

WNBA Draft

Monday, April 11, 2022

Commissioner Cathy Engelbert



CATHY ENGELBERT: Good evening, everyone. It's great to see you. Thanks for being here. This is our first live draft, as you know, since 2019, and I wasn't the commissioner then. This is my first as commissioner, so it's especially special to me, and being here at Spring Studios with all of you.

Earlier today, we had some fun with the draft prospects. We were at the Empire State Building, which will be lit up in orange tonight for the WNBA Draft. They had so much fun, and you'll see it lit up in orange when you leave our draft tonight.

I also really want to thank you all. Your continuing coverage of the WNBA and these amazing players is so important to me personally as we try to grow the league. So thank you for that.

But I did want to start by saying that we continue to be working diligently on bringing Brittney Griner home. This is an unimaginable situation for BG to be in. She continues to have our full support. She's just been such a great person in the league that I can't be any more real about the situation she's in. Certainly we're trying everything we can, every angle, working through with her legal representation, her agent, elected leaders, the administration, just everybody in our ecosystem to try to find ways to get her home safely and as quickly as we can. So thank you all for that.

One thing I wanted to make clear is that in the meantime while we're working very hard to get Brittney home, we will have a league-wide philanthropic initiative led by the Phoenix Mercury, honoring BG and modeled after her work. That will take place in all 12 WNBA markets as we lead up to tip-off in less than a month. BG founded an organization in 2016 called BG's Heart and Sole Shoe Drive. The activations that we will do, the Mercury and the league, are intended to remind us of BG's spirit of giving and do the work she'd be doing if she were here, and certainly the work she will join us in when she returns. More to come on that and you'll see some activations as we tip our season around that.

Tonight we're here to welcome the next phase of stars into the league. What a time to be joining the W. There's so much momentum for women's sports right now. I couldn't be prouder of all that we've been able to do, even with the challenges of two very challenging pandemic years for everyone involved. From our historic capital raise of \$75 million, adding new WNBA Changemaker partners like Google and U.S. Bank, who joined our inaugural WNBA Changemakers, AT&T, Deloitte and Nike, and our pioneering new in-season competition. We'll have our second year of that. We now have a presenting sponsor for that in Coinbase. We're excited about that. And certainly the continued great work of our player-led but league-facilitated social justice council in conjunction with the WNBPA and the WNBA.

If you didn't get it, the future of the WNBA is bright, and I feel really confident. But what I'm most proud of, quite frankly, is the opportunities we've been creating not only to increase pay for the players but also provide several choices for them to choose from for what they're going to do post their career. A lot you have heard me say I took this job to help them post their career, learning about things while they're also playing basketball.

This past offseason we had approximately 30 players take part in paid league and team marketing deals. We know that number will continue to grow. There are internships with our corporate partners available. And we realize that the tenure of a professional athlete in any sport, by the way, is not very long, given what they do physically, the mental strain. So players will always want to continue to hone their skills in different ways, no matter how much we pay them. But we are also creating an economic model for the league where we're aiming for players to prioritize the WNBA.

And a little more on that economic model, because I'd love to talk to you about that. You know we're in the midst of a transformation around our fan experience, our digital footprint, our League Pass, merch, globalizing the game. Disrupting the valuation model for women's sports, as you know, has been a big focus of mine, and making it easier to be a fan.



We're looking at how to change every fan touchpoint. Stepping back, what do fans like? Watching, winning, repping and cheering. We want to communicate better on where to watch, on linear broadcasts and our League Pass. We want to communicate better where to win, through now ESPN Fantasy. Thank you, ESPN -- that is going to be fun -- and our authorized gaming app partners, as well. Repping, as in purchasing merchandise and being able to get it. And when fans want to literally cheer, knowing where and how to buy tickets and attend games. So that's a lot of what we're focused on. We're thinking through innovation, wearables, optical tracking, sports betting. You saw the ESPN Fantasy game announcement. Introducing the WNBA to relevant consumer touchpoints. Whether it's fashion, health care and culture, you'll see us do some things this year into next around that.

Again, always strengthening internally -- our team, hiring people with capabilities and specializations to really help our teams and help our league grow. That's what I've been focused on and my team has been focused on. So all that to say, we're excited for what's ahead, taking advantage of this potential and momentum. We do ask for a little patience, as we have gone through these two challenging pandemic years. It does take some time to get to where we want to be, but we're definitely headed in the right direction.

