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# Marketers Bullish On Monetization Opportunities For NCAA Athletes With NIL Rights

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*I cover the biz of sports, facilities, licensing and travel.*



TUSCALOOSA, ALABAMA - NOVEMBER 09: Tua Tagovailoa...  
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If and when—and it certainly seems like it’s only a matter of *when*—NCAA athletes are able to begin monetizing their name, image and likeness, opportunities for social media marketing present the lowest-hanging fruit. But what does that market really look like, and which student-athletes will have the greatest opportunities?

I spoke with senior executives from four leading influencer marketing companies to get an idea of the current landscape and how student-athletes will be able to take advantage of opportunities. They were all enthusiastic about the prospect of being able to work with student-athletes, and most were already putting people and strategies into place to begin as soon as the rules allow it.

The most important factors that will influence a student-athlete’s ability to monetize their social media will be the size of their following, their engagement rate and the overall awareness of the student-athlete, which is likely to be influenced by the sport they play and the success of their program.

All of the marketers I spoke with emphasized Instagram and YouTube as the two platforms where student-athletes have the most potential for monetization.

“The minimum following may be similar across all platforms, but the earning potential would be highest on YouTube, then Instagram,” says Stephanie Stabulis, vice president and

senior strategy director of [HireInfluence](#).

Mathew Micheli, co-founder and managing partner at [Viral Nation](#), agrees that Instagram and YouTube are the most valuable platforms for monetization right now, but he wonders how feasible YouTube is for student-athletes.

“YouTube would be much more difficult for student-athletes to really focus on given the time needed to create long-form video content,” says Micheli. “However, it produces more income given the value of the content.”

Tyler Farnsworth, founder and chief growth officer at [August United](#), says his agency would generally be looking to partner with student-athletes who have at least 10,000 followers on Instagram or average video views of at least 20,000 on YouTube. On Twitter, they look at average engagement quantity in terms of retweets and likes, and on TikTok they review overall profile and check for key areas of opportunity.

Most marketers I spoke with described a 10,000-follower minimum on Instagram, but Mae Karwowski, founder and chief executive officer of [Obvious.ly](#), says they routinely work with nano-influencers with 1,000 to 10,000 followers, in addition to bigger influencers. On YouTube, she says, brands are looking for 50,000 or more subscribers.

“People love sports, and social media is a huge overdue opportunity for college athletes,” says Karwowski. “Contract amounts go up with follower counts, but engagement is another important metric that brands look at. The athletes on our platform have an average of 6.5% engagement rate, which is way higher than the general average of about 2%.”

The sport a student-athlete participates in will also likely impact their earning potential, according to most marketers.

“In most cases the more prominent sports will have athletes with greater social followings. We’d typically see this play out in football and basketball as they often benefit from the most outside media coverage,” says Farnsworth. “With that said, we have seen various other individual athletes with great stories or those with Olympic participation, for example, reach a higher degree of awareness and thus have increased brand partnership value.”

Karwowski agrees football and basketball athletes will have built-in advantages but says, “Influencers in lesser-known sports such as fencing or equestrian can build communities and find brand collaborations, too.”

Student-athletes in sports outside of football and basketball will likely find opportunities in smaller niches or with regional brands, says Micheli. “Other sports are a little more difficult because of the lack of national exposure. On a micro-regional level, they might be popular, but how is someone who lives in New York supposed to know what happens with Oregon’s soccer team?”

In addition to a student-athlete’s sport playing a role, geography and strength of program may have an impact on monetization potential.

“Geography or affiliation doesn’t dictate much in college. Popularity, size and conference play a much bigger role,” says Micheli. “For example, the hottest name in college football is Joe Burrow, who plays QB for LSU, which is located in Baton Rouge, that has a population of a few hundred thousand people. Versus a school like Fordham, located in the Bronx, may never have a game televised and lacks a player who anyone would recognize on the street.”

Stabulis says, “Athletes at D1 schools and larger state schools are more likely to have relevancy when it comes to endorsements just because they are more well known and have greater audiences—students and alumni—than your smaller schools.”

Geography can still play a role, however, says Farnsworth. “For example, we have a grocery client that would be interested in working with student-athletes from USC or UCLA as they are relevant to the area in which they serve.”

So we know the opportunities are there. But what can a student-athlete expect to make as an influencer?


