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More Than a Game:Why Young Athletes Need Estate Planning for Their NIL Assets

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When college athletes gained the right to profit from their name, image, and likeness (“NIL”), a new era of opportunity began. Take, for example, the University of Texas’s quarterback, Arch Manning, with a deal estimated to be worth $5M; Miami’s Carson Beck, and Ohio’s Jeremiah Smith’s deals are reported to be north of $4M. Endorsement deals, social media sponsorships, appearances, and personal brands have turned student-athletes into entrepreneurs before they have even stepped onto a professional court or field. With these new opportunities come adult-sized responsibilities, and one of the most overlooked is estate planning.

Estate planning usually conjures images of elderly retirees or high-net-worth professionals meeting with their equally elderly lawyers. For young athletes making real money from NIL deals, estate planning has become a critical part of protecting what they have built, planning for what comes next, and hopefully, building generational wealth.

NIL Rights Are Real Assets

A young athlete’s NIL is an intangible but very real property right. The value of your name, image, and likeness can outlast your playing career and even your lifetime. A player’s legacy lives on through merchandise, video games, brand partnerships – to name a few.

Without an estate plan, those rights and the income they generate may not be handled according to your wishes if something unexpected happens. Engaging an estate planning lawyer to create a corporate entity like an LLC and then transferring that corporate entity into a trust ensures your NIL assets are managed and protected during your life and transferred to the people or causes you care about when you die - not left to be sorted out in court.

Protecting Family and Future Generations

Many athletes sign their first contracts by age 18. Despite their young age, it is not uncommon for athletes earning a salary from NIL to already serve as a financial resource to other family members, consider a life after their playing days by investing in businesses, and look for opportunities to give back to the communities that helped them achieve their success in the first place. Each of these reasons amplifies the need for a proper estate plan and the legal infrastructure to ensure that those commitments are carried forward and honored upon injury and death.

By establishing an LLC and a trust, you can manage and protect your NIL earnings during your life, manage how those funds are used after your death, and, in some circumstances, minimize taxes. The infrastructure of a trust that holds your LLC that owns your NIL rights allows the you to appoint a trusted adult or a professional fiduciary to help manage the assets responsibly while you focus on your education and athletic career.

Building a Foundation for Long-Term Wealth

Estate planning not only plans for what happens after you are gone, it also maximizes the growth and preserves wealth while you are here. By thinking strategically, setting up an LLC and a trust to hold your NIL assets, you may also gain tax advantages, protect yourself from lawsuits, and prepare for life after sports.

Proper planning can mean the difference between athletes who simply make money and those athletes who build a legacy. Estate planning plays an integral part in ensuring that your brand is a business, and your future is an investment.

Modeling Financial Maturity, Responsibility, and Control

For young athletes, especially those in the public eye, planning ahead sets an example. It shows future sponsors, teammates, and fans that you are serious about your career, your money, and your name and your legacy.

In the same way you train your body and mind, you can also train your financial and legal muscles. Estate planning is part of that discipline — it is another way to take control of your story. Your NIL is more than a paycheck — it is part of your personal legacy. Whether you are signing your first deal or building a brand that will last for decades, estate planning ensures that your hard work benefits you and the people and causes you care about most.

Young athletes are learning that financial power comes with legal responsibility. Getting an estate plan in place now is not just smart—it is part of playing the long game.