

Men's Grooming Brand Duke Cannon Makes First 'UN-NIL' Deal with Iowa State Mascot

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On the eve of March Madness, the biggest annual event in college hoops, men's grooming brand Duke Cannon has made its first name, image, and likeness deal.

But there's a catch: The company can't use the name, image, or likeness of its new partner, the anonymous person underneath the Cy the Cardinal suit, also known as the ultimate hype man for Iowa State University.

So the brand is calling it the "first-ever UN-NIL deal," announcing the collaboration with a series of tongue-in-cheek ads—there's pixelation and voice distortion galore—from newly named agency of record Quality Meats.

The campaign dovetails into a brand refresh for Duke Cannon, with new packaging and marketing via the umbrella tagline "Earn Your Clean."

Leaning into the brand's gritty, blue-collar ethos, its products "help people who get properly dirty get properly clean," according to Oliver Pérez, CMO of Duke Cannon Supply Co. "And nobody works harder and gets the least amount of recognition during March than college basketball mascots."

The brand will supply Cy the Cardinal—the human hidden underneath, that is—with its range of shampoos, deodorants, body washes, and other products. That should come in handy since, as the campaign’s mockumentary-style video says, the oversized furry red suit sees the inside of a washing machine only a few times a year.

Content infusion

Quality Meats, which initially started a casual conversation with the brand over LinkedIn and eventually won the business, has surrounded the “UN-NIL” deal with content, including out-of-home, social and digital ads that will run during the NCAA’s Final Four.

An accompanying stunt will put the mascot’s “game-used” bars

of Duke Cannon soap on eBay after each Iowa State game. A video that announces the activation promises a certificate of authenticity with the partially melted soap, which reportedly boast “real sweat, real fuzz, notes of sandalwood and lavender, and victory.”

A bit of NIL trivia, a market that’s expected to hit \$1.7 billion in 2025, per On3: the floodgates opened in 2022, and since then some 450,000 college athletes have partnered with consumer packaged goods brands of all stripes.

The mega-deals from heavy hitters such as Nike, Gatorade, and Mercedes-Benz get all the attention, with football players like Shedeur Sanders, Travis Hunter, and Arch Manning nailing down alliances worth more than of \$5 million, and LSU gymnast Livvy Dunne close behind with \$4.2 million. But the bulk of sponsorships range from \$1,000 to \$10,000.

Retro-fab commercials

Duke Cannon’s “UN-NIL” deal follows the release earlier this week of two separate but related ads under the “Earn Your Clean” banner. The vintage-look spots are modeled after cheesy 1970s and ’80s commercials, complete with jingles, aimed to tap into the old-school DNA of the brand. They’re meant to be homage, not parody, down to the lo-fi visuals and janky sound.

The new ad platform “not only stands out in a crowded category by encouraging guys to get dirty instead of clean, but also provides an ongoing way to position our product as a well-deserved reward for guys who embody the hard-working values of our brand,” Pérez said. “It’s a campaign that has longevity.”

One spot, dubbed “Septic,” follows a prototypical overall-wearing worker tackling a gross portable toilet. The mood stays light per narration that’s liberally sprinkled with puns and double entendres.

And as an Easter egg, Quality Meats creatives developed a separate video for the faux company in “Septic” called Mr. Brown’s Septic Solutions. Sample dialogue: “Our services include septic tanks and porta-potties—there’s no such thing as a suck we’re scared of,” followed by the tagline “Poo Poo is What We Do Do.”

Duke Cannon’s estimated media spending is \$16 million, per COMvergence. Born as DTC, the brand has expanded into retailers that share its working-man ethos like Carhartt and Ace Hardware, along with having broad distribution at H.E.B., Target and Walmart.

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