

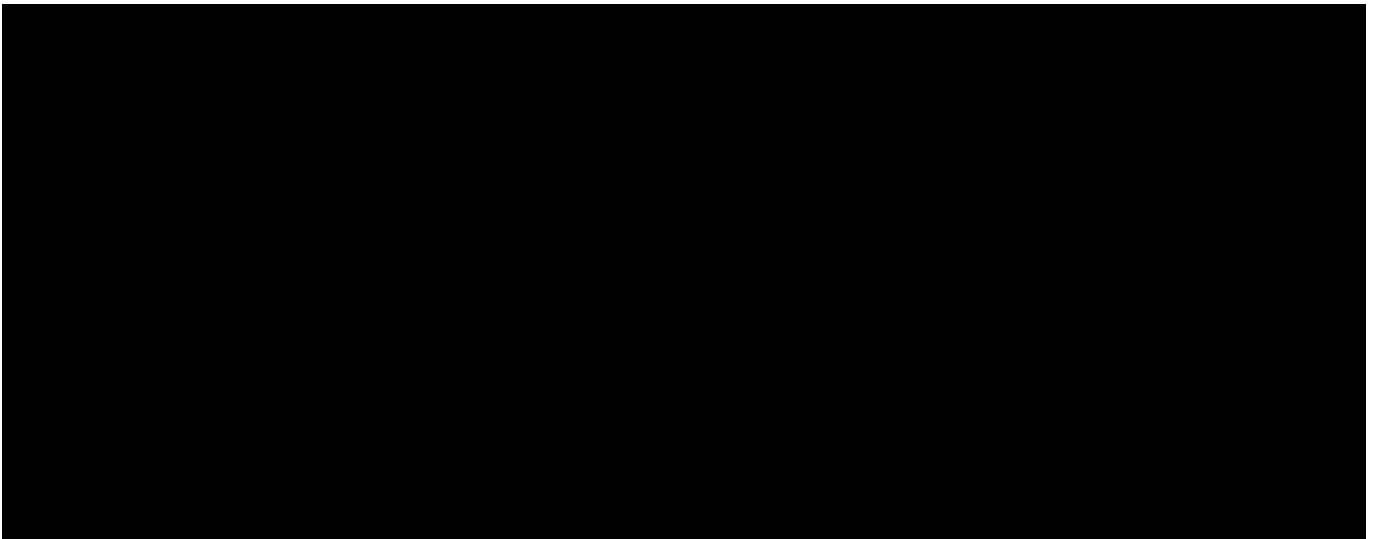
How Livvy Dunne became one of the most recognizable names in sports

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How Livvy Dunne became one of the most famous names in sports



D'Arcy Maine

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OLIVIA DUNNE KNOWS she hasn't had a traditional college experience.

But it was a conversation with four-time Super Bowl champion Rob Gronkowski, at a Sports Illustrated swimsuit issue party, that really made that clear.

"He said, 'I don't know what I would've done if all these eyes were on me while I was in college. That would have been *terrible*,'" Dunne, a fifth-year senior on the LSU gymnastics team, recounted to ESPN.

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But for Dunne, now 22, it's all she has known for most of her time at LSU. She arrived in Baton Rouge in summer 2020, with the pandemic ongoing, as a former junior national team member with a sizable social media following. She was looking to leave her mark on college gymnastics, but she had no idea then what was to come.

Now, nearly five years later, LSU is the reigning national champion after winning its first team title in April. After the NCAA's name, image and likeness (NIL) rule went into effect in 2021, Dunne has become one of the most recognizable college athletes in the country, with more than 13 million followers in total on TikTok and Instagram. [Per On3](#), her endorsements are valued at \$4.1 million, making her the No. 1-ranked women's athlete in front of basketball players [Flau'Jae Johnson](#) and [Paige Bueckers](#), whose endorsements are valued at \$1.5 million each. [Dunne is No. 4 overall](#), behind only football players Arch Manning (\$6.5 million) and Carson Beck (\$4.3 million) and basketball player Cooper Flagg (\$4.8 million).

