

WNBA Finals: Phoenix vs. Chicago

Sunday, October 10, 2021

Cathy Engelbert

Commissioner Press Conference



THE MODERATOR: Welcome to the Commissioner press conference for WNBA Finals, presented by YouTube TV.

To our media, thank you for joining us for WNBA Finals 2021 presented by YouTube TV. I'm going to introduce right away WNBA Commissioner Cathy Engelbert.

CATHY ENGELBERT: Thank you and thank you all for being here and for those that have joined remotely. It's hard to believe we're wrapping our 25th WNBA season, and what a season it has been.

To the media, thank you for your coverage all throughout. It's been a very action-packed year. We launched the inaugural Commissioner's Cup championship right here in Phoenix, groundbreaking marketing partnerships we announced this year, increased viewership, other exciting signals and signs, I keep saying, of the league's growth. We appreciate your work because it's so critical to continue to tell the stories that uplift this league, women's sports in general, sharing success stories, highlighting the incredible athleticism that you've seen just throughout the playoffs let alone what we will see here in the WNBA Finals.

The media landscape has the power to unlock our success. So that's why you tell these inspiring stories. They're so critical to the growth of the league, to building household names. Isn't that what this is all about? These inspiring athletes on the court who are inspiring millions and millions of young girls and boys to be just like them.

So proud of them and great to be here. I want to start by congratulating the Chicago Sky and the Phoenix Mercury for earning a spot in the WNBA Finals. It's a rematch, as you all know, of their 2014 Finals appearances. Really looking forward to this.

In these playoffs, both teams battled through two single-elimination games and the top seeds to make it here. Phoenix is one championship away from matching the WNBA record of four for a WNBA franchise. WNBA scoring leader Diana Taurasi is in her 17th season, as you all know, is a member of the 25 greatest WNBA players of all time, and you saw what she did Friday night coupled

with fantastic performances by Shey Peddy, Brittney Griner, Skylar Diggins-Smith has really made Phoenix one of the top teams in the league.

On the other side, the Chicago Sky going for its first WNBA championship during their second trip to the Finals in their franchise history. They took down No. 1 Connecticut, No. 1 seed Connecticut, to get here. Really impressive performances by Courtney Vandersloot, and posted the second triple-double in WNBA playoff history during Game 1 of the semis, and then Copper and DeShields and Quigley and the list goes on. Coach James Wade making his first finals appearance as a head coach, and what a story for Candace Parker. Don't worry, I didn't forget about her. After her entire WNBA career being played in L.A., taking advantage of free agency this offseason to come home to Chicago, and she has led the team to the Finals her first year with the team and played at such a high level. From where I see this, offers so many intangibles, and the most important one is leadership and leading on the court.

I really though would be remiss if I didn't thank our owners and our teams. This was a tough year, once again. Our players, coaches, and staff another tough year to get through, and they have shined once again.

And I want to thank our partners, new partners like Google, Dick's Sporting Goods, Amazon Prime Video, Wilson, new ball, new uniforms.

And then our WNBA Changemakers -- Nike, Deloitte, AT&T, and Google. And Google is the presenting partner of the WNBA playoffs. A quick shout-out to YouTube TV for being the presenting partner of the Finals. You see that behind me.

Recall our tag line for the 25th season was, "Count it." Well, I hope you agree that the WNBA continued to count it this season. We delivered our most watched season since 2008 for our television partners ABC, CBS, ESPN and ESPN 2 with viewership up 51% over last year. That was after we were one of the only sports leagues with double-digit viewership increases last year during the beginning of the pandemic.



And recall that one of our games this year in the back half of the season peaked at almost 1.6 million viewers. So we saw record growth with a 50% increase over last year from our WNBA merchandise. We set records for our social media engagement, as we know we have a more digital native fan coming into our league. We had 135 million video views, 14.5 million actions, and grew our League Pass subscriber base significantly.

Playoffs this year, up 78% versus 2020 and 54% versus 2019. That's all to say the league has come a long way since inception, and I know some of you have been with us along the way, but we still have a long way to go. But I'm excited, I'm optimistic about the future.

We're in the middle of a five-year business transformation plan, and we have several key places we're going to invest as we go forward. First is investing in our digital product transformation to bring fans closer to our game on their devices. You don't see any sport today where a fan doesn't have a second screen in front of them while they're watching either live or even at home. So that's kind of our first focus.

