



# Winning Beyond the Field: A Case Study of Deion Sanders' Change Management in Football

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## ABSTRACT

*In today's rapidly evolving sports world, coaches who harness the power of social media and media outlets can transform athletic programs and inspire the next generation of athletes and leaders. This study examines the coaching methods and off-field ventures of Coach Deion Sanders, known as "Coach Prime," and the significant role of Well Off Media in reshaping sports media influence. Sanders stands as a disruptive force in college football, using his platform to cultivate a winning team culture, both on and off the field.*

*As the only individual to have played in both the World Series and Super Bowl, Sanders brings unparalleled experience as a multi-sport athlete to his role as a head coach and social media influencer. Through qualitative analysis of Sanders' strategies and their outcomes, this research offers valuable insights into brand development, strategic actions in sports media, and change management in athletics. In an era where influence extends beyond the field, Sanders' approach serves as an inspiring model for coaches aiming to leave a lasting impact on their teams, communities, and the broader sports industry.*

**KEYWORDS:** Coach, Mentor, Influencer, Athlete, Prime Time, Neon Deion, Coach Prime, Major League Baseball, National Football League, Football, Baseball, Social Media

## INTRODUCTION

In today's rapidly evolving sports world, coaches who harness the power of social media and media outlets can transform athletic programs and inspire the next generation of athletes and leaders. This case study analyzes Coach Deion Sanders as an experienced multidisciplinary athlete who transferred decades of knowledge and experience to his current position as a successful college football head coach and social media influencer (McIntosh, 2023).

Deion Sanders played multiple youth and high school sports as an adolescent, and he cultivated the potential to become a legendary college and professional multi-sport athlete (Jackson State University, 2023). After his professional baseball career ended in 2001 and his professional football career ended in 2005, Sanders held positions as a football analyst, high school assistant football coach, and college football head coach. He currently holds the second college football head coach position of his career at the University of Colorado in Boulder (Gregory, 2023). The plethora of experience and decades of dedication have placed Sanders on a platform where he can influence the development of young athletes and coaches nationwide. His leadership style and coaching philosophy demonstrate that of an athletic legend who understands how to motivate and mentor young athletes to perform optimally on the gridiron and in life

(Biography.com, 2023). He connects to the public domain through interviews with media outlets and a conduit through his son's multi-faceted social media platform. Coach Prime's strategic use of Well Off Media has transformed collegiate football branding, leveraging social media to engage fans, attract recruits, and disrupt traditional marketing norms (Green et al., 2023). By embracing an influencer-driven model, Sanders and his team have not only elevated the visibility of HBCU athletics but also reshaped how college football programs engage with their audiences (Green et al., 2023).

## METHODS

A case study is meant "to describe an individual situation (case) in detail, identify the key issues of the case, analyze the case using relevant theoretical concepts from your unit or discipline, and recommend a course of action for that particular case" (Western Sydney University, 2016). Case studies should help provide a deeper understanding of the topic at hand. Therefore, a case study is an excellent approach to better understanding Deion Sanders as a coach, mentor, and influencer.

## ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUND

### Athletic Legend

Deion Luwynn Sanders was born in Fort Myers, Florida,

on August 9, 1967 (Augustyn, 2023). As an eight-year-old, Sanders and his Pop Warner football team won a national championship (SportsDay Staff, 2023). Growing up, he played multiple youth sports, then concluded adolescence as a three-sport All-State athlete at North Fort Myers High School (Wiggins, 2015). Sanders played quarterback on offense and cornerback on defense during his high school football tenure (Wiggins, 2015). The other two High School sports he played were basketball and baseball (SportsDay Staff, 2023). Sanders earned a scholarship to Florida State University, where he played college football, baseball, and track (Augustyn, 2023). After college, Sanders continued his multi-sport career as a professional athlete simultaneously in the National Football League (NFL) and Major League Baseball (MLB).

