The financial reality of today's young athletes

New research reveals smart choices, significant opportunities and the growing need for specialized guidance

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Executive summary

Recent Merrill research surveying 159 high-potential U.S. athletes in their late teens and early 20s reveals a generation that defies stereotypes while navigating unprecedented financial complexity. In 2025, with 74% expecting $25,000+ from name, image and likeness (NIL) deals, sponsorships and related opportunities, NIL deals and social media opportunities are transforming the athletic financial landscape. Today's young athletes face unique challenges that require specialized guidance.

Four key insights emerge from this study:

1

Smart financial priorities drive spending decisions. Athletes allocate 36% of sports earnings to saving and investing while dedicating only 6% to luxury items — creating a strong foundation for wealth management.

2

NIL opportunities create both income and complexity. While 32% earned $10,000+ from NIL deals in 2024, 61% struggle with navigation and management of these opportunities.

3

A confidence-reality gap creates risk and opportunity. Despite 80% rating their financial literacy as "good" or "excellent," 32% feel financially insecure and 21% report being stressed about finances.

4

Demand for professional guidance is overwhelming. 88% express interest in working with financial advisors, with 82% wanting to learn about investing. Currently, only 8% work with advisors.

Today's young athletes represent a financially sophisticated generation making smart choices, yet their unique circumstances require specialized guidance to build financial foundations during crucial earning years.

1

Smart financial choices: Athletes prioritize saving and investing

Young athletes demonstrate remarkable financial discipline that challenges stereotypes about professional sports figures and money management. Most athletes have experience using different financial tools, including savings accounts (98%), checking accounts (92%) and credit cards (69%), with three-in-ten (31%) having an investment or brokerage account. The research reveals responsible spending allocation patterns:

36%
goes to saving and investing — their top financial priority

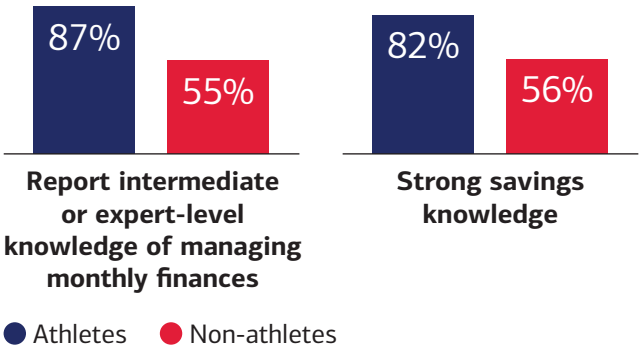
25%
supports personal wants — with only 6% going to luxury items

21%
supports others — including family and charitable giving

17%
covers basic needs — essential daily expenses

This allocation stands in stark contrast to popular narratives about athlete spending. Rather than focusing on expensive cars and lavish lifestyles, these young athletes prioritize long-term financial security from the beginning of their careers. The majority (91%) feel they're managing day-to-day finances well, and 80% feel they're saving effectively — indicating strong foundational habits that can be built upon.

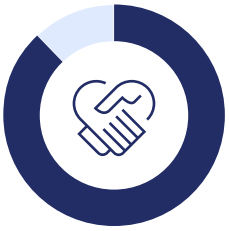
Athletes demonstrate stronger financial confidence than their non-athlete peers.



This confidence translates to performance: 41% feel very comfortable managing day-to-day finances compared to 23% of non-athletes, and 33% feel very comfortable saving compared to 25% of non-athletes.

The giving back mindset shapes financial values

Community impact remains central to how young athletes think about financial success.



88%
Believe it's very important or somewhat important to give back to their communities

The combination of strong saving habits and community commitment positions these athletes for financial planning approaches that balance personal wealth building with meaningful social impact — requiring strategies that accommodate both objectives.

2

The NIL revolution: Significant opportunities, navigation challenges

NIL opportunities have fundamentally altered the financial landscape for college athletes, creating substantial earning potential while introducing complex navigation challenges.

