HIGH FLYER

HOW TEXAS TRACK-AND-FIELD STAR SAM HURLEY USED HIS TIKTOK SAVVY TO SCORE NEARLY $1 MILLION IN DEALS

BY SEAN GREGORY/AUSTIN

ILLUSTRATION BY ALEX WILLIAMSON FOR TIME

ONE OF THE HIGHEST-EARNING COLLEGE ATHLETES ON THE PLANET SAYS a little prayer. Sam Hurley, a University of Texas sophomore, prays that God gives him the wings—represented by an angel tattoo on his left calf—to carry him over the high-jump bar. The overwhelming majority of college athletes who earn in the neighborhood of $1 million or more to market their name, image, and likeness (NIL), as Hurley does, perform athletic feats before 50,000 to 100,000 fans in packed football stadiums or in sold-out basketball arenas. But a few hundred eyes, at most, are fixed on Hurley as he attempts to win the Texas Invitational.

On this April afternoon in Austin, Hurley, 19, soars, arches his back over the bar, and flops on the mat. To a smattering of applause, he hops up, pounds his hand against his chest, and points one finger up in the air. He's clinched his second meet title of the outdoor track-and-field season. "It was a good day," Hurley says afterward, "to be great."

July 1 marks the second anniversary of the day that college athletes were given the freedom to profit off their personal brands. After years of sustaining hits in the courts and in the media for allowing schools, administrators, and coaches to enrich themselves on the backs of football and basketball players, the NCAA relented, and dropped its arcane rules preventing athletes from signing third-party sponsorship deals. Opendorse, a company that connects student athletes with businesses, expects NIL earnings to top $100 million by the end of 2023.

Hurley presents a crucial case study. Of the 25 college and high school athletes with NIL valuations of $1 million or more, according to On3.com, all but two—Hurley and LSU gymnast Olivia Dunne—play football or basketball, the two sports that drive athletic-department revenues. Like Dunne, Hurley has leveraged his social media following into earnings that, he says, are approaching $1 million. Of the 25 most highly valued athletes, only Bronny James, LeBron's son, and Dunne have more impressive social media metrics than Hurley (12.9 million followers for James, 11.4 million for Dunne, 5 million for Hurley).

If NIL rules hadn't changed two years ago, Hurley, who became an influencer in high school, would have skipped college. Since becoming a college

athlete, he's signed NIL deals with brands like Amazon, Jimmy Dean, Vuori, and Bubble, the skin-care company. But while Dunne competes in gymnastics, a star Olympic sport with a loyal following on the college level, Hurley participates in a track-and-field discipline that barely causes an Olympic ripple. Hardcore college high-jump enthusiasts are few and far between.

Hurley's creating a novel path toward college-sports riches. Influencer first, athlete second, with each job gilding the other. His story, however, also highlights who's benefiting from NIL, who's not, and what still needs to change. Hurley deserves everything he's earned. He's a fine high jumper; Hurley qualified for the NCAA National Track and Field Championships, held in Austin in June. Sponsors value the following he has amassed through his charisma, chiseled abs, and athletic prowess. But the nearly $1 million he's earned through NIL isn't commensurate with his value to Texas' athletic department. At Texas, football ($161.5 million) and men's basketball ($23.6 million) accounted for 91% of the haul attributable to a specific sport during the 2021–22 academic year. The school's 13 other varsity sports teams accounted for $18.5 million combined.

By conjuring riches from social media, Hurley throws into higher contrast the legions of athletes—who very often are people of color—toiling in the trenches that fuel the $19 billion college-sports industry. Justice Brett Kavanaugh, in a 2021 concurring opinion, wrote, "Nowhere else in America can businesses get away with agreeing not to pay their workers a fair market rate on the theory that their product is defined by not paying their workers a fair market rate ... The NCAA is not above the law." He seemed to invite further challenges: a few such cases are circulating in lower courts, and the California state assembly just passed legislation requiring schools to share new athletic revenues with the athletes.

A fairer market for college athletes seems like an inevitable next step in the evolution of the industry. And to Hurley's credit, he acknowledges the inequities in the current system. "There's enough money in this NCAA world for everyone," he says. "I'm all for everybody eating."