Dunne is a brand ambassador, influencer, model and graduate student specializing in technology management. But at her core, she's a gymnast who is trying to soak in every last minute of her final months in the sport. She hasn't had the college experience she was expecting, but she wouldn't have it any other way.

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"I struggled, especially at first, with the amount of eyes on me," Dunne told ESPN in January, while sitting in a hallway of the Paycom Center in Oklahoma City. As she spoke, those who walked by seemed to recognize her, and she was greeted by six-time Olympic medalist Aly Raisman. The two enthusiastically swapped stories about their experiences shooting with Sports Illustrated.

"I was 18 years old when everything changed, and I felt like I couldn't breathe, I felt like I couldn't make a mistake. But something you learn on social media is you will get hate and you will get people that are bitter towards you, especially when you have success. But I think that having the eyes on me has been such a blessing in my life, and I feel like it's translated over into eyes on the sport of gymnastics, which was a huge deal to me and a huge reason why I kept coming back for more. ... Watching the growth of the sport, and women's sports overall, has meant so much to me."



Olivia Dunne's endorsements are valued at \$4.1 million -- making her the No. 1-ranked women's athlete in the NCAA.
AP Photo/Tony Gutierrez

NO ONE GETS to the junior national team without a high level of skill, talent and dedication, and Dunne had all three in droves. Like many elite gymnasts, Dunne was homeschooled throughout high school and spent most of her time at her club gym, Eastern National Academy in Paramus, New Jersey. She made the junior national team with a 12th-place all-around finish at the 2016 national championships, and was named to the U.S. team for the 2017 City of Jesolo Trophy in Italy, where she placed sixth all-around and helped the junior team win the overall title. In 2017, she had a ninth-place finish in her final junior national championships.

Dunne didn't find the same success during her senior elite career. She had a series of injuries and extended competition absences and opted to drop back down to Level 10, the highest level before elite, before turning her sights to college gymnastics.

Social media had always been a hobby and a fun distraction from the demands of the sport. She joined Instagram at 10, documenting her journey in and out of the gym. During the early days of the pandemic in March 2020 when her gym shut down temporarily, Dunne filled her newfound free time by [making TikTok videos](#). It didn't take long for them to go viral. By the time she arrived on campus several months later, she had 3 million

followers on the platform.



During her freshman season, she earned All-America honors on bars and continued to post videos and photos.

"I love to use my platform to give LSU the hype," Dunne [told Baton Rouge-area publication InRegister](#) in February 2021. "They deserve it. This is truly the best school ever, and I always get so many likes whenever I post about LSU."

But it was the summer after freshman year when everything really changed. On July 1, 2021, after years of debate and legal battles, the NCAA's NIL rule [officially went into effect](#) with many athletes, across sports and the country, signing endorsement deals when the clock struck midnight. Dunne, then (and still) the most followed NCAA athlete on social media, was featured on a billboard sponsored by LSU in Times Square that day -- and [the TikTok video she posted](#) of herself with the billboard has 19.4 million views.

Countless sponsorship offers and deals started coming her way. It was uncharted waters for college athletes, and Dunne was now in the middle of the ocean with virtually no one to ask for advice.

"There definitely were some learning curves, and it took a long time to learn how to balance it all," Dunne said. "Especially between my sophomore and junior year, that was a

super hard time because I just didn't know what to do and there were nobody's footsteps to follow in. So I kind of had to learn on my own how to navigate all this."

At first, according to Dunne, that meant wanting to say yes to every opportunity. But she quickly learned to be selective. Entrusting her mom and older sister Julianna (known as Julz) as her managers, she also hired noted agency WME to field and negotiate deals. Livvy Dunne the brand was born.