NIL demonstrates significant financial impact

68%
have NIL deals or opportunities in progress across various sports

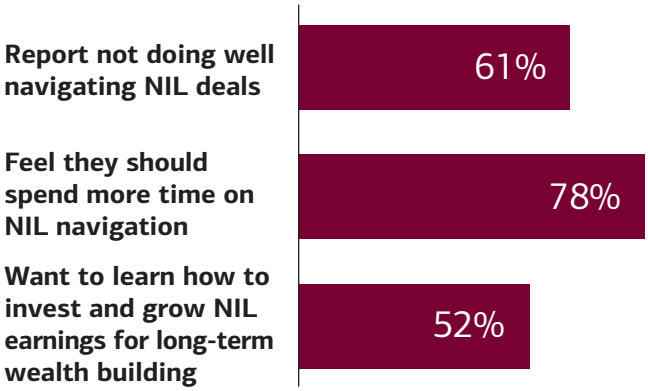
32%
earned $10,000+ from NIL deals in 2024, representing substantial income

28%
expect to have NIL deals in the future, indicating continued growth potential

Athletes recognize clear benefits, with 65% feeling NIL deals have had a positive impact on them. While most (88%) view income as a benefit of NIL deals, 75% cite performance motivation and 64% note increased recognition and exposure as other benefits.

Navigation challenges create guidance opportunities

Despite widespread participation, most athletes struggle with NIL complexities:



Top concerns highlight areas where professional guidance provides value:

Risk of exploitation through undervalued contracts — **38%**

Potential for scams or unethical deals in a rapidly evolving marketplace — **36%**

Complex, confusing contracts requiring legal and financial expertise — **36%**

Athletes with NIL deals show greater interest in learning investment strategies (59% vs. 44% for those without deals), creating natural progression opportunities toward comprehensive wealth management as earning potential grows.

3

The confidence-reality gap: Success mindset meets financial complexity

A disconnect emerges between athletes' confidence in financial knowledge and the complex realities they face. While 80% rate their financial literacy as "good" or "excellent," their day-to-day experiences reveal a different story:

32%
feel financially insecure

21%
report being financially stressed about their current situation

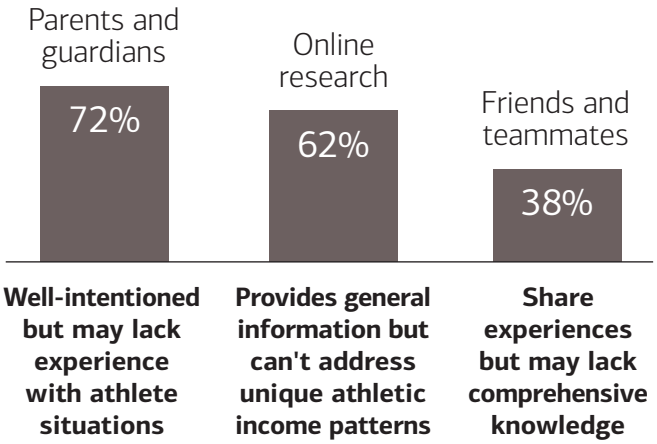
48%
maintain a budget, and just 19% stick to it consistently

61%
struggle with complexities of NIL deal navigation despite these being critical income sources

Athletes from middle and lower socioeconomic backgrounds experience even higher levels of financial insecurity (45%) and stress (30%), indicating that confident self-assessment doesn't always translate to financial peace of mind.

Current information sources create knowledge gaps

Athletes currently seek financial guidance from sources that may lack athlete-specific expertise:



45%
of athletes from middle and lower socioeconomic backgrounds experience even higher levels of financial insecurity

These traditional sources often fall short when addressing unique athlete challenges like NIL negotiations, irregular income patterns and industry-specific tax considerations.

Why this gap matters

The athletic mindset that drives sports success can work against financial success. Athletes are trained to be confident and self-reliant — qualities that serve them well in competition but may create financial blind spots. The stakes are high because athletes often face significant income growth at young ages with compressed earning timelines. Early intervention with professional guidance can bridge the confidence-reality gap while building on existing strong habits.

4

Strong demand for professional guidance

The combination of financial confidence, complex opportunities and recognized knowledge gaps creates substantial demand for professional financial guidance among young athletes.