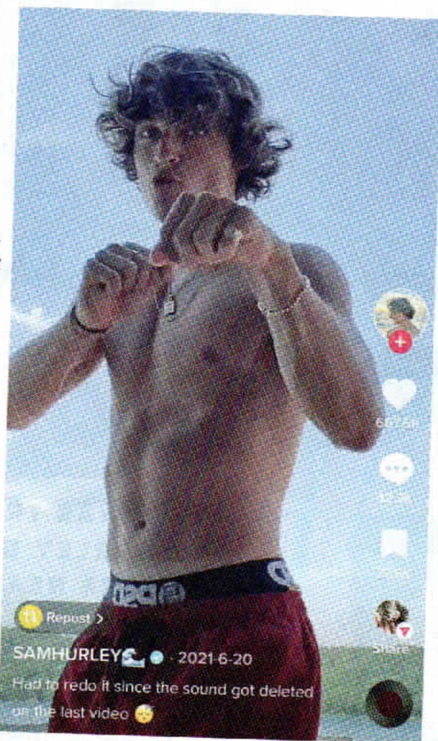
HURLEY, WHO GREW UP in Northwest Arkansas, started posting YouTube videos of himself jumping on a trampoline and skateboarding when he was 8. He was preternaturally athletic—he could dunk a basketball at age 14. Hurley was also comfortable hamming it up. "If we're at the pool, he's going to do 72 different flips and tricks, and we've got to rate them and watch his show," says his brother Hootie.

His parents divorced when Hurley was in eighth grade, and with his two older brothers away at college, "it was such a drastic change, going from a team of five to kind of feeling solo." During his freshman year of high school, however, Hurley discovered TikTok. His first posts, in November 2018, were mostly clips of a scrawny teen backflipping into water, but they racked up tens of thousands of views. Brands started offering him money to partner with them. "I was like, Holy crap, this is crazy," says Hurley. "I realized I can make a career doing this." The influencer market is expected to grow to $21.1 billion this year, according to Influencer Marketing Hub.

Soon Hurley had a million TikTok followers. On a trip to New York City, he posted a message that he'd be in Times Square in a few hours. "COME MEET ME," he wrote. Hundreds of teenage girls surrounded him, screaming, "Oh my God!" That summer Hurley joined fellow influencer Josh Richards and others on a nationwide tour. He began modeling for Polo Ralph Lauren.

Hurley has a right-angular jaw, blue eyes, and a back tattoo that reads "Designed by God." But his desire to capitalize on his good looks and goofy personality made him a target as a teen. "The upperclassmen hated on me so hard," Hurley tells me as we eat breakfast the morning before the meet. "'Oh, you're doing TikTok, dude? Why would you do that?'" On his first day as a sophomore, someone spit on him. Fed up with the bullying, and seeking more flexibility for business travel, Hurley opted into the school's

A STILL FROM A LIP-SYNC VIDEO HURLEY SHARED WITH HIS MILLIONS OF TIKTOK FOLLOWERS IN 2021



TOP NIL VALUATIONS BY SPORT

BRONNY JAMES
BASKETBALL

OLIVIA DUNNE
GYMNASTICS

ARCH MANNING
FOOTBALL

SAM HURLEY
TRACK AND FIELD

NOTE: VALUATIONS BASED ON ATHLETIC PERFORMANCE, SOCIAL MEDIA REACH, AND EXPOSURE (PROMINENCE OF SCHOOL AND VISIBILITY OF POSITION). SOURCE: ON3, JUNE 13

A CHILDHOOD PHOTO, FROM BEFORE HURLEY WAS A SOCIAL MEDIA STAR

COMPETING AT THE USF INVITATIONAL IN TAMPA, FLA., IN MARCH

virtual program. With the pandemic arriving that March, he'd never take classes in the Fayetteville High School building again.

But he suited up for the track team. His junior year, in 2021, Hurley was named Gatorade's Boys Track & Field Player of the Year in Arkansas. Still, he was set on skipping college, since he couldn't promote products on social media while competing in an NCAA sport.

After that July, however, he could do both.