Second is growing the WNBA footprint and giving the consumer more touch points with the WNBA brand. That's really important to me as we think about our new events, think about our merch, think about collaborations. And down the road, yes, I know you're going to ask, growing the size with additional WNBA teams.

Third, we'll continue to uphold the foundation of the game while also amplifying the players' voices around social impact, diversity, equity, and inclusion, and it's really important to us that the players kept their strong social justice voice this year through the actions and activities of our Social Justice Council, and I'm sure you'll have questions on that as well.

As we look ahead, we'll continue our data capture process for various markets around for the potential for additional WNBA teams because, as I've said, expansion is on the horizon.

We also know there's a lot of healthy discussion, especially this time of year, about the playoff format, specifically around the single-game elimination. We've been discussing this at our competition meetings, talking to different stakeholders, and we are looking at finalizing a decision on updates to the playoff format at our upcoming postseason meetings.

Finally, because I know you're going to ask about this, with Game 2 set to take place here in the Pacific time zone on Wednesday and Game 3 scheduled for Friday in the

Central time zone, we will arrange and cover the cost of a charter flight for both teams to Chicago between Game 2 and 3. As you know, we did this in 2019 on a west-to-east with no rest days in between. We have that same pattern this year in the Finals, so that's something that I know is important to our players and the player health and safety.

So I hope everyone enjoys this amazing athleticism and competitiveness. The 25th will surely be one to remember, and I leave you with this: As I've been reflecting on my little over two years here at the league, the state of the league is strong, and I don't think it's ever been stronger, and it's because of the players. It's because of your coverage. It's because I think the movement and the momentum for women's sports and the WNBA players are stepping up and leading.

With that, I'm happy to take your questions.

Q. Commissioner Engelbert, you mentioned the playoffs and that's being discussed. Can you give us any sense of what you think may be the format you guys are looking at? I know it's been talked a lot about in the last couple of months, the idea of maybe keeping part of this format but going back to series. Do you have anything more firm on that?

CATHY ENGELBERT: I think it's great that there's so much discussion about the playoff format, and I think it was so exciting this year to have these single-elimination games, have some underdogs make it into the WNBA Finals. From that perspective -- and we see there's other single elimination like the Wild Card games in baseball, like obviously the NCAA March Madness tournaments. So it's exciting. Single-elimination games are exciting.

So we're looking at that, whether we would retain first/second round single elimination. Would one of those go to a three-game series? Would we only go to a three-game series and then go into our semis and finals?

What I didn't realize because this has been studied for a long time, 2016 is when it changed to the current format. I'm sure whatever we change it to in the next three to five years, we'll be looking at it again because there's pros and cons to every different playoff format.

So we want to be very thoughtful about what we do. We've been meeting with our competition committee. We had a subcommittee around the format that Bethany Donaphin, the head of League Operations, has been leading. So we're getting a lot of input and feedback. Again, it's not as easy as just changing the format because when you add games, if you add a three-game series, you're adding a significant amount of games, and there's a lot of logistics to

doing that and broadcast windows and arena dates and things like that.

We're going to be very thoughtful about it, but we've been having significant discussions since coming off of last offseason, and I think we'll be in a position to make a decision whether we'll stay with the current format or change it over the course of the next few months.

Q. When you mentioned arena issues with the playoffs in particular, obviously having to relocate games in the playoffs isn't a new thing to the WNBA. Phoenix, in particular, here had two of them. Is there something you feel the league can proactively do to help reduce or completely eliminate those issues happening in future seasons?

CATHY ENGELBERT: It's a good question. There's always a balance for these arena operators, and we, the league, don't control them, by the way. We do try to get the playoff dates and hold dates and arena hold dates out. You're asking 12 teams to hold a lot of dates, 9 to 12 months in advance. Some of these concert dates have been booked for three, four years.

COVID disrupted a lot of that. But as you mentioned, it's not a new issue for the WNBA and something we need to work on. We will work on it in the offseason, I assure you. But if we change the playoff format or expand it in any way, we're asking for more arena dates.

Again, the momentum in the league is so important to that part of the story because the more people we can put in seats, the more we can sell out arenas. You saw there was a record number here -- maybe not a record number, but 12,000 or so here the other night on Wednesday, and then in Vegas a record number for Mandalay Bay for Michelob ULTRA Arena.

Again, the more fans we can get in seats and the more we can work on this transformation, I think the less arena operators will make those tough decisions whether to put something in place with a window held 9 to 12 months in advance.