Dunne and longtime boyfriend Paul Skenes on the red carpet before the 2024 MLB All-Star Game.
Jerome Miron-USA TODAY Sports

Since then, she has secured partnerships with Nautica, American Eagle and Body Armour, among others; filmed a national television ad campaign for Vuori; inked a multimillion-dollar deal with content creator platform Passes; and contributed to NBC's social media coverage of the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris. Alongside [Paul Skenes](#), her longtime boyfriend and the 2024 National League Rookie of the Year, she was a guest picker on "College GameDay" in November. She appeared on the cover of Sports Illustrated alongside then-LSU basketball star Angel Reese in October 2023 and recently shot her second spread for SI's swimsuit issue.

Dunne says she usually starts her days with classes and schoolwork before a meeting with her agent and sister. Then, when Dunne is at practice, Julz, who graduated from LSU in

2023, talks to brands and coordinates about what the Dunnes need to do for various posts and deliverables. By the time Dunne leaves practice, Julz has everything set and they then shoot video or still photos. By now, the two have their routine down to a near-science.

"She'll be like, 'You stand there, I'm going to record. You're going to say this, we're going to get it done ASAP,'" Dunne said of her sister.

While she made her own path out of necessity, Dunne is now the blueprint for others. In July 2023, [she launched "The Livvy Fund"](#) in partnership with LSU's official NIL collective to "create more opportunities for LSU female-student athletes, while emphasizing the importance of bringing NIL funds to women in college sports." In a statement announcing the launch, Dunne said she hoped to share her connections and the lessons learned with others. In October 2023, Accelerator energy drink company, which had already inked a previous agreement with Dunne, [signed NIL deals with eight additional LSU gymnasts](#) through the fund.



Dunne with her teammates, wearing the "stick crown" the LSU team passes around when a gymnast sticks her landing.
Derick E. Hingle/Getty Images

Dunne remains the only gymnast in the top 10 NIL valuations in women's sports, but an increasing number of gymnasts are securing high-profile deals. Jordan Chiles, Olympic gold medalist and a junior at UCLA, is currently appearing in a national ad campaign for

Nike.

"There are some athletes who take NIL to this extent where they forget who they are and it's their whole identity, but Livvy has done it right and not changed into someone else," Chiles told ESPN. "She is who she is and she helps her teammates and does all these cool things with it. I think Angel [Reese] and [current LSU basketball standout] Flau'Jae [Johnson] and Livvy are amazing and have been able to change the perception of what it means to have a name, image and likeness and lead the way."

Dunne has her detractors as well. [A 2022 New York Times article](#), headlined "New Endorsements for College Athletes Resurface an Old Concern: Sex Sells," featured Dunne prominently. In it, former Stanford women's basketball coach Tara VanDerveer said the part of NIL that focuses on beauty was "a step back" for gender equity in sports.

"I guess sometimes we have this swinging pendulum, where we maybe take two steps forward and then we take a step back. We're fighting for all the opportunities to compete, to play, to have resources, to have facilities, to have coaches and all the things that go with Olympic-caliber athletics."

In the same article, Dunne said it was empowering to wear what she wanted in her posts. "It's just about showing as much or as little as you want," she said. After the story ran, [she posted a video](#) in which she lip-synched, "If you don't like me that's fine, but watch your mouth," and captioned it, "Only steps forward."

Her fame has also had its drawbacks. Dunne often attracts large crowds, and it can create a scary, even hostile, atmosphere. [At a 2023 meet against Utah in Salt Lake City](#), a group of men holding posters and a full-size cutout of Dunne screamed and chanted "We want Livvy! Give us Livvy" throughout the meet, disturbing the routines of other gymnasts. Dunne, sidelined by an injury, was not competing. [Many of them waited outside the arena](#) shouting for her after the meet. LSU added a security detail for the team on the road, and Dunne later pleaded with fans to "be respectful of other gymnasts" in a post on Twitter.



Dunne with fans at a meet against Utah in Salt Lake City. Alex Goodlett/Getty Images

LSU HEAD COACH Jay Clark is insistent when he says she's not "Livvy" to him or the rest of the team. Livvy, he said, is a social media persona, a celebrity, but Olivia or Liv is the real person, and the one who shows up to practice every day, ready to do what the team needs.

