total of 403 quotations from specific sources.

#### **RQ1: Type of Source Quoted**

The types of sources most frequently quoted in media coverage of amateurism

and NIL rights included (a) the NCAA, (b) politicians, (c) university/conference sources, and (d) student-athlete sources. The most frequently quoted types of sources are discussed in more detail below, while Table 1 provides a full overview of the number of articles and total quotes from different categories of sources. Of the 403 total quotations collected and coded from the 113 articles, the NCAA governing body was present in the most articles overall ( $n = 67$ ).

[insert Table 1 here]

### **The NCAA**

The NCAA source category encompasses the NCAA president, chief officers, and administrators, as well as quotations from “the NCAA” that did not specify a particular individual. The NCAA and NCAA officials were quoted a total of 79 times throughout the collected articles. Of these 79 quotes, 39 were specifically attributed to NCAA President Mark Emmert. Notably, the NCAA was the only source category quoted in more than half of the articles in the sample.

### **Politicians**

A second source with substantial representation and the largest number of overall quotes ( $n = 112$ ) came from politicians, which included governors, state senators and representatives, and federal senators and representatives. While politicians were quoted the greatest number of times, they were quoted in fewer overall articles ( $n = 54$ ) than the NCAA. Although politicians were not quoted

most consistently throughout the articles examined, there were many different individual politicians quoted at a high rate in specific articles (e.g., six different politicians in one article). In fact, two or more politicians were quoted in 32 of the articles examined; not only were two or more politicians present in 28.31% of the total article sample, but there were two or more politicians present in over half (59.29%) of the total number of articles with quotes from politicians.

### **University/Conference Sources**

Sources from universities and the conferences in which they compete were another frequently represented type of source. Specifically, athletic directors were quoted a total of 37 times in 26 different articles, conference commissioners were quoted a total of 25 times in 23 different articles, and university administrators (e.g., college presidents) were quoted a total of 20 times in 20 different articles.

### **Student-Athlete Sources**

Although student-athletes may be the people most directly impacted by regulations related to amateurism and NIL rights, their voices were represented infrequently when compared to sources such as the NCAA, politicians, athletic directors, conference commissioners, and university administrators. Specifically, quotations from student-athlete advocacy groups were included in 30 times in 26 different articles from the sample. Student-athletes themselves, however, were quoted in just 6 articles of the 113 examined in the current study. Similarly, of the

**Table 1***Type and frequency of sources quoted in coverage of NIL rights and amateurism in college sport.*

<b>Quote Category</b>	<b>Articles Present (total n=113)</b>	<b>Article Frequency</b>	<b>Total Quotes</b>
The NCAA	67	59.29%	79
Politicians	54	47.48%	112
Collegiate Athletic Directors	26	23.00%	37
Student-Athlete Advocacy Groups	26	23.00%	30
Conferences/Commissioners	23	20.35%	25
University Administration	20	17.69%	20
Former/Professional Athletes	17	15.04%	22
Sport Historians/College Professors	16	14.15%	15
Attorneys/Judges	12	10.61%	20
Collegiate Head Coaches	8	7.07%	15
Other Journalist/Reporter	6	5.30%	8
Current Student-Athletes	6	5.30%	7
Player Agents	2	1.76%	4
Edward O'Bannon	2	1.76%	2
Miscellaneous (One Quote Sources)	7	6.19%	7

403 quotes identified in the sample, there were 7 attributed to current student-athletes. Overall, the voices of student-athletes were represented in 5.3% of the total article sample, including just one article in which two or more student-athletes were quoted.

## **RQ2: Themes Among Quoted Sources**

Notably, different types of sources were used to frame the issue of NIL rights in different ways. In the sections that follow, themes are organized with respect to those that justify a need to (a) preserve the status quo and those that support (b) the need for change. Table 2 provides a listing of key themes and subthemes, which are explored in more detail below of the most prominent ways in which different types of sources were used to frame the issue of NIL rights.

