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Top prep football player's surprise switch highlights new trend for HBCUs

Georgia high school student Travis Hunter is considered by many to be 2022's No. 1 overall prospect in college football. So the cornerback's decision to flip his longstanding commitment from Florida State University to Jackson State University in December shocked many in the college football world.

Hunter's move from a powerhouse Atlantic Coast Conference school to a small historically Black college and university, or HBCU, is being hailed as a watershed moment in college football recruitment. It also caps a year of unprecedented national exposure and marketing opportunities for HBCUs due, in large part, to the National Collegiate Athletic Association's new name, image and likeness rules for athletes, and attention given HBCUs as a result of racial justice movements and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic.

Hunter's surprising last-minute switch is noteworthy on a number of levels. He committed to the Tallahassee-based Florida State Seminoles in March 2020, but revealed on the first day of the early signing period that he had decided to play for the Jackson State Tigers instead, according to CBS Sports. Jackson State in Jackson, Mississippi, is part of the Southwestern Athletic Conference of 12 HBCUs. There are more than 100 colleges and universities in the United States identified by the U.S. Department of Education as HBCU.

While many HBCU athletes have gone on to play for professional leagues, no HBCU football players were drafted by the National Football League in 2021. If Hunter lives up to his considerable promise at Jackson State, he could help pave the way for HBCUs to land more top prospects and perhaps become known as a pipeline to the NFL.

Behind the scenes, Jackson State's head football coach Deion Sanders is credited with convincing Hunter to play for the Tigers. Sanders, an NFL Hall of Fame cornerback who helped the San Francisco 49ers and Dallas Cowboys win Super Bowls, was



SPORTS MARKETING PLAYBOOK

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also a standout player at his own alma mater — Florida State.

Sanders and others have criticized the lack of resources and opportunities for HBCU athletes and lack of representation in the NFL. The 2021 NFL regular season team rosters include just 18 players who graduated from HBCUs, according to Sports Illustrated.

In an interview with the Atlanta Black Star earlier this year, Sanders cited the lack of financial support for HBCU student-athletes, which forces many to work while training and attending classes. Meanwhile, as the article in the Atlanta Black Star noted, the Power 5 schools in the ACC, Big Ten Conference, Big 12 Conference, Pac-12 Conference and Southeastern Conference all agreed in 2015 to give their student-athletes scholarships to cover the cost of school attendance and stipends to cover cost-of-living expenses.

With the recent change in the rules, however, NCAA student-athletes can now get paid for the use of their own names, images and likeness, or NIL, which opens myriad

opportunities. In July, the NCAA lifted its longstanding ban preventing college athletes from monetizing their NIL. More than 400,000 student-athletes can now enter into commercial partnerships to achieve their financial goals — and brands are jumping at the chance to work with them.

HBCU athletes have quickly taken advantage of the NIL rule change. According to athlete marketing platform developer Opendorse, the SWAC, with its 12 HBCUs, ranks 11th among the 25 Division 1 conferences in which student-athletes have raked in the most NIL revenue. Ky'wan Dukes reportedly became the first HBCU student to sign endorsement deals under NCAA's new NIL rules; the Johnson C. Smith University freshman wide receiver will promote restaurant chain Bojangles and G.O.A.T. Fuel energy drink.

Jackson State currently leads the HBCUs in student-athlete endorsement deals. Jackson State defensive end Antwan Owens, for example, immediately signed an endorsement deal with 3 Kings Grooming, a Black-owned hair product business. Freshman quarterback Shedeur Sanders became the first collegiate brand ambassador for audio brand Beats by Dre. The son of Deion Sanders, Shedeur Sanders also became the first HBCU player to win the Jerry Rice award for the top freshman player in the NCAA's Division I Football Championship Subdivision. The award was another welcome boost for HBCUs.

In the college sports world beyond football, HBCU student-athletes commanded the spotlight on the national and international stage in 2021.