Several of the marketers point to Alabama quarterback Tua Tagovailoa as an example of a current student-athlete with a great deal of earning potential as an influencer.

“Tua boasts nearly half a million followers on Instagram and maintains a mind-blowing 19% engagement rate on his posts,” says Farnsworth. “He doesn’t post very often, but his

fans absolutely love him. A guy like Tua could easily earn \$25,000 or more per branded partnership.”

Micheli has a similar opinion of Tagovailoa. “Some of these athletes could arguably be more popular than their pro counterparts. For example, Tua Tagovailoa in college football if given the opportunity, would probably out-earn 90% of starting NFL quarterbacks if given the opportunity. I could almost guarantee that,” he says.



**tuamaann\_**   
499.5k followers

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I circled back with Farnsworth and Micheli after Tagovailoa's season-ending injury to ask how an occurrence like that would impact the demand and future earnings of a student athlete.

"There is still significant value in brand partnerships; however, a brand may be hesitant to sign a long-term commitment or may put contingencies in place," said Farnsworth. "In short, yes, a significant injury that takes the player out of the media spotlight could negatively impact the overall opportunity for brand deals. That's a sobering statement to make because the health of the athlete is what really matters but is likely a reality nonetheless."

Micheli had similar sentiments. "Currently, Tua's injury has taken him out of the endorsement spotlight until he's recovered. Especially, given the severity of the injury, he's going to put all his energy into recovery," he said. "Severe injuries can damage both career longevity and the athlete's pockets because they're not the hot topic right now."

We also talked about how the market for a student-athlete might shift after their playing days are over and they're out in the working world doing something outside their sport.

"Should a collegiate athlete not move forward in the sport post-college, it is likely that their media attention will diminish," said Farnsworth. "This could result in a lower overall social profile and consumer or fan attention."

Once the college athlete's career is over and they don't go pro, their marketability essentially goes away," said Micheli. "Endorsements will most likely become

non-existent. They become old news unless they go pro or go into another career that would require them to keep up a social presence. There could be some anomalies or outliers to this, but for the most part, all is lost for them, unfortunately.”

However, Farnsworth says it doesn't have to be the end of the rainbow. “Many could use their collegiate time as a launchpad to other successful opportunities. We see this all the time as certain players transition from their life in pro sports.

“For example, former NFL wide receiver Eric Decker gained prominence during his time in the league but has continued growing his stature online, now commanding a significant presence. He has grown an audience that is incredibly engaged and interested in his now post-NFL family life. We have partnered with Eric and saw incredible success.”

Regardless of their star status, Stabulis says there's money for influencers at every level while they're still student-athletes.

“Because it's a niche market, we can expect influencers to be able to make about \$250 to \$1,000 per post, at these lower beginning following ranges. That will escalate as the athlete can reach more people through their social media outlets. This is the price per post for a brand looking strictly at reaching audiences or as part of an influencer marketing campaign.”

“For endorsement deals that rely on paying for an athlete's name, likeness and deeper partnership or ambassadorship, we anticipate this higher,” says Stabulis. “This is also where star performers, bound for professional sports leagues, may be offered more opportunity and more potential earnings.”

Karwowski puts the average right now for college-age sports influencers at \$200 to \$5,000 per post, “depending on their followers, engagement and quality of content.”

Micheli says a student-athlete at a Power 5 program with a following of over 25,000 could earn \$2,000 to \$4,000 per month between digital advertisements and local sponsorships. “For athletes who produce video content, their earnings can easily be in the six-figure range annually to start.”

The marketers all agree brands are salivating over the opportunity to work with student-

athletes.

“We’re already hearing from our brands,” says Karwowski. “They’re chomping at the bit. We’re also ramping up our talent recruitment efforts to make sure that athletes have the best possible representation and contracts as they’re entering this space.”

Stabulis agrees. “In 2018-2019 alone, our company has developed strategies for at least four to five brands targeting student-athletes, and we have been restricted due to the NCAA regulations,” she says. “The demand is already there, so we see potential for brands to move quickly to work with student-athletes.”

Micheli adds the caveat that it’s not just about the sport a student-athlete competes in, or their following; the most successful student athletes are going to be the ones who can develop platforms focused on their own unique personality.