TEXAS' ASSISTANT COACH for vertical jumps and combined events, Jim Garnham, who recruited Hurley, wasn't aware of his social media stardom until he mentioned to the team that Hurley would be visiting. One of the female track athletes asked if he was referring to Sam Hurley, the TikToker. Garnham didn't know what she was talking about. The coach got Hurley on the phone. "She was like, 'Oh my God, you've got his number.'"

Before he arrived on campus, Hurley's future teammates figured he'd be some self-centered influencer guy. Hurley has defied these expectations. "You don't see him out here all the time, doing TikTok dances 24/7," says high jumper Chloe Davis. "He leaves that when he comes through that gate." Teammates appreciate his commitment, and he's been up for informally advising others on how they might take advantage of NIL. "I think it's corny," says sprinter Chris Brinkley of Hurley's TikTok persona. "But I respect what he has going on."

Since April, Hurley has posted the jumps that qualified him for the national championships, shared a photo of himself with a Jimmy Dean sandwich in a paid Instagram promotion, and lip-synched to country songs, shirtless. "We all have these bodies," says Hurley. "What you choose to do with yours is your decision, right? I choose to be shirtless in videos or shirtless whenever."

Hurley notes that he was shirtless in his initial TikTok videos when he was a freshman rail. He attributes this to growing up in Arkansas. "I don't think it's an arrogance thing," he says. "Now I feel more confident with my shirt off. Luckily I'm in a position where some people like when my shirt's off." (About 30 minutes later, he shows me a picture of him holding a 6½-lb. bass he caught in Austin's Lady Bird Lake. Perhaps he forgot his shirt in his apartment, or lost it in the water. You can take the boy out of Arkansas...)

On one of Hurley's Instagram posts, Sophie Robins, a recent high school graduate from suburban Houston, wrote, "IM COMING TO UT FOR YOU." Reached by phone, Robins laughs and says she started following Hurley a few years ago, but she isn't attending UT for the chance to bump into him. "There have been other TikTok boys that got famous," says Robins. "But he has made himself a real well-rounded influencer. Now he has another path in his life, doing track at Texas."

Hurley says for the most part he doesn't feel objectified, but at times fans have crossed the line. Women have groped his crotch area, he says. A few nights before our meeting, he was out to dinner and noticed a woman and a man recording him through a window. "At that point, it's almost like, 'I'm not a zoo exhibit,'" he says.

Most encounters are less invasive, if still incessant. In Louisville, Ky., a high school cheerleading team recognized him in a hotel; moms asked Hurley to pose with them, under the guise of wanting pictures for their daughters. On Easter Sunday, Hurley attended church with his grandmother Verda Turner. The next week, a friend of Turner's shared that her arm was still sore, since her granddaughter had spotted Hurley and pinched her the entire service.

I ASK HURLEY at one point about the occasional social media comment implying his TikTok fame got him to Texas. That criticism rings untrue. Hurley has won meets. Texas recruited him without knowing about his social media. But internet toxins blind people to these truths. "One million percent, one of my biggest motivations for myself is to prove that I'm not just a TikToker," he says.

Despite approaching seven figures in NIL earnings, Hurley isn't living too large. His big splurge was a 2021 Dodge Charger; he purchased a condo as an investment. But he lives alone in a modest apartment; the place is decorated with a Big XII conference medal hanging around a deer's antlers, which shares wall space with the head of an actual Texas longhorn. An e-bike sits in his living room. His own merch—like a white T-shirt with his likeness making the "Hook 'em Horns" gesture—hangs on his bedroom wall.

Before a meet, Hurley is friendly to the competition. "I'm walking around, dapping everyone up, asking them how they're doing." But when the bar goes up, he takes a turn. "I get in this mode of, like, everything that angers me, everything that motivates me, it's all put in my frontal lobe," he says. "Even if I was facing the greatest high jumper of all time, I'm going to beat him in my mind."

> **'THERE'S ENOUGH MONEY IN THIS NCAA WORLD FOR EVERYONE. I'M ALL FOR EVERYBODY EATING.'**
>
> —SAM HURLEY

These mental tricks seem to be working. Hurley has shone for one of the best athletic programs in the country while building wealth unimaginable for most 19-year-olds. But remember: Texas isn't paying him. The cash must come from other sources. So if you're in a low-exposure sport, or aren't the star of a football or basketball team, one path to money might be mimicking his example.

