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The Yard Went Global: How HBCU Merch Got Licensed, Designed — and Who Holds the Pen

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For most of the twentieth century, if you wanted a Morehouse blazer or a Spelman dress, there was exactly one place the culture trusted to sell it to you: the campus, at homecoming, in person. HBCU merchandise lived in bookstores. The rest of American retail walked past some of the most loyal alumni on earth and never saw a market.

That era is over, and the receipts are in the licensing deals.

In March 2022, Ralph Lauren — a company that practically invented the American collegiate look — announced the Polo Ralph Lauren Exclusively for Morehouse and Spelman Colleges Collection, calling it a first-of-its-kind collaboration for the company. Read the details, because the details are the story. The collection was conceptualized and designed by Morehouse and Spelman alumni working at Ralph Lauren. Its white patchwork eyelet and silk wrap dresses honor Spelman's white attire ceremony. Its wool flannel blazer is an homage to the blazer Morehouse bestows on students in their first days on campus. The styles reference what students at both schools actually wore from the 1920s to the 1950s — pulled from the schools' own history, not from a mood board in New York. The company had already put money behind the words: a $2 million scholarship commitment in December 2021 for students at Morehouse, Spelman, and ten additional HBCUs, through the United Negro College Fund.

Nike got there by a different door — from the inside. Yardrunners, Nike's HBCU platform, began in 2020 with two Howard University alumni on the inside, Richard Palmer and Arinze Emeagwali, who took Nike's "You Can't Stop Us" and answered it the way the Yard would: *You Can't Stop HBCUs.* By 2021 the collection carried

apparel from 16 HBCUs. By its sixth year, Yardrunners 6.0 built Air Max 95s around four schools — Florida A&M, Spelman, Morehouse, and Norfolk State — with HBCU students, alumni, and faculty as the faces and the muses, because, as Nike's own page puts it, the shoes draw from their experiences at their respective alma maters.

So the merch question is no longer *whether* HBCU gear sells globally. It does. The question CultureTechLens asks of every licensing deal is the one we ask of the whole record: **who is missing, who is being replaced, and who gets to decide?**

Measured that way, these two deals hold up better than most. The designers were alumni. The references were the schools' own ceremonies. The scholarships were real money. But notice what made them hold up: the institutions licensed their marks *to partners who had to come through the Yard to do it right*. A license is not a donation and it is not a tribute. It is a contract about who controls a name that Black people built — in Morehouse's case since 1867, in Spelman's since 1881 — and what flows back when the world wears it.

That is why HBCU licensing deserves a press credential and a reporter's notebook, not just a shopping link. Every homecoming now, the yard is a marketplace. The alumni deserve to know the terms of the market being made in their name — which is the coverage this publication is assigned to do.

Next in this series: the Black-owned licensees who hold these licenses themselves — and pay royalties back into the schools.

Sources

- Ralph Lauren corporate press release, March 15, 2022 — "Polo Ralph Lauren Introduces New Collection That Builds Upon Its Historic Partnership with Morehouse and Spelman Colleges": first-of-its-kind for the company; designed by Morehouse and Spelman alumni at the company; white attire ceremony and Morehouse blazer references; 1920s–1950s student styles; collection on sale March 29, 2022.
- WCBE / NPR and Insight Into Academia coverage (March–May 2022) — the $2 million Ralph Lauren Corporate Foundation scholarship commitment (December 2021, via UNCF) covering Morehouse, Spelman, and 10 additional HBCUs; James Jeter (Morehouse) and Dara Douglas (Spelman) as the collaboration's in-house leads.
- Nike, "Yardrunners: Meet the Muses" (nike.com) — Kahlana Barfield Brown and Dex Robinson Air Force 1 designs drawn from their alma maters.

- HBCU Gameday, October 16, 2025 — Yardrunners' 2020 founding by Howard alumni Richard Palmer and Arinze Emeagwali ("You Can't Stop HBCUs"); Yardrunners 6.0 Air Max 95 spotlighting FAMU, Spelman, Morehouse, Norfolk State; October 11 retail / October 14 SNKRS availability.
- FOX Sports 1340 AM, October 25, 2021 — Yardrunners 2.0 collection featuring apparel from 16 HBCUs.

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