

[UMaine athletes are finding ways to cash in on NIL deals](#)

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Fans who have watched University of Maine men's hockey coach Ben Barr working to build the program's third NCAA championship team have seen progress.

After a losing season his first year, Barr's Black Bear teams have improved in each of the last two campaigns, culminating last season in their first trip to the NCAA Tournament in 12 years.

Recruiting talented players is the key to the hockey team's resurgence, and to the success of any of UMaine's athletic programs. For decades, improving facilities and increasing scholarship funding, along with convincing players to come to Orono, were the pillars of recruiting.

Now, there is another major factor in attracting talent to UMaine: opportunities for student-athletes to make money.

Since 2021, the NCAA has allowed student-athletes to earn money through Name, Image, and Likeness deals, similar to professional athletes getting paid to endorse products. It works like this: Businesses or donors pay student-athletes who in return do things like sign autographs, make personal appearances, endorse products or businesses, and post on social media.

Major college athletic programs around the country are taking advantage of NIL and are attracting top talent. For example, Duke University men's basketball successfully recruited Maine-born phenom Cooper Flagg, whose NIL valuation is [estimated at \\$1.4 million](#) thanks to his existing social media following, Duke's loyal fanbase and the exposure he'll receive playing for a national title contender.

It's unlikely that a UMaine athlete will ever command the kind of NIL money Flagg will make. But if UMaine sports programs, like men's hockey, are going to be competitive, their athletes must have NIL opportunities similar to those at schools they compete against. And thanks to local businesses, donors and fans, UMaine athletes have started making those deals.

"We have to figure out a way to make that work," Barr said. "If you can't provide things student-athletes can get from other schools, you aren't going to succeed."

The marketplace surrounding NIL is beginning to work for UMaine. Black Bear hockey defenseman and co-captain David Breazeale received NIL compensation through a personal appearance for U.S. Cellular last season.

"The school has given us an amazing opportunity to have a scholarship, perform at an awesome level and get a great education," Breazeale said. "But it's also good to have extra

cash because your scholarship doesn't cover everything and it's nice that the school recognizes that as well."

Word is spreading about what NIL will mean for the businesses and fans who want to capitalize on UMaine's sports teams and players. That's why efforts to help UMaine compete in NIL are springing up in the community.

The newly formed Bear Down Collective connects donors, supporters and businesses with student-athletes. Supporters can obtain Bear Down Collective memberships with a contribution, and each price level offers benefits. Contributions can be designated to go to a specific team or student-athlete.

The Bear Down Collective has already taken in more than \$21,000. A total of \$5,000 has been pledged to two football players, with \$400 more yet to be allocated to members of the football team. Meanwhile, supporters have sent \$4,652 to the men's hockey program, and \$9,500 to the men's basketball program — all yet to be allocated.

Men's basketball head coach Chris Markwood attributes his team's hot NIL start to the connections he has around the state as a South Portland native and former UMaine basketball player.

"Being from the state, there are businessmen, friends and family members I know that want to help," Markwood said. "This is in its infancy phase, and we'll divide it up amongst the players as much as we possibly can. The America East is as strong as it's been in a while — you evolve or get left behind."

Waterfront Concerts founder and promoter Alex Gray and Kristen McAlpine, assistant vice-president and corporate engagement development officer for First National Bank, are the leaders of the collective. They said they are among nine volunteers not earning anything from this venture, but the collective does take a 10 percent cut of NIL payments to pay for its overhead — such as legal fees, web design and free merchandise for supporters.

Gray said he has spent \$50,000 of his own money establishing the website and obtaining merchandise to give to the donors for their support.

The Old Town native said that he witnessed the joy and source of pride at the school and in the community after the 1993 and 1999 UMaine men's hockey teams captured NCAA championships.

"I want to win. It's that simple. I know what winning does at the highest level. I profited from it when I owned a nightclub," Gray said. "I also know what it did for the community and I live in this community. It's a pretty dark place when they aren't winning."