Sanders was drafted in the sixth round of the 1985 MLB draft by the Kansas City Royals but did not sign with the team (SportsDay Staff, 2023). He played on the New York Yankees' minor league team in 1989 then for the New York Yankees MLB team in 1990 (Augustyn, 2023). After his tenure with the Yankees, he played for the Atlanta Braves, San Francisco Giants, and Cincinnati Reds until he retired from MLB in 2001 (Augustyn, 2023). Sanders was picked in the first round as the fifth overall player of the 1989 NFL Draft by the Atlanta Falcons (Pro Football Hall of Fame, 2021). He was the first two-way starter in the NFL since the 1960's (Wiggins, 2015). Sanders played for the Atlanta Falcons from 1989-1993, the San Francisco 49ers in 1994, the Dallas Cowboys from 1995-1999, the Washington Redskins in 2000, and the Baltimore Ravens from 2004-2005 (Pro Football Hall of Fame, 2021).

Sanders earned many outstanding achievements as a lifelong athlete. He earned the Jim Thorpe Award for outstanding defensive back in college football (Wiggins, 2015). His career as a professional athlete was unique in that he was the only athlete to appear in both the Super Bowl and the World Series (Wiggins, 2015). His best MLB season was with the San Francisco Giants in 1995, when his batting average was over .300 (Wiggins, 2015). Sanders played with the Atlanta Braves in one MLB World Series game (Dodd, 2021). He was voted NFL Defensive Player of the Year in 1994 and holds the NFL record for career touchdowns scored on returns (Wiggins, 2015). He was inducted into the Pro Football Hall of Fame in 2011 as a defensive back, cornerback, kick returner, and punt returner; key statistics include nine all-pro selections, 53 interceptions, eight pro bowls, 14 seasons, and 22 total touchdowns (Pro Football Hall of Fame, 2021). Sanders was on the winning team in two consecutive Super Bowls – Super Bowl XXIX and Super Bowl XXX – where he played cornerback for the 49ers in 1994 and Cowboys in 1995 (Pro Football Hall of Fame, 2021).

Coach Deion Sanders is a change agent and an impactful game changer. He has the attention of the entire world now and especially, as quoted by (Tedeschi, 2021) "sharks that live in the same sea." Coach Sanders is a confident, Christian, strategic mastermind as he has calculatngly strategized

his way across the football spectrum. He expertly made his way gaining skills and developing his two sport talent in the MLB and the NFL, coaching high school teams, seamlessly and successfully jumping to coaching college football at Jackson State University an HBCU, and then catapulting to the University of Colorado at Boulder as the head football coach for the Colorado Buffaloes (Curtright, 2024). Coach Sanders is not just a football coach, but a mentor and an author helping to shape the lives of his players on and off of the field in similar fashion that Bill McCartney had with the Colorado Buffaloes before him (Joseph, 2023). The Coach trained and developed Travis Hunter to achieve the most prestigious award in college football, 2024 Heisman Trophy (Meyer, 2024). Coach Prime is an influencer in many ways but the announcement by Coach Belichick, who holds the most Super Bowl wins in NFL history and a football legend of the New England Patriots, comes as a huge surprise to most avid football fans. On December 11, 2024 Coach Belichick announced that he would be coaching at University of North Carolina (University of North Carolina Chapel Hill, 2024). Coach Prime is not finished moving through the arena of football. His next move may be to the National Football League, as there is talk of Coach Sander's and the Las Vegas Raiders mutual interest in each other (Shuster, 2025). With Coach Prime's meteoric rise in sports and his accumulation of skills, support, and credentials, Coach Prime is ready to hit the big time.

## **Coach**

Sanders pursued a career as a high school and college football coach after his 16-year tenure as a professional multi-sport athlete. In addition to his coaching career, he intermittently supported the NFL Network and Columbia Broadcasting System Sports as an analyst (SportsDay Staff, 2023).

Sanders served as a high school football coach for several years, then decided to pursue a college football head coach position. Specifically, he was the Trinity Christian-Cedar Hill offensive coordinator while two of his three sons, Shedeur and Shilo, played High School football (Riddle, 2020 & SportsDay Staff, 2023). He proclaimed, "I am not an assistant coach; I am a head coach," and emphasized how his coaching philosophy is better for college kids than coaching a team in the NFL in an interview with Sports Illustrated (Smith, 2023).

