

Higher Learning: Altius Sports Partners has a plan for NIL space — and two major clients

By Michael Smith and Ben Fischer

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LSU and Texas battled in Austin in September 2019 but will be on the same team with Altius as the first two schools known to have signed comprehensive advisory deals in the name, image and likeness space.

Photo: GETTY IMAGES

During his three years at the NFLPA's for-profit arm, NFL Players Inc., Casey Schwab's job was to generate revenue off the players' marketing rights. It was only natural that the evolving name, image and likeness movement in college athletics would draw his attention.

The more he talked to athletic directors and friends in the business over the past several months, Schwab began to see an opening in the college space for a new agency that would advise athletic departments on adapting to the coming NIL marketplace.

The opportunity prompted Schwab to leave the NFLPA recently to form Altius Sports Partners, a consulting firm with a powerhouse lineup of 10 college insiders and marketing experts whose formidable roster of advisers ranges from ex-Ohio State and Florida football coach Urban Meyer to Oliver Luck, the former XFL commissioner and executive vice president of the NCAA.

With Schwab's hallmark achievement at the NFLPA — a new long-term commercial contract with the NFL negotiated alongside the collective-bargaining agreement — completed last spring, Schwab left his position on July 31 to become Altius' CEO.

He and his co-founding partners, David Carter and John Entz, had been in talks with more than 30 athletic directors as they took Altius from concept to reality, but they're formally launching their shop this week.



I Casey Schwab: CEO and Founding Partner Will oversee the company and focus on business development; David Carter: Founding Partner Strategic marketing expert who teaches at Southern Cal's Marshall Business School; John Entz: Founding Partner Former president of production at Fox Sports who brings an extensive media background; Gabe Feldman: Educational Consultant Director of the Tulane Sports Law School and one of the foremost authorities on name, image and likeness; Urban Meyer: Coaching Consultant; won three college football national championships during coaching stints at Florida and Ohio State.

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Their first two clients, LSU and Texas, represent two of the most powerful brands in college athletics; a third client, Arizona State, is finalizing its deal with Altius. Schwab has been traveling to major college towns in recent weeks talking to other prospective clients. LSU and Texas are the first two known schools to sign comprehensive advisory deals in the NIL space.

"I've had my eyes on the changing NCAA landscape for several years, and my focus was on how NIL was going to get implemented," Schwab said. "There's going to be a lot of uncertainty as NIL takes shape."

With that uncertainty, Schwab believes, will come the need for an advisory firm that can help schools navigate NIL guidelines, whether they are written by federal, state or NCAA legislators. The NCAA has a committee working on NIL, more than 30 states have proposed bills and at least two federal athlete compensation bills have been introduced to Congress, most recently last month.

Altius' model is built on signing consulting agreements with schools that address the NIL rules changes expected to take effect in the next 10 months, as well as modifications beyond that. That could range from compliance support to NIL's impact on coaching, recruiting and booster involvement, and an educational component for athletes.

Navigating all of those questions will require schools to know the developing set of rules, many of which remain murky at this point. For example, can an athlete at a Nike school sign an endorsement deal with Adidas, or even wear Adidas gear at an appearance? It's not clear yet.



Jené Elzie: Former All-American gymnast at Stanford who is now chief growth officer for Athletes First Partners; Oliver Luck: Former executive vice president at NCAA and athletic director at West Virginia. Most recently was commissioner of the XFL; Jessica Mendoza: Olympian in softball who provides baseball and softball analysis for ESPN; Ken Shropshire: CEO of the Global Sport Institute at Arizona State; Malcolm Turner: Former Vanderbilt athletic director who previously was president of the NBA G League and built consulting businesses at Wasserman and OnSport.

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Simply put, Schwab's bet is that schools don't have the manpower and expertise to navigate the new NIL marketplace and ensure compliance among athletes, coaches and boosters. And that they'll be willing to pay for expert help.

Altius did not disclose its consulting fee-based structure, but Schwab said it varies by school.

"We're being hypersensitive to the economic climate," Schwab said. "We recognize that departments are facing massive budget challenges, so we're being creative to build these partnerships."

Stephanie Rempe, LSU's executive deputy AD and COO, talked to Schwab multiple times about NIL issues before deciding to hire him and Altius.

