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Across the country, college athletics departments have worked feverishly to offer the best opportunities for student-athletes to maximize their potential in the name, image and likeness (NIL) era. A lot has already happened inside our departments to ensure student-athletes are well equipped while shifts in both legislation and the marketplace have also forced us to be adaptable. So here we are, several months into NIL and what we all knew has become a reality: brand building now more than ever plays a prominent role in the student-athlete experience.

Since arriving back on campus this fall, one thing that has stood out to me from our student-athletes at St. John's is the high level of engagement in terms of utilizing the educational, technological and networking resources that are available to them related to NIL. The implementation of St. John's

UNLIMITED, a comprehensive program unveiled in November 2020, has been a game changer to navigate the uncharted waters of NIL. The overarching goal of St. John's UNLIMITED is to ensure our student-athletes are afforded the proper tools to enhance their personal brand and capitalize on endorsement and commercial opportunities during their time in New York City.

St. John's UNLIMITED features a joint partnership with The Peter J. Tobin College of Business and The Lesley H. and William L. Collins College of Professional Studies that gives student-athletes the opportunity to pursue a minor in sports leadership and branding. The academic curriculum has already provided many of our student-athletes some of the essentials by completing courses such as financial literacy, entrepreneurship and strategic leadership in a global environment.

In addition to the academic pillar of St. John's UNLIMITED, our department worked quickly to secure a partnership with INFLCR. At the time our partnership launched in November 2020, St. John's was the first athletics program in the country to create a department-wide, NIL-centric program with INFLCR to benefit all of our student-athletes. From putting new technologies in their hands to granting exclusive

access to industry experts, St. John's student-athletes had the opportunity to get ahead of NIL by way of this joint venture. To date, many of our student-athletes have already capitalized on this partnership, whether it may be enhancing their digital profiles with access to compelling editorial content, learning best practices to align with brands, or aligning with new tech partners for NIL business opportunities.

The third pillar of St. John's UNLIMITED is our networking program that helps link student-athletes with alumni and professionals representing a wide range of industries, as well as companies both here in Queens and in the greater New York City area. Such networking events range from our StormChat seminars to career nights that help foster these new relationships. Our networking program has proven to be extremely valuable in setting the foundation for professional careers after graduation and also in capitalizing on NIL.

The NIL era is here to stay and will certainly take more twists and turns as it continues to evolve. In order to serve our current and future student-athletes to the best of our abilities, it is imperative that we remain proactive in offering support services and educational opportunities to ensure they have the resources needed to realize their potential in NIL.

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A Recipe for Success

There has been a growing trend in higher education to engage their constituents through the sale of licensed consumables. Fightin' Hokies Lager, a Munich-style Helles lager, is a true example of a cross-campus partnership with members from the university's licensing and trademarks department, Virginia Tech athletics, the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences and the university's tech transfer hub, LINK + LICENSE + LAUNCH, leveraging each department's strengths to bring the initiative from discovery to market. With a strong internal team in place, finding the right brewing partner was essential to bringing the concept to life. Virginia-based Hardywood Park Craft Brewery's values, mission and incredible reputation made them an ideal partner for the Commonwealth's land-grant institution.

The licensing and trademarks and athletics departments worked with Hardywood to identify brand elements that spoke to the Virginia Tech community. The label focuses primarily on the vintage Fightin' Gobbler trademark, which is a part of the university's College Vault collection and is a nod to nostalgia as the university celebrates its sesquicentennial anniversary. The amalgamation of "Hokies" and the university's older nickname, the "Fightin' Gobblers," are combined to create a new name that many members of the Hokie Nation can identify with. The Hokie stone motif is incorporated within the label design as many of the buildings on the Virginia Tech campus are constructed with the locally sourced limestone. The pennant element was added to represent the fandom and collegiality that embody the Hokie spirit. The group ultimately chose to launch with Hardywood's signature "stubby" bottle, as it both reduced the potential for oxidation compared to its long-necked counterpart and strengthened the retro nature of the beer brand.

With a finalized recipe and label, Hardywood worked diligently with the Virginia ABC and TTB to receive approval for commercialization both in and outside of the Commonwealth of Virginia.

Federal trademark registration was submitted to the USPTO to solidify ownership in all appropriate categories, including those for alcoholic beverages, merchandise and promotional products. Licensing and trademarks worked alongside key licensees and retailers to build out the merchandise collection. Fightin' Hokies Lager launched in April 2021. The official beer of the Hokies can be found in grocery, convenience stores, bars, and restaurants across the state with its inaugural debut in Lane Stadium just in time for the start of college football.

Prior to the start of the fall semester and football season, Fightin' Hokies Lager ranked as one of the best-selling craft beers in Virginia after just 17 weeks on the market. That's a "helles" a launch if you ask us.