Again, an issue that's not easy to solve, but certainly one that will be solved by the growing fan base of the WNBA.

Q. You talked about the viewership growing over this last year specifically, and we've seen ESPN, even in this series, some of the games are not on the main channel. So I wonder for the league what the priority is going to be in these broadcast partnerships and ensuring the games are broadcast on the main channels that these partnerships exist with?

CATHY ENGELBERT: First, we're thrilled to have an ABC window today on a Sunday. Again, in a very crowded sports landscape as we're in right now with MLB playoffs, with NFL having kicked off, with the NBA soon to tip-off, NHL already playing. So we're trying to balance that all. Obviously, it's up to our broadcast partners broadly defined, including ESPN and others, but we're thrilled to have ABC. We'll have ESPN Wednesday night. Would we like everything on ABC or ESPN? Sure. So we'll work going forward with our broadcast partners on that.

Here's something where it is a supply-and-demand thing. If we can draw in more fans, draw in more viewers, there won't be a question as to which network we'll be shown on because we'll be the leader around that.

That's why it's still important to tell the stories, to build on the momentum, to get more fans watching us. I got a report the other day, we have 31 million fans following the WNBA. We've got to get them in an arena, and we've got to get them watching on our broadcast.

Q. Congratulations on the season, Cathy. Just to kind of follow up as far as the TV situation, will it ever expand to maybe 2 1/2 hours? I know we've got a two-hour window, but it's in and out, and we don't seem to see the kind of highlights, especially after unbelievable games that we've had in the semifinals. ESPN 2 for a final Game 5, as you said, we've got to be able to get in with partners where we can. But will it expand time-wise also, also getting more highlights in SportsCenter continuing?

CATHY ENGELBERT: The exposure this league gets is so important to broaden the fan base so, again, a broadcaster doesn't have to make a decision on what sport to put on their highlights, that the WNBA will be there.

I've actually been thrilled with the exposure that the WNBA and the players have gotten this year -- cover of Sports Illustrated, cover of SLAM magazine, Candace Parker and the Adidas campaign, Sue Bird and CarMax, Sabrina [Ionescu] and State Farm, Chiney [Ogwumike] on DoorDash. These are all signs and signals that we're on our way up, we're getting more exposure. We've got to drive that viewership up.

We had a great year, coming off of a decent year last year, but we have to drive it to higher levels so that, when these broadcasters are making decisions of where to put us or to put us in the top ten SportsCenter or whatever it is, that's a natural because everybody's talking about the WNBA.

That Game 5 the other night was epic, there's no doubt

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

about it. It got a lot of coverage, and it got a lot of social media, and we've got to get it more on traditional broadcasts as well.

Q. I was just curious if you had any more specifics on expansion talks and any insights you could bring us about what factors you were looking at, possible timeline, and where that is in the process right now?

CATHY ENGELBERT: It's an active data analysis that we're doing today, so I just had a meeting readout on it this past week about different cities, some of the metrics that you look at are D1 college basketball, how popular it is, viewership of current WNBA games in those markets that don't have a WNBA team, merch sales in that market.

So there's a myriad of probably 15 or so metrics that we're looking at to determine whether a market or city could be good. Then obviously you have to evaluate what ownership groups would step forward and support the team because the owners are a very important cog in this whole thing around picking cities to expand in.

So those are all the things -- again, timeline. I think in my state of the league at the beginning of the season, I talked about that time next year we'd be talking about a little more details on the plan. So I think I would stick with that into the spring and summer next year and into the 2022 season we'll be sharing more.

The data looks like it's going to read out some interesting information for us to start having exploratory discussions with certain cities and make sure that we can find great ownership groups to support a WNBA team and great fan bases. So that's why I think looking at how those cities are already supporting the WNBA through whether it's viewership, merch sales or other things, or whether they're supporting women's sports or women's college basketball are great indicators of how it would get supported if a WNBA team were to go in that market.

Q. You touched on the Social Justice Council at the beginning, and I just wanted to kind of go back to that real quick. What are some of the things that you're most proud of that have come from that already? What do you see as being the next step for that group moving forward?

CATHY ENGELBERT: Just to remind everyone, our Social Justice Council which came out of the events of last year has continued their work very fervently this year, I may add, on three pillars. One is health inequities, particularly in communities of color, one is LGBTQ+ advocacy, and the third and where we've spent a lot of time is voting rights and civic engagement.