“Brands will be salivating to work with some of the higher-profile athletes, especially when looking to market to a younger generation,” says Micheli. “One major factor is the athlete has to have personality to be successful. Success on the court or field doesn’t mean everything.”

Karwowski agrees and gives an example of a college-aged athlete doing well.

“Some of the most successful sports influencers we’ve seen so far are those who also show their own personalities in their feeds. For example, Moaci Lopes (@moacilopes) is a college-aged surfer and skater, but his account with more than 100,000 followers is really focused on his style.”

A quick look at his account reveals far more posts focused on travel and style than highlighting him actively competing in sports.





moacilopes

Follow



823 posts

105k followers

50 following

MOACI LOPES

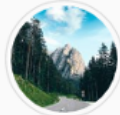
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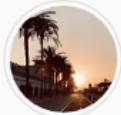
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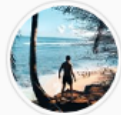
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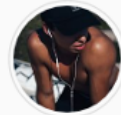
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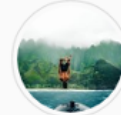
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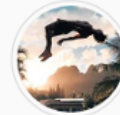
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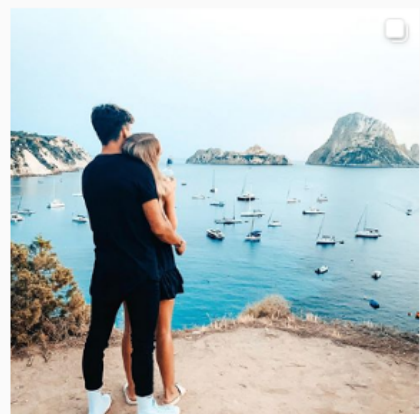
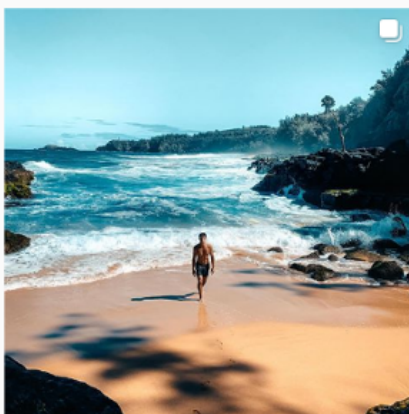
GOOD MO...



HAWAII

POSTS

TAGGED



Instagram feed of Moaci Lopes SCREENSHOT

His feed is in stark contrast to current student-athletes like Tagovailoa and Oregon women's basketball player Sabrina Ionescu, whose feeds are far more focused on their

sport and regularly feature them in uniforms and other school gear in posts.



sabrina\_i

Follow



39 posts

86.5k followers

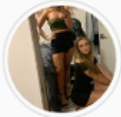
420 following

Sabrina Ionescu

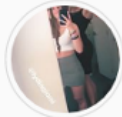
University of Oregon WBB #20. God is good. 📍 Walnut Creek, CA 🇺🇸 Eugene, OR.

•Romaniano•

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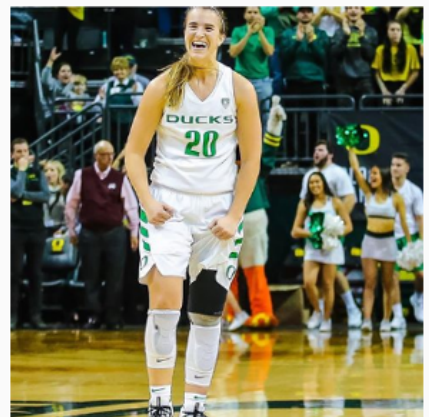
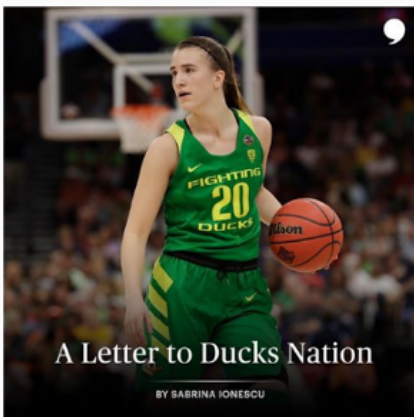
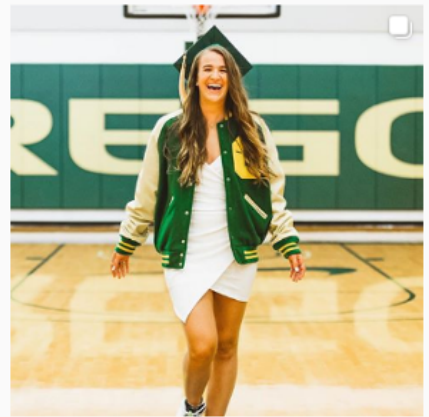
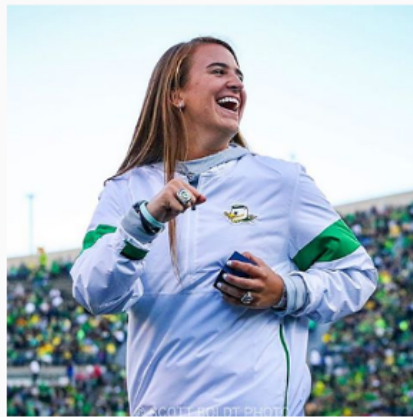
Grad Pics 📸