### ***Preserve the Status Quo***

NCAA officials and coaches in particular were frequently quoted in ways that suggested it is important to preserve the (amateur) status quo in college sport. Specifically, prominent framings that emphasized a need to keep the status quo included (a) a fear about NIL rights creating “blurred lines” between employee/student status, (b) a belief that it is necessary to maintain the “collegiate model” to promote student-athletes’ education, (c) a concern that football and men’s basketball players will disproportionately benefit from NIL rights, thus making it unfair, and (d) a belief that student-athletes are already satisfied and properly compensated.

**Blurred Lines: Employees, Professionals, Students?** A prominent topic of debate highlighted via source quotations in the articles examined whether the status of student-athletes should be considered as amateurs/students or employees/professionals. Frequently, articles discussed the possibility of clarifying the question of student-athletes’ status via forthcoming legislation. Repeatedly, however, quotations from NCAA sources insisted that any type of professionalism for student-athletes or designation as university employees would destroy the world of college athletics. For example, a *Washington Post* article by Barnes and Maese (2020) specifically reported a brief section of the documents the NCAA put forth in a court filing, which stated, “The rule changes that the 9th Circuit’s decision requires, moreover, will fundamentally transform the century-old institution of NCAA sports, blurring the traditional line between college and professional athletes” (para. 12).

Such statements about “blurring the traditional lines” between amateurism and professionalism were continually provided by the NCAA within the sample of articles and used by members of the media to amplify the organization’s history of institutionalized amateurism. As frequently expressed in NCAA quotations, any critic of the existing amateur model or proponent of reformed NIL legislation was imposing detrimental confusion as to the status of student-athletes.

The NCAA further argued that any type of bill that resembled California SB

**Table 2.** Summary of themes and sub-themes among sources quoted in media coverage of NIL rights and amateurism in college sport.

<b>Theme/Sub-theme</b>	<b>Summary</b>
Preserve the Status Quo	Narratives that supported maintenance of the college athletics structure in which student-athletes were unable to profit from their NIL rights.
Blurred Lines: Employees, Professionals, Students?	A fear that NIL legislation will blur the lines regarding whether student-athletes are employees or students, which would have a negative impact on college sport.
Maintaining the “Collegiate Model”	A belief that it is important to maintain the current (amateur) model of college sport in order to promote student-athletes’ education.
Everybody or Nobody	A concern that NIL rights will primarily benefit football and men’s basketball players, serving as a potential impediment to implementing NIL rights.
Satisfied Student-Athletes	A belief that student-athletes already receive sufficient compensation (e.g., scholarships, housing, food, books) and are satisfied with the current system.
The Need for Change	Narratives that supported the necessity of changing a system in which college student-athletes were unable to profit from their NIL rights.
Reforming a “Broken System”	A belief that college sport is unsustainable and in need of reform.
A “Fair Share”	A belief that because college sport generates a great deal of revenue, college student-athletes should be entitled to a fair share of that revenue.
Opportunities for All	A belief that NIL rights will provide favorable opportunities for all student-athletes.
Missed Opportunities	An argument lamenting the fact that former student-athletes missed out on opportunities for income because there were denied the ability to profit of their NIL rights.

208 “would erase the critical distinction between college and professional athletics” (Maese, 2019a, para. 8). Emphasizing the importance of this distinction, another *Washington Post* article (Maese, 2019b) quoted NCAA President Emmert:

Virtually everybody is in agreement that moving forward on this and related issues makes sense, and this is a really good time to be doing it, Emmert said. At the same time, they also made clear some really important parameters: that college sports always needs to be about students playing other students, not about hired employees playing other hired employees. (para. 17)

Overall, a key theme in quotations from NCAA officials involved concerns about a “blurred” model of collegiate athletics that treats student-athletes as professionals or employees, favoring a model in which a clear distinction is maintained between amateur and professional.

**Maintaining the “Collegiate Model”.** Another prominent theme discussed in quotations examined in the current study was the maintenance of the NCAA’s “collegiate model.” NCAA sources routinely justified their opposition to NIL reform due to the supposed necessity of preserving what they called the “collegiate model” of sport. Journalists frequently reproduced quotes expressing the NCAA’s claims about the collegiate model, often without oppositional viewpoints.