"You're going to need a little courage," Hurley says. "It doesn't matter who you are, what you do, what you look like, where you're from, there's a niche of people who are going to like it." ◻

COURTESY SAM HURLEY/KRISTY HURLEY

"Captive Adudience" on land Russia has held for most of a decade, the final battle will be for hearts and minds By Symon Shaster

⑧ Γ 5/20/19

One day last fall, Volodymyr Zelensky, the President of Ukraine, came across a clip

from Russian TV that had gone viral on social media. It showed one of Russia's most prominent talk-show hosts calling for Ukrainian children to be killed—"thrown in a river with a strong current"—for speaking out against the Russian occupation of their homeland. Even by the ugly standards of Russian warmongering, the statement seemed to cross a line, and the host soon lost his job over it. But it continued to trouble Zelensky.

"Their society accepts this, consumes it," he told me with evident disgust a few weeks later. "They live in this paradigm." The Russian invasion of Ukraine was in its ninth month at that point, long enough to harden Zelensky to many of its horrors—the bombardment of Ukrainian cities, the kidnapping of Ukrainian children, the torture and killing of civilians—all of which the President addressed in our interviews with a defiant kind of stoicism. But the Kremlin's propaganda, and the hold it seems to have over many of its viewers, still got under the President's skin. "It shocks me," he said, "the force of this information, the information sickness."

Not only in Russia, but also across the occupied regions of eastern and southern Ukraine, millions of people absorb the Kremlin line about Ukraine through Russian television. Its central message, like a genocidal fever dream mixed in among gardening shows and soap operas, depicts Ukraine's existence as a historical mistake, its government a cabal of satanists and neo-Nazis intent on Russia's destruction. Zelensky, as the main villain in these narratives, does not believe their lack of subtlety makes them any less effective, and he has made it his mission not only to free Ukrainian land from Russian occupation but also to liberate Ukrainians from what he calls the "Russian information space."

Since early June, when Ukraine began its biggest counteroffensive of the war, the armed forces have sought to prove their ability to shatter Russia's defensive lines and regain territory. But Zelensky, who sees himself as more of a communicator than a military strategist, worries about the political challenges to come, especially the need to win trust and support among people living in occupied lands. To reach them, he plans to use the same weapon that Russia has used to indoctrinate them. "Ukraine needs to break through," Zelensky told me, "with its channels of information as actively as possible."

In regions occupied in early 2022, Russia has not been able to win much support. The residents of Kherson, in the south, showed mass resistance to the occupation, staging rallies and standing in the way of enemy tanks. "The Russians did not win in Kherson because, inside themselves, the people did not support Russia," Zelensky said. "They held firm." In other regions, the picture looks more complicated.

Crimea in the south and parts of the Donbas region in the east have been under Russian control for nine years, ever since Russian President Vladimir Putin first sent his forces to occupy them. With enough weapons from the West, Zelensky believes the military can evict the Russians from these regions. But he is far less certain about what comes next. "People in the Donbas, they've been brainwashed," he told me. "All they have, every single day, is the Russian information space. Nothing else exists there. So there is no hope the people there see Russia as the real occupier," he said. "I can't reach them."

He still intends to try, even if his struggle with Russia in the field of propaganda comes with serious risks, threatening to undermine the very freedoms that Ukraine is fighting to defend. Zelensky has already faced criticism over wartime censorship, and the government's plans to reintegrate Crimea and parts of the Donbas include tough methods, among them the forced expulsion of Russian civilians and what one Ukrainian general calls "carrots and sticks." The President, a former producer and star of Ukrainian sitcoms, sees television as his weapon of choice for winning over people in the occupied territories. "I need to be able to speak with them all the time," he says, "assuming they are still ready to listen."