Highlights

POSTS

TAGGED



Sabrina Ionescu's Instagram feed

SCREENSHOT

Some athletic administrators I've spoken with have indicated student-athletes may not be granted the rights to use university intellectual property in sponsored posts, which would mean no uniforms or other gear with school logos. Asked if that would make a difference in their ability to monetize, most marketers agreed it could have an impact but probably isn't a deal-breaker for most brands.

For higher-profile student-athletes who already have made a name for themselves, "absolutely not," says Micheli. "They could be doing endorsements across the country for a plethora of different types of brands, and people would undoubtedly know who they are. With regards to less-high-profile athletes, this would pose difficulty given they haven't built a strong personal brand and would be less recognized by the average person."

Stabulis says, "Not in our experience looking strictly from an influencer marketing perspective—but it would really depend on client expectations and whether they are focused on reaching a particular audience through influencer marketing or they are simply looking for an endorsement from a next big sports star."

"When the focus is on audience, brands tend to want access to either a local audience or audiences with shared interest to what the student is posting about, such as sports or training," she continues. "When brands look for an endorsement, they rely on the popularity and affiliations to help elevate the athlete across brand-owned marketing channels and public outlets."

Micheli says all the what-ifs make this an interesting turning point for college sports.

"This ruling will make the sports go one way or the other. Athletes might get too caught up with making money, or it might incentivize higher levels of competition and increase interest in the specific sports."

In the meantime, the NCAA and its participating institutions have much to think about beyond the basic issue of whether student-athletes should be able to monetize their name, image and likeness.

For example, will collaborations with brands in certain industries, such as marijuana or gambling, be banned? What about conflicts with existing deals entered into by athletic

departments or universities? Who will be responsible for monitoring it all?

When insurance policies are taken out for loss of future earnings for student-athletes who are injured, will that include any loss in marketing revenue? Should athletic departments be responsible for educating student-athletes on contractual and financial issues surrounding the new marketplace for their rights? These are only a few of the questions that still need to be answered before the marketplace opens to student-athletes.

It's an interesting time, indeed.



**Kristi Dosh**

I am the founder of [BusinessofCollegeSports.com](http://BusinessofCollegeSports.com), a nationally-recognized source for news and analysis on the business of college sports. From that site was born a book,...

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# Drones And Artificial Intelligence Help Combat The San

# Francisco Bay's Trash Problem

Sasha Banks-Louie Brand Contributor

Oracle BRANDVOICE | Paid Program

Innovation

Ever since the industrial chemist Leo Baekeland began synthesizing phenol and formaldehyde in 1907, the world has developed a love-hate relationship with the resulting polymer: plastic.

While plastic is convenient, durable, and cheap, **50% of all plastics** (about 150 million tons every year, worldwide) are used only once and then thrown away. Even for those who dutifully recycle our plastic water bottles and sandwich bags, we're only tackling a small part of the problem. That's because heavy winds and rain carry huge amounts of plastic waste along city streets and into the stormwater system, where it likely flows directly into creeks, rivers, bays, and eventually the ocean, with no treatment to filter out plastics.



“Considering the size of the problem, there’s relatively limited infrastructure in place to capture and treat stormwater,” says Tony Hale, program director for environmental informatics at the nonprofit [San Francisco Estuary Institute \(SFEI\)](#).