Through the lens of this frame, the NCAA supported a single, amateur-

ism-based model of college sport. This is shown clearly in a *Washington Post* article in which the NCAA stated about California SB 206, “This directly contradicts the mission of college sports within higher education—that student-athletes are students first and choose to play a sport they love against other students while earning a degree” (Hobson, 2019, para. 4). Similarly, in reference to certain types of new NIL regulations, the NCAA stated its desire for these rules to be “consistent with the collegiate model” in an article published by *USA Today* (Skinner & Wilk, 2020, para. 13).

The “collegiate model” framing has been a lens through which many spectators, fans, and student-athletes have been accustomed to viewing college sport for many years. Such discussions often involve an “all or nothing” type of framing in which the journalist (via selected quotes from the NCAA) suggests that the collegiate athletics experience can only exist with the continuation of a model that supposedly places the “student” before the athlete. The framing was prominent throughout coverage that focused on opposition to NIL reform.

**Everybody or Nobody.** A substantial portion of discourse in media coverage of NIL rights concerned the marketability of elite student-athletes in college sport. To a large extent, media attention focused on the marketing appeal of football and men’s basketball stand-outs due to nationwide coverage and significant revenue generated in these two sports. Further, there is a substantial gap in the amount of revenue generated by teams in major athletic conferences

(e.g., SEC, Big Ten) and those in smaller conferences. In turn, media coverage frequently speculated about the potential for NIL rights to exacerbate existing inequities in college sports. In particular, such questions were frequently a topic in quotations from head coaches. Rick Barnes, coach of the University of Tennessee men's basketball team, shared his thoughts in a *Courier Journal* article:

My deal is, if you're going to pay revenue sports, the other athletes should be paid. Or nobody should get paid...I just think when you talk about paying athletes, it's everybody. You can't just stop it with revenue-generating sports (Sullivan, 2019, para. 9).

Florida State men's basketball coach Leonard Hamilton shared a similar sentiment in the *Courier Journal* when quoted about the impact of NIL on student-athletes:

How do you be fair to that small percentage of elite athletes, as well as not being unfair to the kids who are not considered elite: the general population of college athletics?...Let's really have some meaningful discussion so that we have a better understanding potentially, how this can affect the overall position of the college's role in the grand scheme of things and hopefully we can come to some conclusion that's fair to everybody. (Sullivan, 2019, paras. 10-11)

Joining these statements by men's basketball coaches, Ohio State University track and cross-country coach Karen

Dennis implored legislators, "As you craft legislation to increase student opportunities, I ask that you do so with an eye not just toward revenue-generating sports, but also to sports like those I am privileged to coach" (Dellenger, 2020a, para. 18). Ultimately, the "everybody always" theme represented an effort by coaches (but not student-athletes themselves) to shape the directions in which evolving NIL legislation would take.

While not necessarily an outright rejection of NIL rights, such concerns and calls for "discussion" rather than action were presented as reasons to question the appropriateness of NIL legislation, thus preserving the status quo.

**Satisfied Student-Athletes.** An additional theme among quotes from head coaches concerned the current conditions in which student-athletes work. Although many student-athletes may only receive partial scholarships or no scholarship at all, those on full scholarships receive a tuition waiver, housing, food, books, a monthly stipend, and other amenities that are not available to most members of the general student body at a university. In this vein, some quotes from coaches emphasized the idea that the current compensation structure was adequate, which negated the need for NIL reform. For example, Russ Turner, men's basketball coach at the University of California, Irvine, suggested in the *Sporting News*:

I think that at our level, in the mid-major level, the players are treated really well. And I'd be surprised if any of them that were

part of our program saw it differently. Now, does that mean that they get everything that they could otherwise get if there were no restrictions? No, maybe not. (Bernstein, 2020, para. 25)

The argument by Turner emphasizes that even in the “mid-majors”—schools outside the most powerful and wealthy athletic conferences—college student-athletes are treated “really well.” In this way, journalists sometimes used quotes from head coaches to create a framing that suggests college student-athletes themselves are satisfied with the status quo, and outsiders (e.g., politicians) are inappropriately interfering with the structure of college sport. Turner continued:

When politicians start weighing in on this issue, it feels like this something’s not quite right. Because I don’t think this is a civil rights issue. I don’t think that college athletes in general are being treated unfairly very often. I think there’s some isolated cases where maybe they are treated unfairly, but it seems also like those cases give a lot of, you know, interesting media attention that may be unnecessary. (Bernstein, 2020, para.28)

Such a framing of the issue was further bolstered by the infrequency with which current student-athletes were quoted on the topic, supporting a framing in which the current status quo version of amateurism is acceptable.

