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ASU athletes get entrepreneurship help

By Katie Greisiger Frost, Tribune Guest Writer
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Sierra Ryan, a sophomore women's lacrosse defender at Arizona State, is among athletes who benefit from the Student Athlete Venture Studio, which provides resources and support to athletes for their entrepreneurial and personal-brand ventures.

(GoDaddy photo)



In college sports' ever-changing name, image and likeness (NIL) realm, student-athletes are seeing opportunities for entrepreneurial and personal-brand ventures.

With it comes increasing needs for resources and support.

At Arizona State, the Student Athlete Venture Studio provides resources and support to athletes like Sierra Ryan, a sophomore women's lacrosse defender, as she and other students begin their entrepreneurial journeys.

In partnership with the J. Orin Edson Entrepreneurship + Innovation Institute at ASU, Empower by GoDaddy and Sun Devil Athletics, the studio is the first program of SPORTx — an initiative to bridge the gaps between existing entrepreneurial support at ASU and athletes.

Led by Jeff Kunowski, founding director of SPORTx, and Kate Fitzgerlad, a former ASU women's beach volleyball player, the studio offers mentorship, training, grant funding and incubation space at Mountain America Stadium.

Ryan's interest in tech blossomed through toys and online games, jump-started when she got a computer in middle school.

"I taught myself during that time . . . just kind of building small applications through trial and error," said Ryan, 19.

An AI class in high school had her hooked. She excelled to the extent that she began showing teachers how to leverage AI-practices. At 16, she created her first business, Boterra, offering consulting and custom software.

Her next feat was FuelWarden, an app that offers personalized nutritional support. The app, which Ryan said is "made by athletes, for athletes," is in beta testing with peers across the U.S.

Ryan said there are many apps that use data about athletes – mostly for betting or buying merchandise – but not enough that support an athlete's training.

“From my own struggle with nutrition as an athlete, I realized nothing on the market is made for people competing at high levels with such rigorous schedules . . . and so we’re building FuelWarden to help athletes feel smarter so they can train harder,” Ryan said.

According to Kunowski, although the studio went live in 2025, it was a metamorphosis of past and current programs aimed at supporting student innovations from ideation to launch.

This evolution, and its enduring partnerships, left ASU well-prepared before the onset of NIL in 2021, with the studio as its latest iteration.

“A lot of the athletes have incredible resources and things that are available to them that nobody else has, but they also miss out on a lot of opportunities,” Kunowski said. “And so, our whole goal was to break down that barrier a bit.”

Outreach is among the ways the studio does that. All student-athletes at ASU receive information about its offerings, how NIL partnerships work and optional one-on-one support.

Kunowski said they stay on top of changing policies and laws, such as ensuring that all NIL deals above the \$600 threshold are reported to the NCAA.

The priority, he said, is not to affect the athlete’s eligibility but instead to support every student-athlete.

During 2025, Kunowski said the studio saw 300 websites created, more than 150 incubator-space meetings conducted, and numerous team-building events and learning opportunities fostered across the spectrum of ASU teams.

“We’ve seen real tangible results,” Kunowski said. “We encourage all of our athletes to participate in our Venture Devils program under the Entrepreneurship Institute.

“It’s basically the entrepreneurial ecosystem for all student entrepreneurs at ASU.”

Only one student-athlete participated in Venture Devils last spring. It grew to 21 student-athletes in the fall, seven of whom won funding during a once-a-semester Demo Day pitch competition.

Ryan was among the Demo Day grant recipients in 2025, receiving \$13,000 in the spring and \$11,500 in the fall for FuelWarden.

GoDaddy offered access to its web hosting and AI-fueled online tool, Airo, as well as NIL partnerships and grant monies.

The Valley tech company's social-impact program, Empower, distributed \$300,000 to ASU student-led ventures in 2025.

The partnership and studio do much more than scaffold an athlete's NIL deals, according to Emily Wheeler, Empower by GoDaddy's program manager.

"It's about equipping students with the confidence and skills they need to really further themselves on an entrepreneurial pathway," Wheeler said.

No stranger to risk-taking

Kunowski and Wheeler said Ryan was among the first student-athletes to "lean into" the studio's many offerings, eventually becoming a peer mentor and student-worker.

Ryan enjoys connecting with athletes about things other than sports. Mentoring fellow athletes doesn't feel like mentorship, she said, because they are "proactive."

Ryan mentored ASU women's soccer center-midfielder Brianna Nunley, a senior, helping her prep for the 2025 fall Demo Day.

Nunley, a Chandler native, said that Ryan and the studio prepared her to win \$2,550 in grant money to support her project, Dream it!

Nunley describes it as "a mission-driven children's book and empowerment initiative."

“(Ryan) helped me become comfortable backing myself and confidently asking for the level of funding truly needed, a skill that is challenging but essential as a founder,” Nunley said.

Ryan hopes to continue her work with the Student Athlete Venture Studio, and to continue building software for athletes, acknowledging that constant changes in NIL are confusing and challenging.

“I think, for me at least, (the studio has) given athletes a huge starting point of resources, education and competence, so that all this is less overwhelming,” she said.

Nunley added, “Athletics open doors, but consistency, curiosity and courage are what allow you to walk through them.”

Whether playing sports or creating businesses, Ryan said she is served well by her belief that it is best to “Just start now. Start failing early, and stop waiting to feel ready.”

She hopes more student-athletes will see that and begin to develop their futures off the field well before they’re done playing in college.

“Just get started and do it scared.”