

# Nico Iamaleava's Holdout Is a Product of Tennessee's Own Making

The Volunteers quarterback reportedly didn't attend spring practice on Friday, setting up a public standoff with very few pathways to a happy ending.

[Pat Forde](#) | 1 Hour Ago



Iamaleava reportedly did not attend a Tennessee spring practice Friday, setting up a standoff with the school just before the spring transfer portal window opens. / Adam Cairns-Imagn Images

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On February 13, 2024, Tennessee attorney general Jonathan Skrmetti issued a chest-thumping statement outside a courthouse in

Greeneville, Tenn. Skrmetti was legally challenging the NCAA on behalf of the Tennessee Volunteers, and specifically on behalf of quarterback Nico lamaleava.

"It's a wonderful day to fight on behalf of our student-athletes in Tennessee; they are the backbone of college sports," Skrmetti said. "Due to the NCAA's arbitrary and illegal rules, student-athletes are being harmed and prevented from making important decisions concerning their name, image, and likeness rights—which may have a big impact on their academic and financial futures. Meanwhile, everybody else involved in college sports is getting rich at those student-athletes' expense. That is not legal, not right and it needs to change."

The noble cause, which so galvanized Tennessee fans that they had to be discouraged from flocking to the courthouse to apply pressure against the terrible NCAA, was to prevent allegations of wrongdoing and subsequent sanctions for the cash-based recruitment of lamaleava (among other athletes). The school and the entire state caped up on behalf of their star quarterback from California, who agreed to a reported \$8 million deal over the life of his college career to play for the Vols.

Fourteen months later, the empowerment of lamaleava to flex his money-making muscles might be coming back to bite Big Orange. In a reap-what-you-sow moment of the highest order, Tennessee might now be fighting *against* lamaleava, not on behalf of him.

According to [multiple media reports](#), lamaleava has embarked upon what could be called a work stoppage. We'll see how far it goes.

The starting QB [did not attend Tennessee's](#) spring practice Friday, which was an unexpected development for the coaching staff. lamaleava [reportedly wants a new NIL deal](#), and this could be construed as evidence that he's serious about using his leverage in negotiating with Spyre Sports, the primary Tennessee collective.

Has Mr. Skrmetti weighed in on The Holdout yet? Quite a few fans have. The #FreeNico spirit of 2024 seems to be in short supply now.

Saturday is the Vols' spring game. If lamaleava declines to participate in that as well, the situation escalates. The NCAA transfer portal spring window opens next Wednesday, and the market has changed since lamaleava signed that whopper deal.

The Duke Blue Devils, of all programs, landed Tulane Green Wave transfer quarterback Darian Mensah for what has been reported as a \$4 million deal. Georgia Bulldogs transfer Carson Beck went to the Miami Hurricanes for a reported \$4 million-plus. (It is worth noting that the NIL world is opaque and full of folklore, so you can believe whatever you want to believe.)

lamaleava might be looking at the landscape and suddenly thinking he's underpaid. And there might well be another school willing to give him a raise to leave Knoxville. And given the flimsiness of the current NIL deals in terms of tying an athlete to a school, there isn't much stopping him from bailing. (NCAA rules prohibiting unlimited transfers are another thing the Tennessee attorney general, and many of his colleagues from other states, [fought to strike down](#).)

So Tennessee's virtuous act of athlete empowerment is now a double-edged sword being wielded by a quarterback who, frankly, has only

been pretty good so far. In his first season as a starter, lamaleava was tied for seventh in the 16-team SEC and tied for 32nd nationally in pass efficiency last year with a rating of 145.34. He was 11th in the SEC and 63rd nationally in total offense. He had fewer than 200 yards total offense in five games, including all the Vols' losses during a 10–3 season.

Are those the numbers of a \$2 million college player who deserves a raise? That depends on what the market is willing to bear, and right now, the market is silly.

We are in the Drunken Sailor Spending Spree Era, with schools rushing to get big deals done before the House vs. NCAA case settlement is ratified and goes into effect later this year. That new world order could have a chilling effect on both the money being spent and the complete lack of regulatory oversight, so the going rates are quite high at present.

But a rare (and very public) holdout by a college athlete is going to be met with considerable backlash. It's a bad look for everyone: lamaleava; a collective that has been touted as the cutting edge in the NIL world; a coaching staff trying to unify the locker room; and a boisterous fan base that embraced situational outrage on behalf of this very QB all of a year ago.

There are only three ways this ends well:

Many college fans still haven't come to grips with the idea of athletes being paid. Many more dislike the constant transferring in search of a buck. And the number of fans who will serenely accept an actual holdout is smaller still.

This is why enforceable binding contracts would be in the best interest of the schools and college sports in general. But with that concept probably comes employment status, and if there is one thing college leaders are deathly afraid of, it's that.

So, in the gray area created with the assistance of people like the attorney general of Tennessee, the quarterback the courts empowered just might become the quarterback who holds a program hostage.

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