An airstrike on Kyiv's TV tower in March 2022, left; Russian troops in southern Ukraine in May 2022

THE BATTLE for the airwaves has played out in Ukraine for nearly a decade, always in parallel to the clashes at the front. In eastern Ukraine, one of Russia's first conquests took place on April 17, 2014, when a group of heavily armed militants drove up to a TV tower on Karachun Hill. At the gates, they encountered two guards, a man and an elderly woman, along with a shaggy mutt named Bim that looked too small for its doghouse. When I interviewed the guards a few days later, they told me the gunmen went straight up to the tower's control room and asked the engineer to broadcast the frequency of Russia's main propaganda channel, Rossiya.

The engineer complied just in time to show Putin's annual call-in show, which lasted around four hours that day. Seated at a desk in front of a studio audience in Moscow, Putin used the show to expound on his imperialist vision for Ukraine. He referred to eastern

and southern Ukraine as Novorossiya, or New Russia, and he argued that with the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, these lands unfairly ended up outside of Moscow's control—"God only knows why." From that point forward, Putin would use all means at his disposal, including military power, he said, to protect the ethnic Russians living in these regions from their own government, which he described as a bunch of radical nationalists.

Coming a month after the Russian annexation of Crimea, Putin's performance served as a warning that he could do the same with other regions of Ukraine. The government in Kyiv, which had come to power in a revolution that winter, understood that Putin intended to use his TV networks to stir a separatist rebellion among ethnic Russians, and it tried to block access to these networks across the country. Throughout May 2014, the Ukrainian military fought fierce battles for Karachun Hill that ended only after its TV tower was destroyed.

It made little difference. By the middle of summer, Russian forces took control of two major cities in eastern Ukraine, Donetsk and Luhansk, along with their television towers. "Let the people hear the truth," one of the separatist broadcast engineers, Pavel Mikhalev, told me as he configured the tower in Donetsk to show Russian propaganda that July. "Let them understand that Ukraine has no future as a state."

OPENING PAGES: AFP/GETTY IMAGES; THESE PAGES: EYEPRESS NEWS/SHUTTERSTOCK; AP

Russian-occupied parts of Ukraine

SOURCE: INSTITUTE FOR THE STUDY OF WAR AND AEI'S CRITICAL THREATS PROJECT, JUNE 13

WHEN ZELENSKY TOOK OFFICE in 2019, he believed he could win support across eastern Ukraine, even in the regions that had been under Russian control for around five years by then. The cities of Donetsk and Luhansk had turned into separatist enclaves, ruled by a cast of Russian-backed warlords and spin doctors who were often assassinated and replaced with new appointees of the Kremlin. One separatist commander, known as Batman, was sprayed with bullets on a roadside in Luhansk. Another was blown up in a café. A third, nicknamed Motorola, was bombed in an apartment building. A fourth was incinerated with a flamethrower. The list went on.

While Crimea survived on Russian tourism to its beaches, neither of the two separatist regions in eastern Ukraine had a functioning economy. International sanctions cut them off from any form of legal commerce with the world. Their leaders dealt in contraband, particularly the smuggling of weapons and coal, with some meager subsidies from Russia. No country in the world, not even Russia, recognized their independence. Yet they were home to well over 3 million people. Reliable surveys of public opinion were hard to come by in these regions. The best polling available suggested that in the fall of 2019, just over half of the people in the separatist parts of eastern Ukraine were not, in fact, separatists at all—they wanted to reintegrate with the rest of the country. Zelensky encouraged them.

A native Russian speaker, he had spent most of his early career as a comedian touring stages and concert halls across Russia and Ukraine. Many people in Crimea and the Donbas grew up watching his movies and TV shows. As President, Zelensky promised to start paying pensions to people living under Russian occupation. Soon new roads opened across the front line, making it easier for people in these regions to visit friends and family in other parts of Ukraine. "People should cross over and see that it's better here, and slowly their opinions will change," Zelensky said. "We need to bring them back and fight for them."

But within a year of taking office, the President realized his message could not penetrate Russia's monopoly on

information in these regions. All major television networks in Ukraine were controlled by private media tycoons. Nearly all of them opposed Zelensky's government, and a few were allied with the Kremlin. In early 2021, Zelensky banned three of the channels that he accused of broadcasting Russian propaganda in Ukraine. The move infuriated Putin, and European leaders criticized Zelensky for encroaching on the freedom of speech. But he saw no other way to curtail Russia's influence over his citizens. "I think these channels killed a lot of people," he told me after banning them. "Not directly," he said, "but through information."