### ***The Need for Change***

Politicians, former college student-athletes, and coaches were often quoted in ways that supported an argument in favor of allowing student-athletes to profit from NIL rights. Specifically, prominent framings that emphasized the need for change included (a) a belief that the current system is “broken” and in need of reform (b) an argument that student-athletes deserve a “fair share” of the massive revenue generated in college sport, (c) a belief that NIL rights will provide favorable opportunities for all student-athletes, and (d) an argument lamenting the fact that former student-athletes had missed out on the opportunity to profit from NIL rights.

#### **Reforming a “Broken System”.**

The way in which college athletics are run under the supervision of the NCAA has been a focus of scrutiny and criticism for decades, and debates about the rights of student-athletes have surfaced repeatedly throughout the NCAA’s history. In the articles examined for the current study, a common theme in quotations by politicians in particular framed college athletics as a “broken system” in need of reform. For instance, Cory Booker, a U.S. Senator from New Jersey was quoted in a *Sports Illustrated* article expressing his thoughts on NIL and the proposed unlimited free transfer rule,

The system is broken right now. I’m sure that only once [transferring to a new school] is not fair...I have grown dissatisfied with the NCAA’s talk of a lot of reforms and their failure to implement



them. They've failed to police themselves and protect athletes as they should. (Dellenger, 2020b, para. 21)

As illustrated by this quote, a common refrain in the “broken system” frame is that the government needs to take action because the NCAA has failed to properly “police” themselves. Given that politicians were quoted on 112 occasions in the sample, journalists frequently positioned politicians as the rightful figures to speak on behalf of and stand up for student-athletes to help them secure NIL rights. While there are certainly power dynamics that may allow politicians to speak about issues in a way that many student-athletes are not able to, it is notable that student-athletes themselves were quoted so seldom in the examined articles.

**A “Fair Share”.** Another theme demonstrating the tendency of journalists to quote politicians as the primary figures challenging the NCAA’s status quo and standing up for student-athletes’ rights was the idea of student-athletes being entitled to a “fair share” of the revenue generated by college sports. In a *New York Times* story, for example, the author quoted U.S. Senator Bernie Sanders stating, “college athletes are workers. Pay them” (Witz, 2019, para. 14). Definitive language such as this frames the issue of NIL rights as being a labor issue—that student-athletes perform a level and amount of labor that is similar to other workers and should thus be entitled to compensation. U. S. Senator Richard Blumenthal from Connecticut

similarly highlighted the double standard that exists in which student-athletes work to produce massive profits, but are prohibited from receiving direct compensation for their work, stating, “Put the athletes first. Colleges ought to hear that message loud and clear. College athletes must receive fair compensation for their work” (Giambalvo, 2020, para. 3). Ultimately, it is notable that the “reforming a broken system” theme and “fair share” theme were employed routinely to create a narrative in which politicians were positioned as the leading figures to which the public should turn when seeking to understand the rights of college student-athletes.