Sanders accepted his first college football head coach position at Jackson State University on September 21, 2020, a Historically Black university (Jackson State University, 2023). His first season resulted in a school-record 11-win season and the first Southwestern Athletic Conference football championship since 2007 (Jackson State University, 2023). His presence as a head football coach impacted a winning record for the team and enabled significant networking, which increased university revenues and improved facility conditions through extensive renovations (60 Minutes, 2022). His presence changed the dynamic of college football recruitment when top high school prospects chose Jackson State over leading Division One universities, as Florida State

University (60 Minutes, 2022). His mentorship and influence in college only grew stronger when he left Jackson State University to attend the University of Colorado in Boulder.

Sanders is the head football coach at the University of Colorado in Boulder, Colorado. His approach to the program results from decades of experience as a multi-sport athlete and Christian. As a coach, he can get the kids to buy into what he is saying, which is an essential quality as a leader and coach (Schaible, 2023). He has a passion like none other, especially with his approach to acquiring potential recruits (Schaible, 2023). His emphasis on influencing an organization's culture sets the foundation that drives his coaching philosophy. Sanders described his philosophy best when he addressed thoughts on culture in an interview on the Joel Klatt Show, "Culture is the way of life. I only know how to do things one way, and that is to give everything I have got" (Klatt, 2023). He set the precedence for his coaching philosophy when he addressed the University of Colorado football team for the first time as head coach, "God strategically placed me here," then he had the team recite the following affirmations, "we are smart, tough, fast, disciplined, with character" (Sanders Jr, 2022). Another tactic Coach Sanders used to instill a resolute fighting spirit involved requiring players to wear blank jerseys until they earned their number during spring practice (Sanders Jr, 2023). Sanders' experience and coaching philosophy provide a model for other coaches in the nation to emulate and young athletes to follow.

### **Influencer & More**

Two key nicknames, Prime Time and Neon Deion, historically represent Deion Sanders. Prime Time came from a high school friend who developed the idea after he watched Sanders score 30 points in a basketball game (SportsDay Staff, 2023). He acquired Neon Deion as a college athlete from the public relations staff at Florida State University (Wiggins, 2015). A third nickname has recently risen to the surface: Coach Prime. Coach Prime represents his current persona at the University of Colorado in Boulder.

Not only is Sanders an influencer for young athletes, but he is also an influencer for the Christian faith. He led the Dallas Cowboys' bible study group during the 1998 season, during which pastors and members of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes preached to the team upon his request (SportsDay Staff, 2023). Religion played a significant role in Sanders' life (Publishers Weekly, 1998).

Sanders has three sons – Deion Jr., Shilo, and Shedeur – and two daughters – Deiondra and Shelomi (Eidell, 2023). He had two children with his first wife, Carolyn Chambers: Deiondra and Deion Jr. (Eidell, 2023). His other three children were from his second wife, Pilar Biggers-Sanders (Eidell, 2023). Deion Jr. controls the primary social media platform that tracks Sanders' progress at the University of Colorado in Boulder, called Well Off Media. Aside from Well Off Media on social media, sports podcasts and other media outlets provide the platforms for Sanders to influence athletes and coaches nationwide.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Disruptive marketing involves using new approaches to advertise services or goods. Rather than using word of mouth, newspaper ads, etc., a company will test a new tactic to market its products. For example, social media and influencers are a prime example of disruptive marketing. A few years back, we would have never guessed the many ways that social media would impact the business world. Now, companies know that "as the popularity of the internet has brought about a new class of 'celebrities' or influencers, marketers need to seize this new opportunity or adapt to this new reality" (Jarrar, 2020, p. 2).

Classmates.com was the first social networking site. It allowed instant messaging communication between friends (Walla et al., 2023, p.1). No one could have predicted what the future of social media would hold. Celebrities and other influencers now dominate most social media sites, posting daily life updates. Walla (2023) believes this leads followers to feel close to the influencers, almost giving the illusion that they are friends. Followers feel so close to influencers that they are willing to believe anything they say, which is why influencer marketing is so popular. Users "follow influencers because they have a genuine interest or trust in what they promote or represent" (Jarrar, 2020, p.12). Although the "close bond" between influencers and their followers may be an illusion, influencer marketing results are very real. Companies have learned to adopt this new approach and understand which influencers have access to their target audience.