That’s where SFEI is looking to use research and data—and most recently, drones—to make a difference.

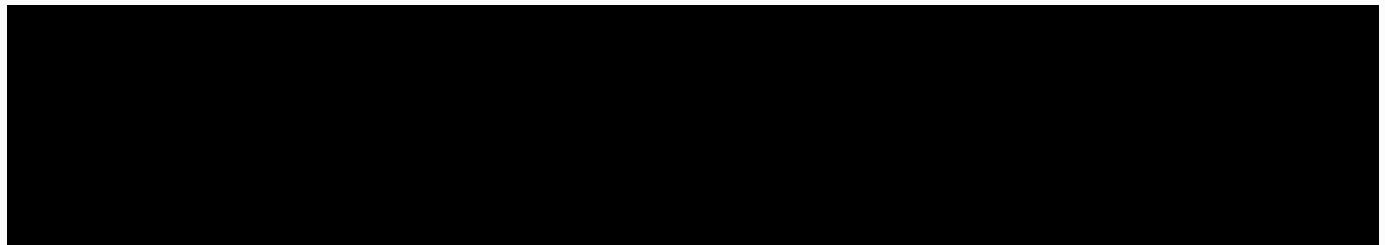
In addition to sending out crews of people on foot to count and collect trash in local waterways, SFEI began using camera-equipped drones to assess that waste on a much larger scale.

“Most ground crews working for stormwater programs monitor trash once a year, twice if we’re lucky,” Hale says. “So what we can learn about trash and its impact on communities is limited by the number of people we can afford to send out.”

With drone photography, “we can track all of the trash in a creek, river, or stream, examine how it’s distributed, and then apply machine-learning algorithms to analyze those images as often as we want,” Hale says.

The drone research is part of a new project by SFEI and its sister organization [Southern California Coastal Water Research Project](#), through funding from the [Ocean Protection Council](#), to validate trash-monitoring methods, and produce a trash-monitoring playbook that community cleanup groups, municipal programs, environmental agencies, and ecologists can learn from and put to use. The effort studies initiatives such as plastic bag bans to urban rain gardens.

“Our mission is to help city planners find the best ways to [filter their stormwater](#) and stop contaminants such as trash and plastics from entering their protected wetlands and public waterways,” Hale says.





## Deep-Learning Cleanup Crew

By sending drones over the San Francisco Bay and [neighboring tributaries](#), SFEI collected some 35,000 images in its initial foray.

“Covering so much ground so quickly was amazing,” Hale reflects. But his excitement soon faded, as the reality of crunching so much data in a reasonable amount of time set in: “It took us almost a month to process these images.”

Using 2,000 annotations to describe various trash particles, Hale and his team were training an open-source [TensorFlow](#) machine-learning algorithm to identify the type, quantity, and location of each particle of trash depicted in those 35,000 images.

To speed up the analysis, SFEI partnered with [Kinetica](#), a data analytics startup that participates in the [Oracle for Startups](#) program. It put SFEI’s trash-detection model into a Docker container and then brought it into Kinetica’s “active analytics” workbench, says Kinetica CMO Daniel Raskin. Using a Python API, Kinetica then streamed the images into a table, where they could be stored, categorized, and labeled.

“We’re not just ingesting these images and distributing them inside our platform” Raskin says. “We’re also running SFEI’s trash-detection model to classify all of the images as they hit our database.”

This gives SFEI more than just a giant image catalog. The California water-quality



watchdog can now visualize each of the 35,000 images based on its geographical location and trash profile.

Initially, Kinetica ran SFEI's deployment from a distributed CPU framework, on its own 4-core machine, using managed Kubernetes. "It took us about 10 days to run the entire simulation," says Nick Alonso, a solution engineer at Kinetica who works on the SFEI project. Even after moving the application to a server using a single GPU—processors that are well suited to machine learning work—the simulation still took the better part of a week.

Kinetica then decided to run SFEI's entire workload on [Oracle Cloud Infrastructure](#), using eight V100 GPUs. "We're no longer talking about days to run this simulation," Alonso says. "We're doing it in hours—about 18 hours and 26 minutes, to be exact."



**Sasha Banks-Louie**

An organic hay farmer and writer, Sasha Banks-Louie is a content strategist at Oracle, covering sales, marketing, and customer service issues, as well as startups and...

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