Overwhelming interest in advisor relationships

The research demonstrates remarkable openness to professional guidance, with:

88%
expressing interest in working with financial advisors

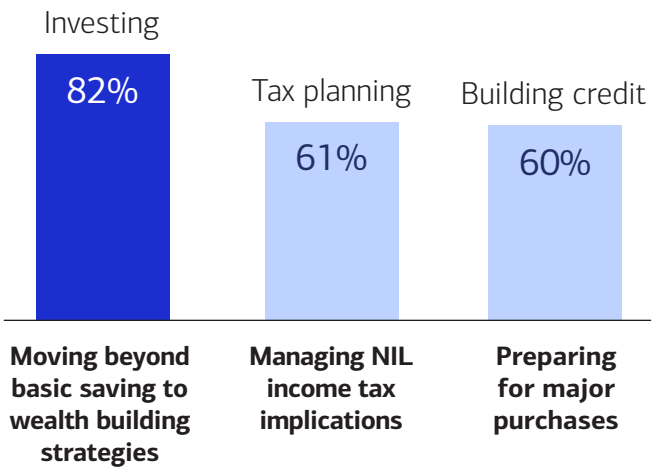
Interest breaks down into immediate and future opportunities

20% → **68%**
now and as earning potential grows

Currently, only
8%
work with advisors

Learning priorities align with current challenges

Athletes identify specific topics they want to learn from financial advisors:



Financial worries drive desire for advice

Specific concerns motivate athletes to seek professional guidance:

40% **fear losing money through bad decisions — their top financial concern**

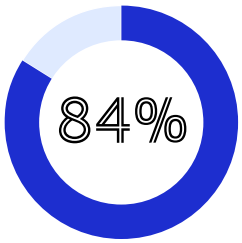
29% **worry about not earning enough to support goals and lifestyle aspirations**

28% **are concerned about spending money excessively without proper planning**

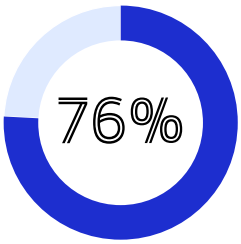
20% **fear being taken advantage of financially, particularly relevant given NIL complexities**

Clear preferences for advisor characteristics

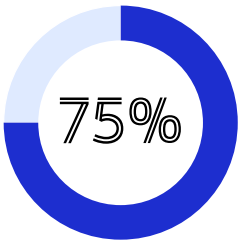
Athletes prioritize the following characteristics when choosing an advisor:



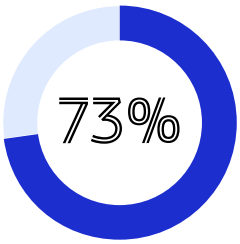
Approachable personality — emphasizing relationship comfort



Experience with athletes and sports professionals — understanding unique circumstances