**Opportunities for All.** In contrast to concerns about NIL reform exacerbating inequities, some coaches provided quotations about the potential benefits of reform. For example, Villanova University men’s basketball coach Jay Wright provided the following quote to *Sporting News* in response to NIL legislation:

The positives are a simple thing like a basketball player in the summertime going to speak at a camp. Speaking in front of 400 campers and doing a presentation and a skill instruction and getting paid. To me, that is a great lifetime experience. It’s a great educational experience. (Bernstein, 2020, para. 24)

Wright’s comment frames the issue in such a way that NIL rights are not only financially beneficial for student-athletes, but also have valuable educational worth. Similarly, University of North Carolina

football coach Mack Brown was quoted in a *Sports Illustrated* article arguing that “Personal branding is becoming a critical element of football programs around the country. We’re always looking for ways to educate our young men so they can take advantage of opportunities as they arise” (Krest, 2020, para. 4). Stanford University football coach David Shaw, meanwhile, provided another supportive quote in *Sporting News*:

I would love for more people to understand that a high percentage of coaches are in favor of this. There are certain people that have kind of painted coaches on the side of trying to restrict and take away from student-athletes. Many of us get into college athletes not to restrict, but to advise and be mentors and teach and help young people grow. (Bernstein, 2020, para. 23)

While all head coaches may not agree with the potential benefits of NIL legislation, quotes like those of Shaw seek to frame coaches as being on the “side” of college student-athletes as mentors and advocates.

**Missed Opportunities.** Although current student-athletes’ voices were seldom included in media coverage, journalists more frequently quoted former student-athletes to speak in favor of reform in college sport. A common theme in such quotations was the idea of “missed opportunities” that could have occurred had there been NIL legislation during the time of their collegiate careers. For example, Hayley Hodson,

a former Stanford University volleyball player, was quoted in a *New York Times* article, stating, “College is the only time they have to profit off their hard-earned athletic successes” (Blinder, 2019, para. 21). Former University of Wisconsin basketball standout Nigel Hayes emphasized a similar idea in the *Sporting News*:

Given the popularity I had and my team had, whatever I decided to do would have sold like hotcakes. It’s good now though that the opportunity (will be) there, but I know for sure that if it would have been something I was allowed to do, the sky would have definitely been the limit with that. (Bernstein, 2020, para. 6)

Many student-athletes, particularly those who do not go on to compete professionally, reach the height of their popularity during their collegiate years. For such student-athletes, the inability to profit from NIL means that they are unlikely to ever capitalize financially on their athletic success. However, some successful professional athletes were also quoted as supporting NIL legislation, such as Draymond Green, an NBA All-Star who competed collegiately at Michigan State University, quoted in a *Vox* article: “I’m tired of seeing these college athletes get ripped off” (Campbell, 2019, para. 5). Ultimately, it is notable that while current student-athletes’ voices were generally excluded from media discussion on this topic, journalists more frequently turned to quotes from former student-athletes to speak on their behalf.

## Discussion

The current study investigated the ways in which media coverage framed the issue of amateurism and NIL rights in college sport, with a particular focus on understanding how the sources quoted in news articles were used by members of the media to construct different framings. Building on the body of literature examining the ability of sports media to shape societal perceptions of controversial issues (Kian et al., 2015; Sanderson & Cassilo, 2019), the current study identified distinct framing employed by media members to either support the status quo or call for change in college sport. In particular, the current study adds to a growing line of research that demonstrates the importance of the sources that journalists choose to quote when covering a particular topic (Karimipour & Hull, 2017; Kozman, 2017; White et al., 2022).

The findings reveal that the NCAA, politicians, and coaches made up a large portion of the quotes used by media members when informing readers about NIL rights in the leadup to the summer of 2021. The findings also demonstrate a lack of attention given to the voices of student-athletes and their interests. In some ways, the findings demonstrate a connection to existing literature, as government sources and sports officials are often quoted to provide a sense of authoritativeness about an issue, as was the case with news coverage of steroids in baseball (Kozman, 2017). However, athletes themselves have been frequently quoted in coverage of steroid

use (Kozman, 2017) and concussions (Karimipour & Hull, 2017), so the relative absence of student-athletes' voices in media coverage of NIL rights was particularly notable. Ultimately, it is clear that not only were certain source categories intentionally privileged in mediated discussions of NIL rights, but others were highly underrepresented. Additionally, media coverage of the issue of amateurism and NIL was consistently framed by members of the media in ways that potentially impact the discussion and implementation of NIL legislation.