Gray sees similarities between the late Shawn Walsh, who coached UMaine to the two national championships, and Barr. He is convinced Barr will win a national championship if he has the resources to do so.

Complementing the Bear Down Collective — which is geared toward boosters and businesses seeking NIL opportunities with athletes — is UMaine's partnership with Icon Source, which gives more control to the student-athletes to take the initiative.

Icon Source, a Denver-based company founded in 2019, created its digital Icon Suite platform that allows college and professional athletes seeking NIL-related opportunities to create online profiles and engage with local companies through a custom marketplace.

The platform simplifies the administrative process of deal disclosure and compliance for all parties. UMaine partnered with Icon Source in early April, and as of mid-July, the UMaine Athletics Department had reported that approximately two dozen student-athletes had created Icon Suite profiles.

The first batch of NIL deal data from Icon Source is scheduled to arrive in August.

Another important fundraising entity is Van Wagner, the exclusive sales representative for corporate marketing and sponsorship programs for UMaine.

"Two months ago, we couldn't broker NIL deals (due to NCAA rules). Now we can," said Justin Barnes, the general manager of Van Wagner. "We are now actively involved. Our goal is to work with the collectives because we all have the same mission, which is to raise NIL funds for the student-athletes."

The UMaine men's hockey team is expected to earn the lion's share of NIL support in the coming years, with other teams taking a back seat to Barr's squad because of its status as a national championship contender.

Ultimately, the businesses and donors determine where the money goes. There is no provision to ensure women athletes or players on lower profile teams get NIL deals.

"We're going to try to build equity between genders and teams, but I think we're going to fail long term," Gray said. "The reality is it's impossible — it's capitalism."

McAlpine hopes businesses and donors will want to spread the wealth.

"It would be great to build in some things through gender equity but it will be a slow burn," McAlpine said. "The benefit of it being donor-directed is that if you have a donor out there who is really passionate about female programs and female athletes and they want to support them, they have full control over where that money goes and we're more than happy to put it there."

This exciting time for players and sponsors is a challenging time for UMaine administrators who must make sure NCAA regulations and state laws are followed. NCAA rules governing NIL don't allow the university to arrange NIL deals. Maine law says universities and colleges can't create rules that limit NIL opportunities. The NCAA rules have been changing, which makes monitoring deals challenging for colleges and universities.

UMaine Athletic Director Jude Killy said his department wants to track NIL deals to ensure the rules are followed.

"Technically, right now, student-athletes don't have to disclose deals they have in place," Killy said. "We're asking them to do that so we can make sure they are doing real work for real pay. We're strongly recommending disclosure for a number of reasons like NCAA compliance, competitive equity and market analysis."

Samantha Hegmann-Wary, the associate athletic director for compliance and senior woman administrator, and her staff are responsible for making sure the regulations are followed by the donors and student-athletes.

For example, as part of their NIL deal, student-athletes can't promote alcohol, drugs, gambling, adult entertainment or NCAA-banned substances.

Even though third parties making NIL deals with athletes are a separate entity from the university, "we're still held accountable for those things," Killy said. "That's why the disclosure piece is very important."

The school intends to educate UMaine student-athletes this fall in financial literacy and brand management to understand how NIL works, he said.

An obstacle that many UMaine student-athletes will face has to do with their international status. Players from Canada or Europe, for example, aren't able to receive direct NIL payments from U.S.-based entities while attending UMaine on a student visa.

Roughly half of the men's basketball team — including star guards Kellen Tynes and Jaden Clayton from Nova Scotia and Ontario, respectively — are international students and won't be eligible for most NIL opportunities.

"We work hard, and the players deserve [compensation]. It would definitely be nice," Tynes said. "But speaking for myself and the other guys I know well, we don't do it for the money, but for the love of the game. Our main focus is to win a championship."