Social media has become more than just a way to communicate and keep up with friends and family. For many influencers, social media brought them to fame and provided various opportunities they would not have had otherwise. One of the most well-known influencers on social media today is Addison Rae. Her rise to fame began after she went viral for making TikTok dances in her room. Only a year or so after she went viral, "Rae nabbed a multi-picture deal with Netflix, cementing the notion that, with talent and a touch of luck, you can travel from your bedroom to Hollywood on the back of selfie videos" (De La Cava et al.). She now has multiple brand deals, which she posts about daily and gets paid generously for. Addison Rae's net worth is approximately \$15 million, a third of Deion Sanders. That is a huge difference. However, if you consider their ages and that Addison has only been on the scene for a few years, it is hard to believe that she grew to wealth and fame that quickly by simply being a typical teenager online.

## **ANALYSIS & FINDINGS**

SWOT and PEST were utilized to identify and examine the internal and external factors affecting celebrity coaches and social influencers, such as Deion Sanders. Celebrity Coaches like Coach Sanders have unique characteristics. See Figure 1 and Figure 2.



## SWOT ANALYSIS OF DEION SANDERS

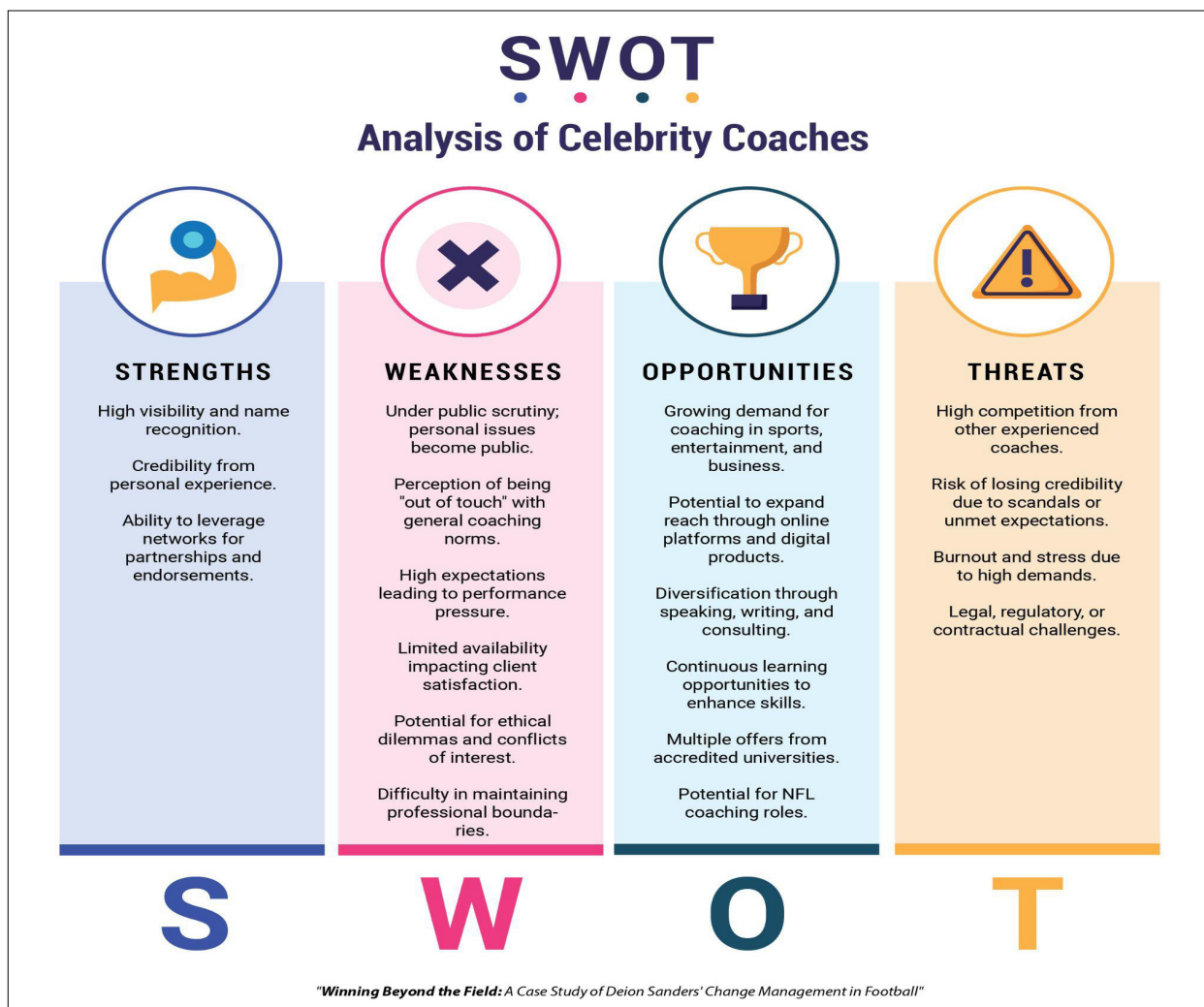


Figure 1. SWOT Analysis For Celebrity Coaches

**STRENGTHS:** Throughout our research, the articles highlighted that "Sanders is the most versatile, compelling, and maybe most valuable player in all of football" (Kirkpatrick, 1994, p. 1). People know Deion Sanders and respect his ability to coach/play football. Deion Sanders is a former NFL and MLB star with two Super Bowl rings and a World Series appearance who has a charismatic personality and is media savvy. His credibility is attached to his name, so he no longer needs to prove himself. Sanders utilizes his real-life experience on the field and in the spotlight to coach his players on and off the field. His name recognition and credibility are also seen as a perceived ability to attract top recruits and sponsors.

