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OPINION

College Sports Are a Big Money Mess

By Josh Cook November 5, 2026

Alex Fulton has helped high school athletes become college athletes and get rich at the same time—something that was prohibited just 10 years ago. Now Alex finds himself leading a band of colleges from the sports fields and pitches to the field of hardball politics. He heads a political action committee pushing for answers and rules for big and small schools with sports programs.

College sports are in a strange policy spot right now. Schools are still figuring out how to pay athletes—while also compensating them in other ways. The rules keep shifting, and no one knows what they will look like in two or three years.

Louisiana State's effort to bring back NFL-drafted players for additional eligibility brought the issue into the national spotlight earlier this year. For decades, college athletes could not earn money from their own fame.

NIL stands for name, image, and likeness. It means a player can make money from ads, autographs, or social media. In 2019, California passed a law letting athletes do this, and other states quickly followed. Then, in 2021, the Supreme Court ruled against the NCAA in NCAA v. Alston. That summer, the NCAA gave in and allowed NIL deals. Almost overnight, players began signing deals with local businesses and big brands. The lawsuits have been nonstop.

The House v. NCAA settlement was supposed to bring order to the player talent market. It hasn't answered everything.

One case worth watching is Patterson v. NCAA, which challenges limits on how long athletes can play. If a player is denied an extra year, they may be able to ask for the money they would have earned if they were given that year. No court has said schools must pay. It's also unclear who would pay. Still, schools with tight budgets should pay attention, with a few $2-million-a-year contracts that could add up to real money.

Congress has a bill called the Protect College Sports Act. It could change how athletes get paid, who can play, and what schools owe their players. But the bill isn't moving. Meanwhile, many major questions remain unresolved.

That uncertainty comes at a cost. Coaches, players, and schools spend more time on lawyers, contracts, and monitoring other programs than on games and educational matters. Program and player investments aren't on solid financial footing, and to keep up, many colleges are already overextending themselves.

College sports were meant to pair competition with education. Right now, that spirit is getting lost.

Schools need to organize and engage with Congress before one faction, like big or small schools, athletic conferences, independent schools, TV channels, or labor unions, decides college sports' future for them.

Big money is here to stay in college sports. Betting on sports is a double-digit growth industry, and when colleges get money clawed back after policies change, either in court or by Congress, there will be big winners and big losers.

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