The track and field program at North Carolina A&T State University in Greensboro, North Carolina, had a banner year. At the NCAA Outdoor Track and Field Championships in June, the Aggies secured four top-four placements in both the women's and men's championships, the only school at the event to do so, reported HBCU Sports.

North Carolina A&T student athletes additionally became the school's first Olympic medalists at the postponed 2020 Summer Olympic Games in Tokyo in July. Aggie sprinters Trevor Stewart and Randolph Ross Jr. each won gold medals as part of the U.S. 4x400 team, and Stewart earned a bronze medal as part of the U.S. mixed 4x400 relay team.

Recruitment coups and high-profile wins have made HBCU student-athletes the faces of their schools, which may also help increase their individual earning power in NIL deals. HBCU schools also typically benefit from their student-athletes' successes through increased interest in the institution's sports program, which leads to increased enrollment and donor giving. Hunter's football career at Jackson State in particular will be closely watched and, depending on his trajectory, could spur more top high school athletes to choose an HBCU over other schools.

HBCUs are also benefiting from a recent wave of giving connected to racial justice issues and the COVID-19 pandemic. As athletes, teams and leagues continue to take stands calling for racial equity and criminal justice reform, philanthropists are directing their wealth to HBCUs.

Notably, philanthropist MacKenzie Scott gave \$50 million to Prairie View A&M University in Prairie View, Texas, \$45 million to North Carolina A&T, \$40 million to Howard University in Washington, D.C., and \$40 million to Morgan State University in Baltimore, all as part of the \$560 million she gifted to 23 HBCUs around the country starting in 2020,

The Washington Post reported.

Organizations benefiting Black student-athletes also received windfalls during professional sports seasons that were abbreviated, postponed or otherwise affected by COVID-19. In 2021 alone, the National Basketball Association funneled more than \$3 million to HBCUs through the Thurgood Marshall College Fund, United Negro College Fund and other organizations during the NBA All-Star Weekend.

In 2020, as the NBA played the final games of its 2019-20 regular season and the 2020 playoffs in an isolated "bubble" at Walt Disney World in Orlando, Fla., player Chris Paul name-checked numerous HBCUs to raise awareness about the schools. Paul, then a point guard for the Oklahoma City Thunder, used his time in the NBA bubble to display the names of 20 HBCUs on his clothing and gave shout-outs to the schools.

While onetime, multimillion-dollar gifts to HBCUs clearly benefit the schools and their student athletes, HBCUs are also getting less-tangible boosts from new marketing opportunities that could prove to be game-changing in the long run.

Sometimes, the value added is clear. For example, when Jackson State hired Sanders to lead its football team in September 2020, ESPN immediately moved its broadcasts of the school's football games to a higher programming tier. Jackson State officials estimated that move alone increased the school's promotional value by \$19 million, reported The Undefeated, a website that covers sports, race and culture.

The Undefeated also calculated how much three HBCUs' wins at NCAA events in 2021 are worth to the schools. The three schools — North Carolina A&T, Norfolk State University in Norfolk, Virginia, and Texas Southern University in Houston — brought a total of approximately \$700 million in national exposure.

North Carolina A&T garnered the most, up to \$600 million in exposure, by seizing the spotlight for nearly a month after its wins at the NCAA men's and women's track and field national championships. At the same time, the school also sent nearly a dozen student-athletes to the Olympic trials, including its two eventual medal winners, said The Undefeated.

Norfolk State and Texas Southern captured basketball fans' attention during March Madness when each won opening-round games in the men's NCAA basketball tournament. The new brand recognition is expected to result in more interest in the schools, which could likely lead to increased enrollment and philanthropic donations, The Undefeated said.

New interest in HBCUs is being spurred by a powerful combination of high-profile recruits and hires, student-athletes' NIL partnerships, and their sports teams' excellence. Leagues, brands, broadcasters and others seeking ways to engage sports fans are turning to HBCUs for feel-good stories and to support social change. And with the continued success of the student-athletes themselves, HBCUs should be able to maintain this momentum.