**WEAKNESSES:** Sanders is always in the public eye, which means everything he does is subject to scrutiny. He is often seen as a controversial figure with an outspoken style. For example, an interviewer once tried embarrassing Sanders, "Deion sloshed ice water over the announcer--three times" (Seligmann, 1992, p. 1). Even though both parties were out of line in one way or another, Deion was the only one called a coward publicly for his actions. Coach Sanders also faces potential conflicts of interest with his sons on the Colorado team.

**OPPORTUNITIES:** Deion Sanders has his pick of coaching positions in any league. He has been offered multiple positions in college football and can coach in the NFL. Undoubtedly, he will have various positions to fall back on for the rest of his life. Coach Prime can also leverage his network and influence in the sports industry to help him build the football programs that he coaches. He has also generated a growing interest and support for Colorado football, which he can leverage. Coach Sanders can also innovate and experiment with new strategies and technologies from his playing and coaching experience and connections with other football minds.

**THREATS:** Deion Sanders refuses to coach in the NFL because he believes he would be too hard on his players. He stated, "I have a problem with men getting their checks and not doing their jobs; I would be too tough as a coach in the NFL because I still have those old-school attributes" (Smith, 2023). In college coaching, there is a high expectation and pressure to win, especially from a known winner such as Coach Sanders. There is also the threat of competition from other established programs that Colorado plays nationwide and the Big 12 Conference. Additional threats for Coach Sanders are the possible legal or ethical issues arising from his actions or statements in the public and media from his outspoken communication style.

