Grosse Pointe South star cornerback Will Johnson looked like a million bucks. He wore a new suit and tie and sat down at a table in a Parc Detroit, a restaurant in Campus Martius downtown Detroit.

He wiped tears from his eyes as he signed a national letter of intent to play at [Michigan football](https://www.freep.com/sports/wolverines/).

Johnson put on a Michigan hat and everybody started clapping.

“Just thankful for everybody for coming,” Kafi Kumasi, his mother, said. “This is a special moment for us. A special thank you to Mike Stein and Joe Bellanca for making this event possible.”

Stein and Bellanca are Johnson’s lawyers. Yes, he has a team of lawyers.

**MEET THE NEW KIDS:**[Michigan's 2022 recruiting class: What to like about each player](https://www.freep.com/story/sports/college/university-michigan/wolverines/2021/12/15/what-know-michigan-footballs-2022-recruiting-class/6503250001/)

Welcome to the wild, wild west of the NIL (name, image and likeness) era.

“A year ago, without this NIL, we would have been in a high school gym somewhere,” Kumasi said. “This is a testament to the future and what is possible.”

The microphone was given to David Walker, the owner of Positivity Alkaline Water, based in Atlanta. He stood next to Deon Johnson, Will’s dad. They went to Michigan together.

“I wanted to tell you Will, this brings everything full circle, things we dreamed about," Walker said. "Watching this guy have to maneuver through college with pizza cards as opposed to being compensated. Now, I own a bottled water company and I’m happy to announce, we are signing Will to an NIL agreement.”

**WHAT A DREAM!:**[Meet the Free Press 2021 football Dream Team](https://www.freep.com/story/sports/high-school/2021/12/12/detroit-free-press-2021-football-dream-team/6463622001/)

Everybody clapped for [Johnson, a five-star defensive back, who is the top ranked recruit in the state](https://247sports.com/Player/Will-Johnson-46058580/), the No. 4 corner in the country and the No. 20 recruit in the nation, according to 247Sports Composite ranking.

This is the power of Michigan coming full circle,’ Walker said. “Will, I’m proud to say, we are behind you 100 percent. You will never be thirsty.”

**The new normal**

I’ve been to countless college signings, and there were parts of this felt normal. The room was filled with former coaches, teammates and family members who talked glowingly of Johnson’s character and talent.

Johnson seems like a great kid — humble, smart and engaging — and he has an impressive, smart, loving family.

But there were several elements that made this feel entirely new.

***[ How Michigan's on-field success translated into flurry of high-level signings ]***

Promotional brochures were set up at every seat, listing Will’s platform and engagement potential. It touted his 15,700 followers on social media. The copy talked about an “engagement strategy that aligns both your brand with Will’s brand through a relevant social media strategy, and propositional publicity opportunities."

It felt more like a product launch than anything else. And the product is an 18-year-old thrust into the business world. They have been holding meetings and doing business.

We've had a few conference calls, Zoom calls, face to face meetings,” Deon said. “I mean, somebody will contact me and they'll pitch whatever they have to me. These last few weeks, there's been a lot of meetings with a lot of different people.”

This is the first national signing day with the new NIL rules. Everybody is getting into the act — car dealerships, restaurants, energy drink company and clothing companies.

A Texas non-profit group is [offering $50,000 a year for individual Longhorn offensive linemen](https://www.si.com/college/2021/12/07/texas-offensive-line-nil-deal-nonprofit).

Who will they block for? A millionaire quarterback. Quinn Ewers, a quarterback, has at least three NIL deals, [including a three-year, $1.4 million deal with GT Sports Marketing](https://www.espn.com/college-football/story/_/id/32120440/ohio-state-buckeyes-qb-quinn-ewers-nil-deal-14-million-source-says). He left high school early, went to Ohio State for a redshirt year and [now has transferred to Texas](https://www.freep.com/story/sports/2021/12/13/quarterback-quinn-ewers-headed-ohio-state-texas/6490903001/).

It's happening all across college athletics.

**BOOK IT!:**[Celebrate Michigan's historic Big Ten championship with this new Free Press book!](https://www.freep.com/story/sports/college/university-michigan/wolverines/2021/12/04/michigan-football-big-ten-championship-season-commemorative-book/8863422002/)

And I don’t have a problem with any of this. Let the kids get paid. Everybody makes money off college football — especially the TV folks, colleges and coaches — so it seems only right that these athletes deserve a slice of the pie.

But still, it’s so different, it feels unsettling.

Johnson has been approached by 10 companies and he’s weighing different offers that range from clothing deals to health-care promotion.



“We're just taking our time and we're not moving too fast,” Deon said. “Some of the deals are not ready to be rolled out right now. Some of the contracts are not ready.”

This is completely new for Deon, too.

When he signed with Michigan back in 1990, it was far different.

“My letter came in, in a FedEx envelope," he said. "Lloyd Carr came to my house and sat down and picked up my paperwork and took it back up to Ann Arbor. Now, you get an email, you sign it electronically, and you send it back. And there's tons of media coverage.”

**MORE FROM SEIDEL:**[The flowers had to be perfect for the Oxford funerals. They made it happen.](https://www.freep.com/in-depth/sports/columnists/jeff-seidel/2021/12/12/oxford-high-school-shooting-funerals-hardest-moments-florists/6448582001/)

**'It's a business now, man'**

All of this is great for Michigan.

When it comes to recruiting, it’s a good thing for the Wolverines if future players know they can get NIL deals.

“You can't do anything with alcohol, tobacco, gambling, marijuana, promote anything like that and you can't do anything right now that that promotes yourself using a block M,” Deon said.

Johnson appears to have a tremendous team behind him. His dad is a co-founder of Sound Mind Sound Body Sports Academy. His mother is a professor at Wayne State. His sister is getting her master’s degree in sports management. And he has a growing team that includes two lawyers and a brand manager.

**MYLES POLLARD:**[Why Ravenwood star never wavered from Michigan ahead of national signing day](https://www.freep.com/story/sports/high-school/2021/12/15/myles-pollard-signs-michigan-football-national-signing-day-ravenwod/6467010001/)

But what about the kids that don’t have this kind of support?

Soon we will hear about athletes who have signed bad contracts or people who have taken advantage of them.

Because all of these deals come with a catch. Will is not eligible to compete as a high school athlete in Michigan anymore. But that’s not a problem. He decided not to play basketball and he is enrolling early at Michigan.

“So it's like, Hey, why sit back and wait, let's get the ball rolling," Deon said. "I mean, it's a business now, man. All business at this point. These kids may have the opportunity to come out of school, and they could have the opportunity to make millions of dollars before they even become a quote unquote, professional in life or professional athlete.”

That’s the new world.

Fancy suits. Lawyers. And promotional brochures. And talk about business.

It’s gonna take some time to get used to this. The kids are getting paid. That’s a good thing. But I’m not sure where this is headed.

After the event, Walker showed me a [website](http://Willjohnson.positivitywater.com), featuring Johnson. It was already live.

“Think positive,” the tagline read. “Drink Positivity.”

Nope. He’s never gonna go thirsty.