

NFL stars become owners in National Cycling League, hoping to change the sport



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MIAMI BEACH, Fla. – Miami Dolphins cornerback Jalen Ramsey waved the starting flag in the second leg of the inaugural National Cycling Race at the corner of Ocean Drive and 11th Street on South Beach.

NFL agent David Mulugheta was among four NCL co-founders who tried to avoid getting sprayed by champagne as the Denver Disruptors, one of two league-based teams, celebrated their win during the Miami Invitational on Saturday.

Los Angeles Chargers safety Derwin James greeted cyclists and posed for pictures after the race, encouraging them to continue perfecting their craft as their new venture together gets underway.

“You think about and hear the story about UFC and when it first started. It didn’t pop off immediately, but look what it’s grown into. And this is the exact way I see the NCL starting out,” said Tennessee Titans safety Kevin Byard, an investor like Ramsey, James and their agent Mulugheta in the new venture, which drew 20,000 spectators in their first event.

“This is just the start, and I can only imagine what this is going to be in 5-10 years down the road.”

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'SHORT, FAST, INTERESTING': National Cycling League kicks off first season

The National Cycling League is the brainchild of CEO and co-founder Paris Wallace, who founded and sold two health technology companies and took up an interest in cycling after

moving from Boston to Miami during the pandemic.

Along with co-founders Mulugheta, Randall Clark and Mark Wilkins, the NCL wants to become an organizer for criterium bike races in America. They also want to expand diversity within cycling with opportunities for minority ownership and gender equality both in competition and pay.

For the NFL players, it's an opportunity to have an ownership stake in a new American sports league and diversify their portfolios outside of their NFL salaries and endorsement deals.

“If you think about the NBA or NFL right – hopefully one day, we're that big – but you think about those organizations when they first started and even to now, there's not that many Black investors or owners,” said Ramsey, a Super Bowl champion with the Los Angeles Rams following the 2021 season.

“But this, it's from the jump. It's Black history, automatically.”

What makes the NCL different from other sports?

The NCL is unique because of its racing format and structure. Women and men compete together as teams, each racing 30 laps, or about a mile, on city streets. Points are awarded – three for first place, two for second place, one for third place – each lap. Points are also tripled on the last lap.

“It's the first league that treats the girls as the same as the men, pays us equal, and gives the girls the same importance as the men,” said Valentina Scandola of the Denver Disruptors women's team. “I raced in Europe many years, and this is a new concept. I think it's really good. It goes forward.”

The Denver Disruptors women's team started with a 69-point lead in the first race, and the Denver men hung on with 69 points to win with 138 total points. The Miami Nights, the other NCL team, placed second with 93 points, ahead of eight other teams invited to participate.

“It's cool: No other sport do you have this, men and women racing together,” said Noah Granigan of the Denver men's team. “They gave us a huge lead, and we couldn't let them

down. It's a lot of pressure.”

The NCL is providing cycling athletes a platform to get paid doing what they love.

Andrea Cyr, a member of the Miami Nights team, was working in Chicago as a sports medicine doctor last year. Now, she's a professional athlete.

“I literally quit my job,” Cyr said. “NCL is trying to elevate the sport, and make this a true professional sport. Not only does it reveal my potential as an athlete, but I can make this my living right now.”

The riders also believe the NFL players' involvement in the league can help the sport reach new heights and new audiences.

Zach Berend, a rider with Texas Roadhouse men's team, was ecstatic to meet James after the race with five of his teammates.

“We've been watching him on TV. He's one of the stars,” Berend said. “It's cool to have these people you see on TV that are superstars contribute and for us to have the opportunity to do the same is great. I'm very grateful.”

Pro athletes investing in NCL

Along with Ramsey, James and Byard, Atlanta Falcons cornerback Casey Hayward and NBA guard Bradley Beal of the Washington Wizards are among investors in the NCL.

“It speaks to the mentality of this generation's players now,” said Heisman Trophy winner Desmond Howard, who attended the NCL event and considers himself an amateur cyclist.

“I think it's becoming more commonplace that they understand ownership is the way to go. It's no longer about getting checks from people. It's about receiving equity.”

Mulugheta, who negotiated Deshaun Watson's \$230 million fully guaranteed contract with the Cleveland Browns and whose agency has had the most first-round picks in the last three NFL drafts, according to Forbes, approached some of his players about investing after whiteboarding the NCL idea with his co-founders.

And they jumped at the opportunity.

“The great thing about it is we’ve been able to invest and be partners with people who are very knowledgeable about the sport already. They’ll continue to teach us. They’re knowledgeable about the business side of it, too,” Ramsey said. “It’s all been very calculated and strategic, and we’re going to continue trending in that direction.”

Wallace said he’s been impressed working with the NFL investors, seeing their love for competition branch into the business world.

“I’ve been blown away by them quite frankly,” Wallace said. “My joke with them is why are they wasting their time in the NFL because these guys should be in business. They are so sharp. They get it. They understand. They’re making great recommendations. And they’ll tell you bike racing is pretty dope.”

The NCL will have three more races during its first season: Atlanta on May 14, Denver on Aug. 13 and Washington D.C., where riders will race on Pennsylvania Avenue between the White House and the Washington Monument, on Sept. 17.

It’s just the beginning. But the NFL players have a long-term vision.

“There’s so many riders who don’t get to showcase what they can bring all across the world. But they get a platform to come out here and show what they’ve been doing,” James said. “It gives them a chance, too. Not just us.”

Added Ramsey: “It’s not just about the business side and trying to make some money. We really want to grow the sport.”