I'm proud of the work we've been doing in all three, but the voting rights and civic engagement and what we just did with Rock the Vote and some of the activities, again, that our team has led. I've said all along the social justice work of the WNBA is player-led, league facilitated and amplified. So the demands of the season, I think, obviously curtailed a little bit of what we got done just in the last couple months because coming off the Olympic break, the competition was really fierce, but we've continued to have meetings and trainings and bringing together social justice leaders.

I think that's probably what I'm most proud of -- these players command other social justice leaders in society to actually come talk to them about their strong voices and what change they want to see, and that's probably what I'm most proud of.

Q. You were here for the Commissioner's Cup. What's your evaluation of how that worked and how you look at the Commissioner's Cup going forward? And what do you think the message that neither of the teams in the Commissioner's Cup are here for the Finals in terms of the parity and strength in the league?

CATHY ENGELBERT: I'll address the latter first. I think it's a great sign and signal to have parity in the league and not have one team dominate both the Commissioner's Cup play leading into the championship and the WNBA playoffs into the Finals. So I think it's a good sign and signal.

One of the reasons we wanted to do this was to build more rivalries, build competition, have a little conference rivalries that we don't see when we get to our playoff format. So I'd say very successful on all those points.

Whenever you're trying to build an asset, a special competition, a new competition, it probably takes a couple years for fans to understand, for media to understand it, everyone understand it. I think once we paid out the player prize pool this year, the players really understand it now and how important it is to the competition, how important it is to the first half of the season and giving meaning to the regular season. So I think those are all positives. And we did it like with limited fans in the first half of the season.

So I think as we get into 2022 and hopefully start to fill our arenas again, I think we'll do a lot more fan interaction, fan engagement, engagement with our social justice activities. Those are the things that I think you'll see us tweak next year.

But the competition itself I think was highly competitive running into that last weekend before the Olympic break.

Then I think the players really understand it now. Hopefully over time the fans will really see this as an opportunity to build those rivalries and those household names.

And thanks for hosting, Phoenix. Great to be back here.

Q. You mentioned the chartering between games 2 and 3. I know Joe Tsai has mentioned on social media he's trying to figure a way to help the league out to get charters during the season. Is there any discussion on that or just him chatting on social media?

CATHY ENGELBERT: Obviously, as you know, it's something I've been talking about and thinking about since I joined the league and talking with airline executives since I joined the WNBA, based on my relationships from my prior job.

So it is an important issue. It's one though we just had gotten done collective bargaining in early 2020 that obviously based on an economic model was not supported at the time. That's why we're doing the business transformation. We're making a lot of progress. There's nobody that wants this more than me, but we've got to chip away at this transformation, build more viewership, build more sponsors, build more media rights deals, and there will be a point in time when we can have an economic model for it.

That's what I was hired for, not just that, but just to transform the league. Hopefully, that will be something we can do long term. I think some of our owners have been helpful in thinking about how to do it and how to approach airline executives and see. But as you know, charter travel, again, requires enormous amount of investment by someone. So obviously, we're totally open to partners and sponsors stepping up to help us with this issue, but certainly for these playoffs, funding when there's a west to east with no real days in between other than a travel day, it's important that we fund it.

It's something we continue to talk about with our ownership as well as with the players, and I think the players understand the economic model has to transform and we have to get better media deals and better sponsorship deals in order to do that. That's all that we're working towards, and all the momentum I talked about and the state of the league being strong is all pointing in that direction. It's just not something imminently that we have an economic model for but we're working on it.

Q. Cathy, you have to work with your rightsholder partners, ESPN when it comes to Finals scheduling. They obviously have contractual commitments when it comes to sports. At the moment there are two

potential finals-clinching games airing on ESPN 2. As a follow-up to the question you were asked earlier, I wanted to ask you specifically, did the league specifically ask or advocate to ESPN executives to put all games on ABC and ESPN? Did the league make that ask, and then ESPN obviously made its scheduling decision?

CATHY ENGELBERT: Yeah, we always ask for the best windows we can possibly get. Remember, it's about a year ago that you start having those conversations about what windows would be available. Some sports are already ahead of us with locking in their windows, some are behind us. So we try to balance it all and get the best windows we can get.

That's the reality of the situation we're in with our viewership numbers. Again, if we were at 17 million viewers, we'd be in a different place, and we'd be on ABC and ESPN for every game.

