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NIL COMPLICATES HIGH SCHOOL ATHLETES' COLLEGE DECISIONS

🕒 MARCH 26, 2024 🚩 ASHLEIGH SIMPSON

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BLOOMINGTON, Ind (March 26, 2024). A narrow, 84"-long runway spans the gymnasium floor. A young woman in red at one end, a metal horse at the other.

The University of Michigan Crisler Center was doused in fluorescent light and brimming with anticipating chants. Sarah Rowland coated her hands in a layer of white chalk, swiftly saluted the judges, and planted her feet in their familiar place opposite the vaulting horse. She took a deep breath in and a small step back before launching into a full sprint, barreling down the length of the foam runway.

Rowland's teammate slated to compete on vault was having a rough day during warmups, so her coaches put her in to compete as the alternate. That Sunday, February 9, 2020, the Ohio State University (OSU) gymnast earned a career high vault score of 9.800.

"It was such a surreal moment– all the support from my teammates and coaches, knowing that I stepped up and filled that role, especially starting off the lineup. I feel like that really sets the tone for what everyone else is going to do" said Rowland.

To any observer, that vault was the culmination of hours of training and years dedicated to the sport, condensed into a five-second routine. But to Rowland, it was more personal; that vault still lives in her memory as a moment of pride to compete for the school she loves.

Rowland was a member of the women's gymnastics team for all four years of her undergrad from 2019 to 2023. For most of that time, she recalls the National Athletic College Association's (NCAA) name, image and likeness (NIL) policy just beginning to crop up in conversations among coaches and peers. Even after its passing in June 2021, NIL did not significantly affect Rowland's athletic career, much less her decision to attend OSU-- the next wave of young athletes cannot say the same.



18-year-old Sarah Rowland competes for the Ohio State University Buckeyes at the University of Michigan Crisler Center on Sunday, February 9, 2020. She scored a career high (9.800) on the vault as the alternate, proud to step in for a teammate having a rough day. PHOTO CREDIT: Sera Kitchen



VIDEO CREDIT: Correnn McClure
<https://youtu.be/RbWk3KjrlDg?feature=shared>

NIL is the NCAA policy which revokes college athletes' amateur status, therefore allowing them to become paid endorsers by monetizing their name, image, and likeness.

"NIL has become baked into the landscape for a lot of schools," said Associate Professor Galen Clavio, Director of the National Sports Journalism Center. The effects of NIL on college athletics are being more intricately explored everyday; meanwhile, the ruling on NIL as it applies to high school athletics is still somewhat vague. Most recent data from January 2024 reports 31 states and the District of Columbia having active NIL legislation. These state legislatures outline the rules for collegiate NIL, but avoid the topic of high school NIL altogether.

Those advocating in favor of high school NIL argue that it is capable of benefiting high schoolers in the same principle ways it benefits college students. Athletes can earn compensation for their commitment and used to support low-income students, even incentivizing them to stay in school. But with the same benefits also comes many of the same concerns. For example, smaller schools risk losing their best athletes to bigger, wealthier schools.

Neither NIL's advantages nor disadvantages are exclusive to collegiate sports. However, two issues which are particularly strained when it comes to high school sports specifically are the pressure students face under NIL

involvement and the college decision process.

“We’ve turned college sports into more of an actual money-making system, whereas previously, it was more development,” says New Albany High School JV Baseball Coach Jairus McClure.

He has already observed some players’ shift in mindset at just the prospect of future

future NIL deals— they go from asking their coaches how they can improve, to asking how much money they can get paid in college. McClure considers this a disservice to the programs and kids themselves.

“Kids should base their decisions more on what environment suits them best, what coaches suit them best, even, rather than going straight for, ‘Hey this is how much money I’m going to be making,’” he said when asked how high school athletes should consider their college decisions.

The college sports industry prioritizing players’ marketability over athletic ability has been a concern since the implementation of NIL. According to Clavio, “that’s not how it’s played out.” Alternatively, Jeremy Gray, Senior Associate Athletic Director for Strategic Communications and Director of the Mark Cuban Center, said this fear has



Associate Professor and Director of the National Sports Journalism Center Galen Clavio leads a panel on NIL ruling. Clavio discussed the current situation of NIL, the changing status and rights of athletes, and how instances of high school NIL are faring. *PHOTO CREDIT: Kathryn Petersen*



New Albany High School junior varsity baseball coach, Jairus McClure, poses for a photo on the field where he coaches. This is the same field he played on during all four years of high school and also where developed a love for the sport. *PHOTO CREDIT: Correnn McClure*

become a new challenge for coaches.

“Don’t go after a student athlete who is only in it for the money. That leads to a bad teammate, more maintenance issues, and you deal with a different kind of work ethic, or lack thereof,” said Gray, giving his opinion on how experts should factor NIL’s effects into the recruitment process.

“I think that’s a little bit too young to be starting deals with different brands, especially if they don’t know what they’re getting into,” said Rowland about high schoolers making NIL deals.

Sarah Rowland arrived at the college sports scene two years before NIL did. Had she arrived two years later, when asked her favorite moment of representing her chosen school OSU, her answer might have been very different. She might have beamed about scoring a big brand deal rather than scoring a career high vault. It’s clear that Rowland’s recruiters understood what Gray meant when he said:

“Go for an athlete with one ingredient in the stew, someone who is there to



IU Athletics' NIL Task Force co-chair, Jeremy Gray, shares his insight on what it takes for student athletes to become successful and how NIL has increased their opportunities for the better. Photo courtesy of National Sports Journalism Center



Podcast host, Brooke Gyory, engages in conversation with Ashleigh Simpson and Correnn McClure about our findings while reporting on the NIL ruling.