IN FEBRUARY 2022, with the start of the full-scale Russian invasion, Zelensky imposed martial law nationwide, which gave the state a powerful weapon in the information war. The airwaves in wartime are treated as critical infrastructure, and the authorities in Ukraine have the right to use them for national defense. Ukraine's biggest television networks quickly agreed to set aside their political agendas and show a unified message of resistance, falling in line behind Zelensky.

The result became known as the Telemarathon, a round-the-clock broadcast of news and commentary that airs on all the major channels in Ukraine. Along with the latest updates on the fighting and essential advice on where to shelter, when to evacuate, and how to survive, the marathon carries Zelensky's message into every household in the land. Nothing like it has existed in Ukraine since the Soviet era, and critics have complained that it smacks of propaganda. A strict new media law, which came into force in March, also earned Zelensky criticism for expanding the state's ability to shut down news outlets. But he insists such measures are essential. "The weapon of information is very important," he said last summer. "It's also important to point this weapon not at one's own head, but in the direction of the enemy."

For nearly a year, as Ukraine's armed forces have advanced in a series of counteroffensives, engineers have rushed to bring the Telemarathon to liberated towns and cities. The Russians have tried to block it. When they retreated from Kherson in November, Russian forces blew up the city's television tower, which fell in a heap of metal beams and antennas over a city park. The Ukrainians used a transmitter donated by Poland to restore the TV signal in Kherson. Two days later, the Telemarathon showed Zelensky returning the national flag to the center of the city, where hundreds of people had gathered to celebrate their liberation.

In other parts of Ukraine, that kind of welcome would be hard to imagine.

A pro-Russian separatist tears down Ukrainian banners near a TV station in Donetsk in April 2014

After living for nine years on the Russian side of the front, many people in Crimea and the Donbas may not accept Ukraine as their home. The youngest among them have grown up under Russian control, watching the Kremlin's television channels. Thousands of young men in the separatist regions have been conscripted to fight against Ukraine. "They are also dying," Zelensky says. "And when their bodies come home, they are told, 'Look what the Ukrainians have done!'" As Ukraine retakes these regions, village by village and town by town, "we need to be ready," Zelensky says, "for the fact that some of those people will not be happy to see us."

SINCE LAST FALL, when the military began advancing into Russian-occupied areas, the government in Kyiv has developed plans for reintegrating the people living there. Iryna Vereshchuk, who heads the ministry in charge of this process, says the government has begun to train teams of civil servants, teachers and social workers who can sweep into these regions after they are liberated and, as she put it in a recent interview with *El Pais*, remake the state "from scratch."

The government expects many Ukrainians to move into liberated regions and help rebuild them once the Russians are expelled. Under Ukrainian law, anyone who collaborated with the occupiers must face prosecution in a period of "transitional justice," which could take years. Ukraine estimates that over 600,000 Russians moved into Crimea in the years after its occupation. All of them will need to leave "voluntarily or through forced expulsion," Anatoly Stelmakh, the deputy minister for the reintegration of occupied territories, told a Ukrainian news outlet.

Some officials in Kyiv have suggested harsher methods to root out Russian sympathizers. In a TV interview this spring, Kyrylo Budanov, the chief of the military intelligence service, said the influence of Russian propaganda has "modified the psyches" of people in occupied Crimea and eastern Ukraine. "We have to re-educate those who can still be re-educated," he said. "With the carrot and the stick."

Zelensky tends to take a softer line, insisting he can convince people in the occupied regions without the use of force or coercion. The ones who abetted the occupiers must face justice, he says, and under the laws against collaboration Zelensky signed last year, the penalties are stiff—up to 15 years in prison for the worst offenders. As for the rest of the people in these regions, Zelensky wants a chance to speak to them, if not in person then through television, and to change their minds. "We have to try," he told me. "We have to get closer, and the closer we get to Donetsk and Luhansk, the higher the chance they might hear us." □