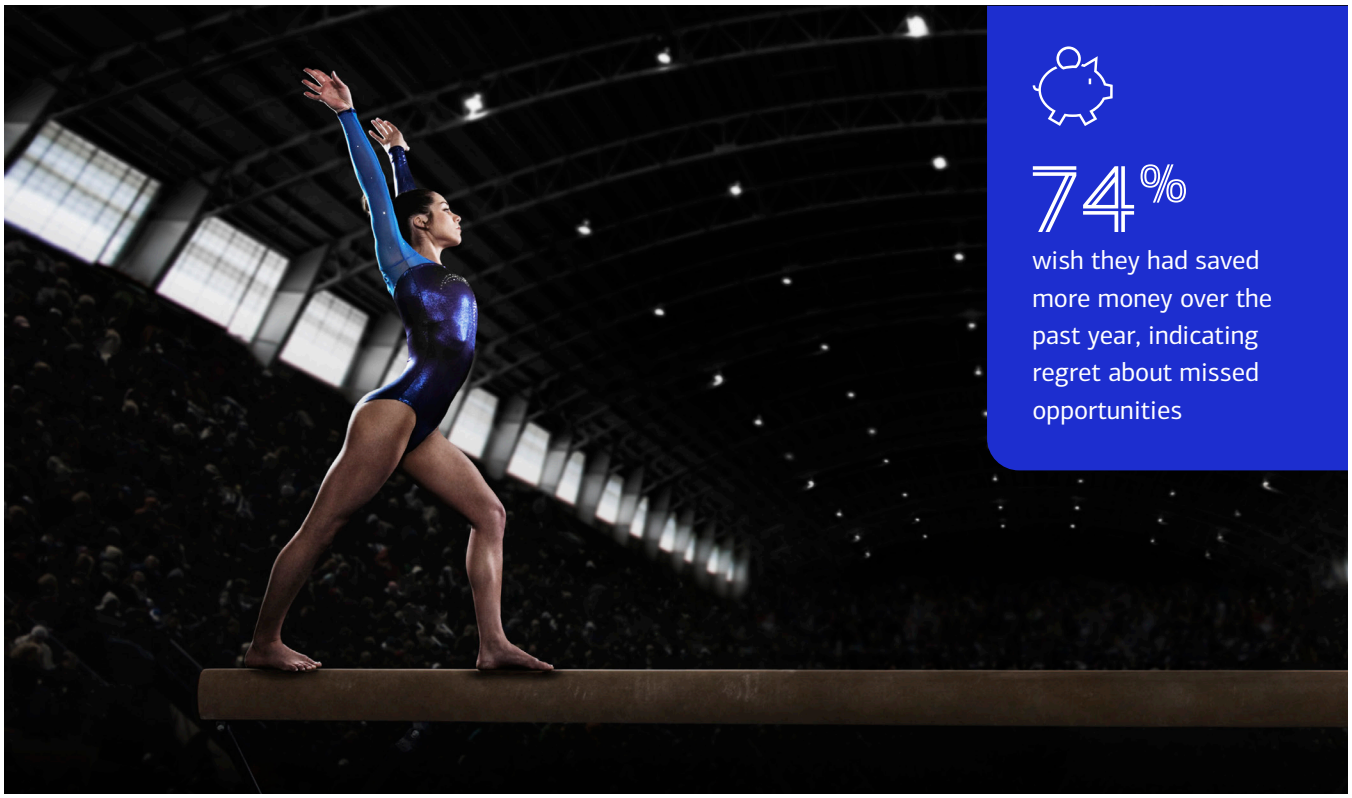


Clear communication style — making complex concepts accessible



Understanding of financial needs and goals — personalizing advice

These preferences suggest successful relationships will emphasize education, communication and industry expertise rather than purely investment performance or credentials.



74%

wish they had saved more money over the past year, indicating regret about missed opportunities

Your financial game plan

Today's young athletes represent a financially responsible generation making smart choices while facing unprecedented opportunities and complexities that require specialized guidance.

Key takeaways for immediate action

1. **Build on smart financial habits** by maximizing the impact of existing saving and investing priorities. With 36% of earnings already allocated to wealth building, improved budgeting and planning can significantly enhance outcomes.
2. **Address the confidence-reality gap** by seeking specialized guidance for athlete-specific situations. While 80% confidence provides a strong foundation, addressing the 32% who feel insecure can prevent costly mistakes.
3. **Get professional help with NIL navigation,** given that 61% struggle with these opportunities despite significant earning potential. Expert guidance can maximize income while avoiding exploitation and contract pitfalls.
4. **Don't let exploitation fears prevent seeking help,** since 88% want professional guidance but only 8% currently have it. Proper advisor evaluation and fiduciary relationships provide protection while delivering expertise.
5. **Plan early for community impact goals** to ensure giving remains sustainable and effective throughout varying income levels. Strategic planning maximizes community impact.

The importance of specialized expertise

Athletic careers create unique circumstances requiring specialized knowledge. From irregular income patterns to industry-specific tax considerations, athletes face complexities that differ significantly from traditional careers.

Early financial decisions have amplified importance because athletic careers often involve compressed earning timelines and significant income growth at young ages. The research demonstrates that 82% want investing education and 88% are interested in professional guidance, creating opportunities for meaningful relationships that can grow throughout their careers.

Connect with Merrill Sports & Entertainment advisors

Merrill's Sports & Entertainment team brings specialized experience working with athletes, entertainers and sports industry professionals. This expertise enables understanding of the unique challenges identified in this research — from NIL deal evaluation to career transition planning.

Our comprehensive services span immediate needs like NIL income management to long-term goals, including wealth preservation and community impact planning. This approach grows with athletes throughout their careers, from college through professional contracts and post-career ventures.

Young athletes ready to build on their strong financial foundations with specialized guidance can connect with a Merrill Sports & Entertainment advisor to discuss their unique situation and goals.

Research methodology

This analysis is based on research conducted among 159 high-potential athletes across the United States in 2025. High-potential athletes were defined as those age 18+ with significant earning potential, including athletes with existing or pending NIL deals of $10,000 or more, those competing at professional levels or offered professional contracts, athletes representing their country in international competition, those competing in top conferences for their sport or those expecting to pursue professional athletics.

The study participants represented diverse sports including basketball (18%), football (14%), baseball (11%), soccer (9%) and various other competitive athletics. Ages ranged from 18-24, with 81% between ages 18-21. The study examined financial behaviors, NIL participation, advisor relationships and financial planning priorities, providing comprehensive insights into this unique demographic's financial needs and preferences.

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