Again, that's why the transformation is so important, bringing in more fans, getting more fans to view our games, building the household names and the rivalries so the compelling content that is the WNBA game, people come and watch. I assure you I got a couple messages from people who hadn't really watched the WNBA until Friday night, and they said, wow, I'm a huge WNBA fan now.

We know when we bring in, draw in that fan, they're going to say, and we just need more tactics to do it. I think that's the reality of the world we live in in women's sports, and I think the -- and I talked a lot, and I put out an opinion piece on the undervaluation of women's sports in the media. We're just a microcosm for broader society, and we need to fix it. You saw the NCAA report about the undervaluation of the women's March Madness tournament from a media perspective.

So we just need to keep chipping away. We always ask for the best windows, but we do understand there are contractual commitments that may predate the way our year works out. This year was an unusual year because of the Olympic year. Next year we'll have the FIBA World Cup on the back half of our season, so we'll have the playoffs in a different footprint. So that inconsistency isn't always ideal for us either.

Those are all things we continue to work on and monitor to make sure we have the best communication around the windows that we want.

Q. Something I've been following closely and something you actually just mentioned, amid this 25th



season, is the state of WNBA rivalries. And sort of how having these healthy rivalries will impact the growth of the league moving forward. A lot of the reporting that I've collected suggests that sometimes the single-elimination games in the playoffs maybe prevent rivalries from developing. I'm curious as to what you believe needs to be done, aside from the new addition of the Commissioner's Cup, that you believe maybe can foster and germinate some of these rivalries moving forward.

CATHY ENGELBERT: It's something, obviously, as part of our strategy, we're working on how to evolve the consumer of our game, where they're consuming our game, how we draw in the viewers to the compelling game that's on the court, and how you build those rivalries. I'm a big studier of history of sport, and rivalries put leagues on the map and grow fandom and grow fan bases.

When you're only in 12 U.S. cities, part of that also is what we're trying to really be thoughtful about how we grow our fandom, even outside the 12 cities, so we can draw in a broader viewer because we do quite well in the cities we're in on viewership, but when you go outside, they might not know that a WNBA market is in their region, for example.

So I think there's some tactics we can work on to draw that rivalry interest higher. One of those was to introduce a new special competition. One of those is to have household names compete against each other, like we have here in the WNBA Finals with Diana Taurasi and Candace Parker, two of the W25 that just got voted on by the media and by basketball pioneers, and then the fan vote on the GOAT.

So building that and telling those stories and having you guys amplify those stories is an important part of it. Yeah, we'll continue to chip away at other ideas. If anyone has ideas, always happy to take input on how to build those rivalries further. I think we're off to a great start with the Commissioner's Cup building some intra-conference rivalries now that players know what it really means to play those first ten games against your intra-conference rival.

I think we've got some budding rivalries happen naturally because of our playoffs, but understand your question on single elimination. Again, we just had two great series, a five-game series in the semifinals. The parity in the league is also helping us tell the stories more broadly about many of our teams who have a chance to compete for both the Commissioner's Cup championship and the WNBA championship, which is something our players vie for every year when they start in training camp.

So a lot to unpack there, I know, but it's part of what we

think about every day at the league as to how to build this so there's compelling content that people want to watch because that sets everything into motion around broadcast windows, around arena availability, around our ability to get better media rights, fee deals, better sponsorships.

I will tell you, as we look at our fan data, we're growing. We skew younger, more diverse, more women. So for sponsors who are interested in that kind of fan base, we're it. So that's the story we're trying to tell. One of the most inclusive leagues in sports is also something we're very proud of and we use to help develop our fan base so that we can drive those rivalries into a fan's mind so they want to tune in.

Q. Just wondering what you thought of the WNBA Twitter ad and the support Twitter's had for the WNBA.

CATHY ENGELBERT: Love the WNBA Twitter ad. The photo shoot, I saw you on Instagram with the photo shoot. Thanks for your support on that with some legends. You had the opportunity to meet our WNBA legends. We'll have some of the W25 here to honor during this Game 1 of the WNBA Finals, and hopefully that will get amplified through that Twitter campaign as well. Twitter's been a great partner for the league this year and continues to amplify and grow, help us grow our fan base.

So thanks, Pepper, for all you're doing for the league. I know you're still young, but you have a huge impact, I think, as a role model for young boys and girls to follow this league at a young age and make sure that their first entry into the world of basketball is through the WNBA.

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