## Corrupted Amateur Idealism

The idea of amateurism we know today was generally conceptualized in the 1800s as a love for sport being played without compensation (Crabb, 2017), valued by members of privileged social classes (Afshar, 2014). As the NCAA formed around the turn of the 20th century, amateurism was incorporated as a key component of college sports and continues to restrict the rights of college student-athletes (Tatos, 2019). The NCAA has long emphasized the claim that it was designed to be an educational nonprofit organization, not a commercially driven enterprise (McLeran, 2017). As such, the NCAA has positioned its version of amateurism as the backbone and primary defense in cases challenging restrictions on student-athlete compensation. In reality, however, any scholarship money given to a Division I student-athlete is now referred to as "compensation"—a payment for services in a student-athlete's respective sport (Groves, 2016).

The Ninth Circuit has ruled that, legally, there is value in the NIL of a student-athlete that would provide real compensation to those student-athletes if NCAA rules had not prevented it (Groves, 2016). Such rulings have repudiated the NCAA's "blurred lines" framing found in many quotes and articles from the current study. The reality is that many students at universities are already paid professionals, or at least semi-professionals, in fields they are studying, so the status of student-athletes as "students" does not automatically define them as amateurs (Steele, 2015). Rather than anything inherent in college sports, it is the agenda of the NCAA that positions amateurism as a foundational concept that requires heavy-handed restrictions on student-athlete compensation (Tatos, 2019).

Ultimately, media coverage that has privileged NCAA sources as "experts" may foster biased views among readers. Prior to the introduction of NIL legislation, college student-athletes were not "amateurs" in a legal or practical sense (Groves, 2016). Rather, as evidenced by the quotes included in media coverage within the current study, the NCAA has used amateurism as a façade to maintain a system in which student-athletes receive little compensation compared to the substantial sums of money their labor generates (Busby, 2012). By privileging NCAA narratives about NIL legislation creating a confusing "blurred line" between professionalism and amateurism, media coverage often served to stifle impetus for reform.

### **Sidelining the Student-Athlete**

Apart from a few quotes offered by select journalists, the narratives present in media coverage were bereft of actual student-athletes' voices. Despite being some of the most identifiable and popular sport figures in their communities and, in some cases, across the country, current student-athletes were not well represented regarding a topic that more directly affects them than anyone else. The experiences of many student-athletes reveal that they need not only fair compensation, but also stability and protection from the exploitative nature of many NCAA regulations (Sheetz, 2016). All too often, however, student-athletes were not allowed to speak for themselves with respect to the types of stability and protection they desired as NIL legislation was being propagated.

In some of the rare instances when current student-athletes were quoted, they were framed as being uninformed or unable to answer for themselves in the media articles regarding the issue. For example, when asked about possible changes to NIL policy, Arizona State University running back Eno Benjamin stated:

I actually had a presentation in one of my classes (Marketing 441) that I did on that. I know a little bit of what's going on. I'm sort of indifferent. I see pros and I see cons. That's not for me to decide. I'm at Arizona State. (Sullivan, 2019, para. 17)

As Busby (2012) suggested, "Maybe certain media members with the largest platform are fixated only on telling a

tale about amateur student-athletes that propagates a story of academic shams and bagmen in back alleys with hoards of cash for blue-chip athletes” (p. 175). In reality, college student-athletes have long sought creative ways to capitalize on the notoriety achieved from their athletic success, but have been continually frustrated by NCAA restrictions (Gerrie, 2018). The framing of student-athletes as being “indifferent” or unable to form a clear opinion regarding NIL rights, however, serves to perpetuate the status quo. In this way, the media has typically failed to voice real concerns of the student-athletes who are in search of the ability to control their NIL rights.

### **A Fight for Power Amid NIL Chaos**

Although certain sources, such as politicians, sought to challenge the power of the NCAA and its amateurism model, the same group of politicians were framed as being in search of their own power to influence the direction of college sport. While the NCAA and politicians may have different agendas in many ways, both were framed as desiring to hold power to make decisions that affect student-athletes. While the NCAA has achieved great power to control the direction of college sport with little external interference (Lush, 2015), California SB-206 and subsequent legislation has challenged that power, leading the NCAA into a fight for its future. As Landry and Baker (2019) argued:

The deference that once fortified the NCAA’s amateurism model from scrutiny has eroded to the

point that material change to college athlete regulations is inevitable. The NCAA must now choose whether it wants to lead in the creation of change to its regulation of college athletes, or be led. (p. 61)

Despite an effort to maintain hegemony over the direction of college sport by crafting a narrative about “blurred lines” between amateurism and professionalism endangering the future of college athletics, the NCAA ultimately had no choice but to act in response to the wave of NIL legislation.