"Livvy is a different person than the person we know," Clark told ESPN. "The Liv we know is inclusive of everyone and she gives back to our university and gives back to her teammates. We encourage selflessness on our team, and she embodies that."

A regular in the bars lineup during her first two seasons, an injury derailed much of her junior campaign and, largely because of the depth of LSU's talent, she hasn't been a consistent member of the lineup since. During her senior year in 2024, she competed twice on bars and was more frequently seen on floor, with eight appearances. She did not compete at the NCAA championships in April but was the alternate on floor in case a last-minute lineup change was needed.



This season, through LSU's seven meets, Dunne has notched four appearances on floor (with a season-high score of 9.875 on two occasions), two on beam and one on bars. She last competed Jan. 24, in a loss to Arkansas, and Clark in an interview Monday that [said she has been dealing with a knee injury](#). "It isn't a stress fracture, but it is a stress reaction on her kneecap," Clark said. "The only answer for that is rest."

But even without an injury, Dunne wouldn't be a lock to compete every week. A team is able to have only six gymnasts on each event and, simply put, with a roster like the Tigers' -- which boasts reigning NCAA individual champions Haleigh Bryant (all-around) and Aleah Finnegan (floor), as well as other 2024 SEC individual champions and several former national team standouts -- it is a challenge to simply make the lineup.

"Jay says every role on this team is so important, and I can't agree more," Dunne said. "I feel like this year has been one of my best years gymnastics-wise, and I am pushing my way to make those lineups. But honestly, any role that I'm given, I'm so excited to do. It's one of those things where you have to seize the opportunity when it comes."



Dunne with LSU head coach Jay Clark. Dale Zanine-USA TODAY Sports

During LSU's victory over top-ranked Oklahoma in front of a crowd of more than 13,000 earlier this month, Dunne could be seen cheering and celebrating for all of her teammates, and dancing along to seemingly all of the choreography during the team's final event on floor.

"We have a quote that we say a lot in our gym that's stolen from [legendary UCLA basketball coach] John Wooden and it's, 'Happiness begins where selfishness ends,'" Clark said. "Someone who is not performing as much as they might want still plays a vital and irreplaceable role in our success if they choose to embrace that. Liv is a great example of that, and certainly the most visible because of all the exposure she gets."

And Dunne's enthusiasm for her teammates extends outside of the gym. Last summer, after LSU won the national title, it was Dunne who found a way to get the entire team out to Los Angeles for The ESPYS ceremony. Working with her agents and a sponsor, Dunne secured travel and an invitation for the entire team to walk the red carpet and attend the event.

She gathered the team together to share the news.

"I got to read the email to them, and everyone was going crazy," Dunne said. "It was just a

very special moment. ... Getting to share these opportunities with my team, who deserve all of this as much as I do, is incredibly special and very cool."



The LSU gymnastics team at the 2024 ESPYS. Dunne and Haleigh Bryant are not pictured. AP Photo/Damian Dovarganes

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While it remains to be seen how much Dunne will compete the rest of the season, including in Friday night's meet against No. 9 Kentucky (7 p.m. ET, SEC Network) in Lexington, she knows, no matter what, she has less than two months remaining in the sport she started as a 3-year-old. What began as a love for wearing pink sparkly leotards developed into an all-encompassing passion and something that has brought her virtually everything in her life.

She said she is excited for her next chapter and hopes to pursue something in sports media, but she's aware of the countdown clock that keeps ticking down. While Dunne's college experience has been anything but typical, her hopes for her final months are just like most college students' in their last semester.

She just wants to take it all in.

"I'm just trying to seize every opportunity and make the most of it and make those memories," Dunne said. "The travel meets are some of the best memories you'll have when you're a college athlete and being with the girls on the team. Even just practice every day is special. These are my sisters, and that's something I'll never forget."

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