## PEST ANALYSIS OF DEION SANDERS

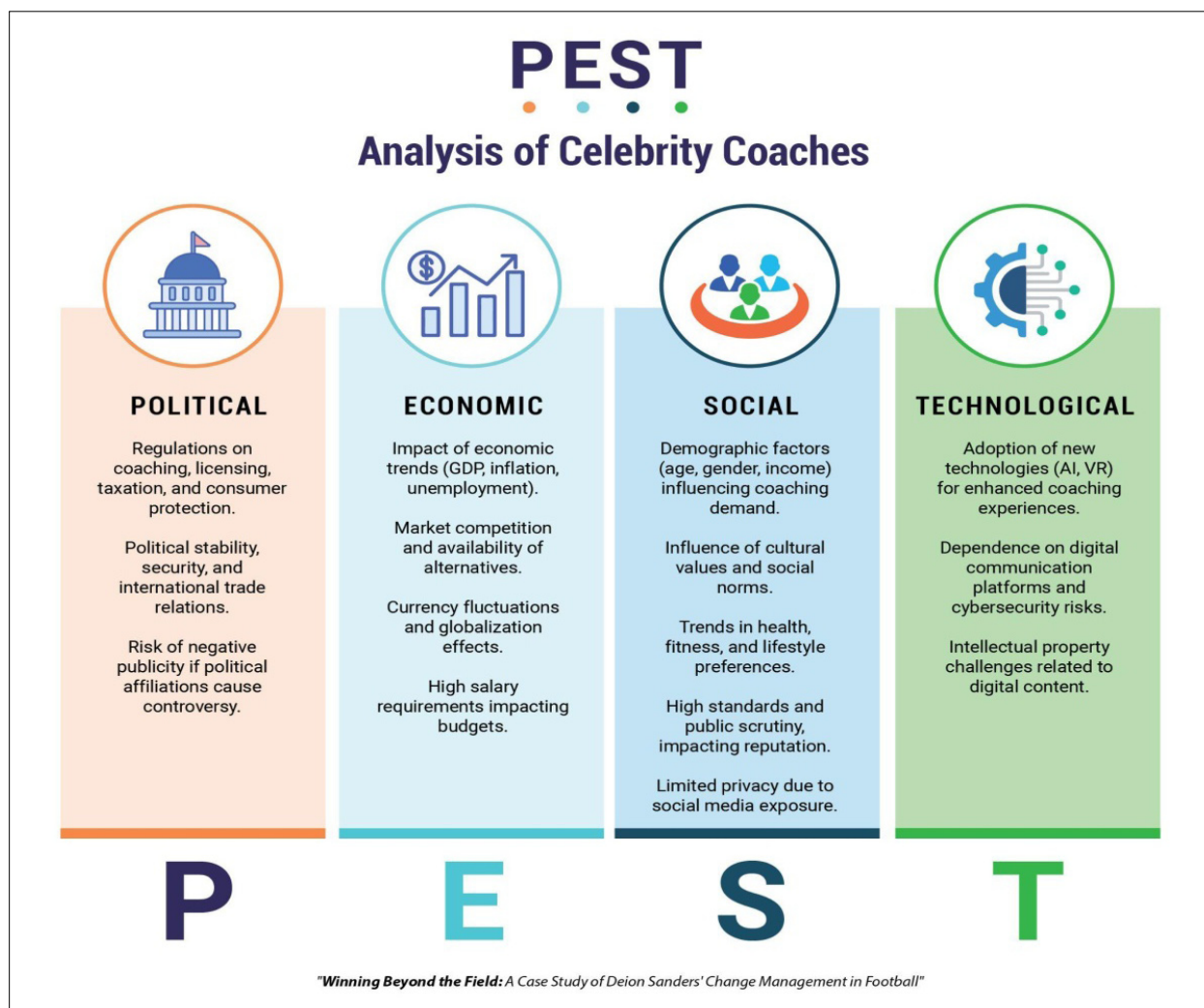


Figure 2. PEST Analysis for Celebrity Coaches

**POLITICAL:** Deion Sanders has received much backlash for his partnership with the Koch brothers because they are Republican. Despite their political affiliation, they do many great things in the Dallas community. The new program Sanders and the Koch brothers made is "Prime 5, [which] will help families in the Dallas area with employment, personal finances, family issues, education, substance abuse and trauma, according to reports" (Thompson, 2017).

Coach Sanders may face political challenges as the head coach of the Colorado Buffaloes. He may have to deal with the expectations and pressures from the university administration, the alumni, the fans, and the media. Coach Prime may also have to navigate the complex and competitive landscape of the NCAA, the Pac-12 conference, and now the Big 12 Conference beginning with the 2024-2025 season and the expanded College Football Playoffs. He may encounter resistance or criticism from some of his peers, rivals, or former colleagues who may question his qualifications, experience, or style. Coach Sanders may also have to deal with the legal and ethical issues arising from his recruiting practices, coaching decisions, or conduct.