In this struggle for power to control the direction of college sport, quotations from NCAA President Mark Emmert often framed the issue as a surprising development that the NCAA could not have foreseen. However, amateurism has long been a “flawed cultural tradition” as applied to college sports (McLeran, 2017, p. 197), and numerous commentators had predicted that the O’Bannon decision would force the NCAA to revisit its rules on amateurism (Lush, 2015). But when journalists included quotes expressing surprise from the NCAA without proper context or historical background, such coverage served the purpose of protecting the NCAA from criticism over its lack of action. In this way, the prominent place of quotations by NCAA sources in media coverage of the NIL debate protected the legitimacy of the NCAA during a time when its traditionally unquestioned power over college sport was being challenged. In turn, such media coverage helps clear a

path for the NCAA's continued hegemony over college sport despite its missteps with respect to handling NIL rights. In this sense, understanding the nature of media coverage during NIL developments can provide insight about what to expect as debates about amateurism in college sport continue to play out in the future.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Research**

Though the current study identified sources who were quoted along with related frames in media coverage of amateurism and NIL rights, multiple limitations should be recognized. For example, journalists are tasked with writing articles within certain constraints, as a journalist is only able to quote a limited number of sources to stay within a particular word count. Regardless of these space constraints, however, it is notable that NCAA sources and politicians were still quoted so regularly. Ultimately, it may be the case that when a writer (and editor) make reductions to the length of an article, quotations from the NCAA and politicians are rarely the first to be cut. Further, the direct quotes that are included in media coverage are often part of a larger conversation between a journalist and a source; after having a conversation, the journalist must make decisions about which statements they will include from a particular source. Additionally, structural constraints in college athletics may limit the sources to which journalists have access. For example, barriers may exist when a journalist desires to interview

a student-athlete, and additional power dynamics may make student-athletes hesitant to speak about a controversial and ongoing issue like NIL rights. Such factors may contribute to the dearth of student-athlete voices included in media coverage of this topic.

By choosing to focus on print and online media coverage, the current study only sampled one portion of a broad media environment in which amateurism and NIL rights were being debated. As such, a clear avenue for additional research would be to examine broadcast media discourse about amateurism and NIL rights. Notably, investigating social media sources, such as Twitter and Instagram, may be an effective means of further understanding how current student-athletes were discussing and framing the issue of NIL rights in the lead-up to the summer of 2021. As such, a fruitful avenue for research would be to explore the effect of social media, student-athletes' voices in particular, on the framing of NIL rights and continued debates about amateurism restrictions in college sport.

### **Conclusion**

The period leading to the point at which NCAA student-athletes gained the ability to profit from their NIL rights was a time of contentious debate in the sports media. As numerous states passed legislation with the potential to challenge the NCAA's traditional "amateur" model, media members turned to a variety of "experts" to provide viewpoints and perspectives about the issue. Ultimately,

NCAA sources, which were quoted in 59.3% of articles, tended to be privileged in a way that supported arguments about college sports being detrimentally harmed by the emergence of NIL rights. In contrast, current student-athletes themselves were rarely quoted (5.3% of articles), a trend mirroring the general tendency for student-athletes' voices to be marginalized in the NCAA governance process. Politicians (quoted in 47.5% of articles), meanwhile, were more often framed as the proper authorities to speak up on behalf of student-athletes and to fight for the rights they deserved. While college student-athletes were ultimately granted the ability to profit from NIL rights, debates about amateurism, the labor rights of college student-athletes, and the structure of college sport are continual and ongoing. As such discussions evolve, media members would be well served to give attention to the voices of those most directly affected by the issues—namely, the student-athletes themselves.

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