"It's not so much about adding more staff as it is the experience and expertise Casey brings," Rempe said. "We had the discussion internally about creating our own working group and then using our own counsel on campus to help us navigate this and to kind of teach ourselves. Or do we get in on the front end of this with a super impressive operation like this? That's how we wound up where we did."

The firm's educational component will enable its advisers to help the athletes at LSU and Texas understand NIL regulations. Schwab said that service could take the form of a mobile app, created with a tech partner, that athletes or client schools could download for regular reference.

About Casey Schwab

CEO and founding partner

Altius Sports Partners

Hometown: Lancaster, Wis.

Residence: Washington, D.C.

Career: VP/business and legal affairs, NFL Players Inc., 2017-2020;

Director, business and legal affairs, Fox Sports, 2016-17;

Manager, business administration, NFL Media, 2013-2016

Education: J.D., Southern California, 2013

Bachelor's, University of Wisconsin, 2010

Altius does not intend to work with athletes to sign sponsorship deals or arrange appearances for a fee. The athletes will have their own marketing reps or agents to do the deals.

Agencies working for the school are not going to be allowed to arrange paid appearances on behalf of the athlete, according to the guidelines established so far by the NCAA and state and federal proposals. But Altius can provide education for athletes so they can learn how to maximize their brand and manage their income. That's the distinction.

Schwab said there already are plenty of agencies looking to bring deals to the athletes.

“We see ourselves as helping athletic departments navigate all of those companies that are out there,” Schwab said. “You’ve got social media companies out there. You’ve got sponsorship companies out there. You’ve got agencies starting NIL divisions. Our role, as opposed to being one of the pieces of the puzzle, is to sit at the table with athletics and help navigate all of those pieces.”

Altius is not the first agency to enter this space and it certainly will not be the last as established companies and startups stake out their turf. Collegiate Licensing Company is having discussions with leaders in the college space about what role it might play in the disclosure and transparency of NIL deals. OneTeam, the firm started jointly by the NFLPA, MLBPA and Redbird Capital, was founded to help athletes maximize their NIL. It has not entered the college space yet. Competitors Opendorse and INFLCR have a track record of delivering revenue from sponsors based on an athlete’s social media prowess. A handful more, like Altius, are looking to assist athletic departments. The difference-maker, Schwab believes, is the all-star lineup he’s assembled.

His co-founders, Carter and Entz, have extensive media and marketing backgrounds. Carter is a renowned marketing professor at the University of Southern California while Entz was formerly president of production for Fox Sports. Educational consultant Gabe Feldman, who directs the Tulane Sports Law Program, is perhaps the preeminent authority on NIL and athletes’ rights. Malcolm Turner (Vanderbilt) and Luck (West Virginia) have experience in the AD chair.

“Casey understands the athlete’s perspective,” Feldman said. “I think this group understands the market perspective. We’ve put together a group of experts from across many different fields to make sure athletes, administrators and sponsors get the full educational picture.”

Drew Martin, Texas’ executive senior associate AD for external affairs, said the plethora of stakeholders involved in the NIL discussion, from politicians to the NCAA to athlete advisers, makes it a complicated landscape.

“I’m not sure the NIL of 2022 will be the same as the NIL of 2021,” Martin said. “There are so many voices in this conversation that we need a group studying this issue specifically.”

Altius has no external capital partners, and Schwab is the only full-time employee for now. Equity is wholly held by the founding partners and advisers, though the company declined to break down details. Schwab said Altius has initial funding for 12-15 months.

Meyer, who will be the coaching consultant, predicted extraordinary demand for Altius’ services. Coaches’ time and attention in 2020 has been totally consumed by the pandemic, social justice causes and uncertainty around the 2020 season itself, Meyer said, so few of them have given full consideration to what NIL rights might mean.

The kind of guidance and expertise that Altius promises could provide its clients with a leg up in recruiting the top athletes who might be in position to benefit from NIL the most, the coach said.

“Universities will adapt, everyone will adapt,” Meyer said. “But I know a coach is going to want help in this space. He’s going to want to know what other people are doing. The biggest thing is what the NCAA compliance is going to look like. ... This is going to be very chaotic for quite a while.”