**ECONOMIC:** Celebrity coaches like Deion Sanders have ample

personal experience on and off the field, so they often require higher compensation. Coach Sanders may face economic challenges in his new role as the head coach of the Colorado Buffaloes. He may have to manage a tight budget and allocate resources efficiently and effectively. He may have to balance the demands of his players, staff, sponsors, and donors. Coach Sanders may have to compete with other programs that have more financial resources, facilities, or incentives. He may also have to deal with the economic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, which may affect the college football industry's revenue, attendance, and operations.

**SOCIAL:** All celebrities are subject to public scrutiny, so they must be cautious about everything they say and do. For example, Sanders was fired from Prime Prep Academy because he assaulted a faculty member at the school. The member said, "He just grabbed me by my throat and kind of threw me to the ground. Some people had to get him off of me" (Wilson, 2013). Sanders responded, "Until we start serving these kids in Dallas like the kids are served in Fort Worth, and better, I am going to be on the same rampage because the teachers are frustrated. We are frustrated" (Wilson, 2013).

Coach Sanders may face social challenges as the head coach of the Colorado Buffaloes. He may have to adapt to the culture and values of the Colorado community, which may differ from his previous experiences in Jackson State, Florida, or Texas. Coach Prime may have to build trust and rapport with his players, staff, colleagues, and supporters. He may have to deal with diversity and inclusion issues that could affect his team, recruits, or fan base. The Coach might have to deal with his job's social media and public relations aspects, which may expose him to praise, criticism, or scrutiny.

**TECHNOLOGICAL:** Over the years, social media has become more prominent. Sanders is well aware of the impact social media can have, so he enlisted his son to help him build "an audience for Colorado football, one video at a time, with daily behind-the-scenes access to players, coaches, and the celebrity life of his dad" (Schrotenboer, 2023). Colorado's fan base has tripled since Deion Sanders Jr. took over their social media accounts. Coach Sanders may face technological challenges as the head coach of the Colorado Buffaloes. He may have to keep up with the latest trends and innovations in coaching, training, scouting, and analytics. The Coach might have to use various tools and platforms to communicate, collaborate, and coordinate with his players, staff, colleagues, and supporters. He may have to leverage the power of technology to enhance his performance, efficiency, or creativity. He may also have to deal with the risks and challenges of technology, such as cyberattacks, data breaches, or technical glitches.

## DISCUSSION & RESULTS

Coach Sanders has served many roles in his life: player, father, coach, and now influencer. He and his son work hard to keep up with the trends and stay current on Colorado's social media pages. Celebrity coaches and influencers, such as Deion Sanders, have become more influential since the rise of social media. Over the past few years, influencers have gained the ability to "shape others' consumption via both sponsored engagements and unsolicited opinions on brands and products" (Lee et al., 2022, p. 3). Companies that have not yet tried the influencer marketing approach are missing many opportunities to reach customers they might not have been able to reach before. In this case study, we explored how "consumer-brand relationships [have] fundamentally changed, as marketers now increasingly depend on consumer-generated digital content as a medium for marketing influence" (Lee et al., 2022, p.17).

## CONCLUSION

Deion Sanders' transformative impact on college football and social media exemplifies the powerful intersection of athletic excellence, leadership, and digital influence in today's sports landscape. This case study examines Sanders' coaching methods and off-field ventures, particularly the role of Well Off Media in reshaping sports media influence. As a multi-sport professional athlete, Sanders has leveraged decades of experience to become a successful college football head coach and social media influencer. His leadership as head coach

at the University of Colorado and his son's growing social media presence enable Sanders to mentor young athletes and influence the broader sports community. Sanders has disrupted traditional coaching paradigms through his winning mentality and innovative approach. This research highlights the intersection of brand development, sports media strategies, and change management in athletics, providing valuable insights for coaches and athletes alike. Future research could explore how social media and former athletes in leadership roles continue to reshape team culture, coaching effectiveness, and the long-term impact on the sports industry.

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