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Women's March Madness scores big with brands, breaks records

Louisiana State University's 102-85 victory over Iowa in the National Collegiate Athletic Association women's Division 1 basketball championship game proved women's hoops can bring as much on-court excitement and trash-talking controversy as a men's final.

This year, a record-setting number of viewers watched the women in action as brands flocked to support the players.

Women's college hoops is coming into its own, thanks in no small part to the NCAA's 2021 decisions to extend the men's March Madness current branding to the women's D1 tournament and allow student-athletes to monetize their own names, images and likenesses (NIL).

The college basketball star who currently has more NIL deals than any other NCAA hoops player — male or female — happens to be LSU standout Angel Reese, known as “Bayou Barbie.”

Women's college basketball has come a long way in a short time since a 2021 viral TikTok video revealed disparities between training facilities for male versus female players. The NCAA commissioned a gender equity study and acted on its conclusions, the most visible of which recommended calling the women's championship tournament “March Madness.”

In 2022, for the first time, both the men's and women's basketball playoffs used the trademarked “March Madness” branding at tournament sites, on merchandise and in broadcasts.

Meanwhile, ESPN, the home of the women's NCAA basketball tournament since 1996, stepped up and aired all 63 of the women's games nationally for the first time in 2021. This year, ESPN went a step further and created a season-long, multi-platform campaign for the women's edition of March Madness dubbed “That's Our Move,” according to Adweek.



SPORTS MARKETING PLAYBOOK

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The campaign showcased Women's National Basketball Association stars, including Arike Ogunbowale of the Dallas Wings and Kelsey Plum of the Las Vegas Aces, and college standouts like the Iowa Hawkeyes' Caitlin Clark and the South Carolina Gamecocks' Aliyah Boston, who was drafted No. 1 last month by the WNBA's Indiana Fever.

ESPN is obviously doing something right since the network sold out its multi-platform advertising inventory and sponsorship deals for the women's March Madness — nearly 100 advertisers and 15 broadcast sponsors. Adweek and other outlets reported that the new brands jumping on board this year included Intuit QuickBooks, Under Armour and the U.S. Army.

Insurance company Aflac had supported the women's tournament in the past, but after the gender inequities came to light in 2021, the brand decided to focus even more of its marketing resources on the women's basketball championship, Aflac said in a statement.

In particular, Aflac increased its visibility at the women's March Madness events this year by reallocating its on-site presence from the men's Final Four venue in Houston to the women's venue in Dallas. The insurer was also the main sponsor for the Women's Basketball Coaches Association (WBCA) 2023 Assistant Coach of the Year awards, which is presented to one associate head coach or assistant coach in each membership division.

All this increased exposure for women's college hoops has helped spur another brand bonanza for female players — NIL deals. The NCAA lifted its longtime ban on student-athletes making money off their own names and faces in 2021, which allows players to cash in on brand endorsement agreements.

It's no surprise that brands gravitated to Reese, the sophomore forward who helped her team bring home LSU's first basketball title in the school's history. Named the Most Outstanding Player of the Final Four, Reese is known for her fake eyelashes, penchant for pink, and outgoing personality, which earned her the Bayou Barbie nickname.

Reese has racked up 17 NIL deals, the most of any college basketball player, with brands including Amazon, Bose, Coach, JanSport and Sonic, the Sporting News reported. She's also capitalizing on her growing fame by trademarking “Bayou Barbie” and cultivating a growing social media presence.

Reese isn't an anomaly among female college basketball stars with the most NIL deals. Right behind Reese on the NIL list are University of Miami guards Haley and Hanna Cavinder with 16 NIL partnerships. The twin sisters are tied with the first male hoops player to appear on the SponsorUnited list, the University of North Carolina's Armando Bacot. Overall, NIL deals with female college basketball players increased

186% between October 2022 and March 2023, while brand partnerships with their male counterparts increased just 67%, Sponsor United noted.

All the brand love for women's college hoops culminated in a record-breaking March Madness finale. Nearly 10 million viewers watched the LSU

Tigers' win over the Iowa Hawkeyes on the ABC network, a record audience for an NCAA women's basketball game, according to the website SportsPro. Viewership for the championship game increased 103% over 2022, with 12.6 million watching across platforms owned by Disney, including ESPN.

The NCAA's March Madness branding and NIL decisions proved to be game-changers for women's college basketball. As today's luminaries set their sights on the WNBA, the organization has laid a strong foundation for rising stars to continue the sports momentum with brands and fans.