



Graham: Students debate who could be allowed in youth sports



Ethan Josefchuk, left, representing Rogers High School, and Branden Fowler of Sand Springs' Charles Page High School stand at the lectern Wednesday during the Sports Debate City Championship at the University of Tulsa College of Law.

Courtesy, National Association for Urban Debate Leagues

By Ginnie Graham

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Teens and preteens shouldn't be allowed name, image and likeness sports deals because of potential exploitation, harm to small schools, and damage to the spirit of youth and amateur athletics.

Then again, NIL deals in Oklahoma high schools are already happening. So instead of trying to reverse course, it's better just to reform the system.

That's the summation of the nation's first Sports Debate City Championship, which was held Wednesday at the University of Tulsa College of Law and featured teams from Tulsa's Rogers High School and Charles Page High School in Sand Springs.

At the end, I couldn't choose a winning team. The students were that closely matched. My inclination remains against NIL for teenagers, with mounting frustration that state officials aren't doing enough to protect kids.

The National Association for Urban Debate Leagues chose **the Tulsa Debate League** to be the pilot project for expanding into debates devoted to sports topics.

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There's nothing wrong with the typical high school debate topics. But, honestly, subjects like government exploration of the Arctic, intellectual property rights and the establishment of a comprehensive bilateral trade agreement with the European Union just aren't as attention-grabbing as NIL.

"Sports is relevant to debate," said Rhonda Haynes, executive director of NAUDL. "Unfortunately, not a lot of people know about debate. Sports (topics) could create more access and grow an audience, not just for students but adults, as well."

The Tulsa Debate League remains one of my favorite youth nonprofits. It was founded in 2013 when the only debate team in Tulsa Public Schools was at Booker T. Washington High School. Mostly only private schools could afford debate.

The nonprofit, led by Executive Director Ross Faith, starts and supports programs in public schools. It has a particular knack for finding professionals who are debate alumni and enlisting them as

volunteers and donors. The Tulsa Debate League now assists 29 programs in TPS, including at 13 elementary schools, by providing curriculum and volunteers. It hosted 10 debate tournaments during the past school year.

Through these efforts, public school students who never would have learned debate skills now qualify and win state and national awards. They learn how to research and how to argue both sides of an issue. They experience how to disagree respectfully.

“There’s a connection between sports and debate, and that’s competition,” Faith said. “Law is a common pathway for debaters, and there’s a connection between law and sports. Three of the four major league sports commissioners are lawyers. League offices are full of lawyers. So this is among the many pathways there are for debaters.”

The arguments for and against name, image and likeness rights

The debaters came at the NIL topic with research, anecdotes and personal examples. Student Ethan Josefchuk of Rogers High School had been in debate for only a month when he earned a spot in the championship with fellow student Iliel Hurtado Valle.

Josefchuk argued the position in support of NIL benefits at the high school level, calling for “responsible reform.”

“Eliminating NIL is both unrealistic and unfair,” Josefchuk said.

“Instead, we advocate for refining the system to make it more equitable and protective of all students.”

The Rogers team likened NIL deals to student actors getting paid for acting gigs or youth cashing in as social media influencers. Their other points: NIL packages incentivize students to participate in sports, and it teaches skills like marketing and financial literacy. They say it would boost school sports over competitive club leagues.

The team acknowledged that inequities exist among schools and various sports, so the goal should be putting in guardrails to close those gaps.

“This is not about whether NIL is perfect. It’s about whether we can improve opportunities,” Hurtado Valle said. “NIL empowers students to earn and grow and stay involved in schools. Let’s not punish ambition. Let’s protect and guide it.”

OK, decent points. I almost changed my mind, but the Sand Spring team came up with good counterpoints on NIL harms to youth.

Recently graduated senior Gracie Gifford, a three-year wrestler and track and field athlete, said NIL deals would only widen inequities, particularly between male and female sports, and erode critical lessons such as teamwork.

“The pursuit of individual NIL deals often overshadows team achievements, which is what high school athletics is all about — growth, amateurism and a competitive environment that prioritizes team success,” Gifford said.

“NIL deals repetitively exclude female athletes. Very few NIL collectives target female athletes because they are looking for what is worth more financially. Unfortunately, we all know that is primarily masculine. There is a clear difference between female wrestlers and male football players in NIL deals.”

Her debate team partner, Braden Fowler, emphasized possible exploitation of youth. Teenagers who lose interest today can quit with little fallout. That could change if big money is on the line. Parents could force their children to keep playing against their will, or NIL donors could exert their influence in toxic ways.

That’s the convincing argument for me. I’ve seen so much bad parental behavior at just the possibility of a kid playing college sports. That’ll be so much worse with NIL.

NIL deals would benefit larger, richer schools with more businesses able to offer lucrative packages, Fowler argued.

“Elite talent is being concentrated in a handful of schools with large fan bases and NIL collectives, leaving smaller fan bases with little hope of recruiting the star players,” he said.

I wasn't alone in not identifying a clear winner. Veteran debaters and coaches in attendance were reluctant to name the standout team.

"This was an incredibly well-matched debate," Faith said.

No winner was named because this was a public showcase of the new program. That's a little ironic, considering this is about sports.

But judges were present to give feedback: Russell Fisher, associate athletic director for compliance at the University of Tulsa; Brentom Todd, deputy chief of staff for the Tulsa Mayor's Office; and Rick Horrow, chairman of Florida-based Horrow Sports Ventures and the strategic adviser for the sports debate pilot.

"Sports makes debate cool, and debate makes sports more inclusive," Horrow said. "I'm excited to be part of this program."

The prevalence of NIL money in Oklahoma high school football

Tulsa World Sports Columnist Bill Haisten previews his story on how much money is being talked about when it comes to the licensing of name, image and likeness of high school football players. After showing up in college football, the contracts are now being signed by high school athletes.

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