I can't be any more pleased with where we are. State of the league is strong. I hope you all continue to join me in lifting the WNBA, because I think a rising tide lifts all boats. We've been leading and these players have done amazing things on the court, in their communities, social justice. They just continue to amaze me. I think you're going to see an amazing -- now that I've spent some time with them live, an amazing crop of new players come in and really step up and lead.

Thank you again for all your coverage, in good times and in tough times. I know it's not always easy. We could not be doing what we're doing without you all and your coverage and the momentum that you're helping us take advantage of.

With that, 2022 Draft is upon us in an hour or so. I'd love to take your questions.

Q. This is your first live Draft; are you excited, nervous? All of the above? What's the feeling going into doing this live instead of just on Zoom?

CATHY ENGELBERT: Totally excited. There's no nervousness because I get to see and shake hands and hug these players who, as I call them to have them attend the Draft tonight, you hear things like, You're making my

dreams come true, and you hear things like, It's an honor. It's a real honor. And these are young women who have had great college careers for the most part. I'm just really looking forward to seeing them up on a podium rather than through a Zoom. I'm really excited for that.

Q. You talked about the state of the league in a sense. Every year we talk about expansion. Less than half of the draftees last year were still on rosters, which is not a good sign, just because there are so few spots and it's the toughest league to make. Is this something you're looking at potentially down the road either expanding more teams or expanding the rosters to get more players involved? Because it's probably not great that only 14 or a dozen players out of 36 tonight might be on the roster at the end of a season.

CATHY ENGELBERT: Yeah, it's a great question. I think the great conversation to be having is about expansion of the number of teams. When you're only in 12 cities in a country of our size and scale with a global fan base like we have, we do need to be in more cities. I mentioned we were doing an exercise around, kind of a whole data analytics exercise, looking at 100 cities, looking at all of these metrics, which ones would be the best cities to start thinking through to have a WNBA expansion franchise.

I think the conversation about the number of players making teams is also one showing the depth of the quality of the play in this league. I mean, it's amazing. So it is hard to make a team, there's no doubt about it.

I think as we think through and get through these past two COVID years, get into our 26th season this year, I think you'll be hearing more about this from us. I think it'll be a conversation we'll be having over the course of the season. As we get into hopefully having much bigger fan bases, our owners feeling more confident. We want to have any new owners coming into the league faced with the potential of a successful franchise.

We're still building that economic model I've been talking about, but we'll definitely be talking about this more this summer. I know the challenges of the rosters, but I think it just shows the depth and quality of the league. And look at the popularity of this game at the NCAA level. Saw the viewership for the Final Four. I was in Minneapolis. The fans there were so amazing, no matter what team they were rooting for.

I think that's coming from a position of strength, coming off two pandemic years. I wish I could be in a different position to talk about it, but we're going to get there and it's definitely in our future.



Q. You mentioned again your first Draft live and this is really a culmination of the whole weekend, the prospects being in New York. Curious what the weekend was like for you. Did you get a chance to talk with the prospects and what was the reception like in New York?

CATHY ENGELBERT: Yeah, they're fired up, I will tell you. They seem like such a great group that is already getting to know each other because they played against each other. Probably some of them even before they went to their college or university.

But I saw a lot of camaraderie already building. Now, they'll all get drafted to different teams, so it'll be interesting. I can see a lot of really powerhouse marketing storytelling opportunities amongst this group. They really have personality. I spent some time with them this morning at the Empire State Building. I spent some time with them just now. I spent some time with their parents and caregivers a little earlier at a brunch. The parents are all excited.

Everybody doesn't really know what's going to happen next and where they'll be drafted and what city they'll be in, and obviously they'll be in training camp soon. They just came off their NCAA season, then training camp and then the tip of the season, again, less than a month away.

I'm really excited for this group, and those that aren't here that will be drafted, because there will be some that get drafted that will make teams. I'll be excited to get out to games starting May 6th.

Q. We had a chance to talk with a few of the draftees a little bit earlier and they were all very high on the state of women's sports and where they see that going. You've alluded to some of that already, particularly with the W and the \$75 million funding round, the sponsorship of State Farm. Would you talk about the momentum you see building from a commercial partner perspective, both for the W and with women's sports, kind of taking a holistic view?

CATHY ENGELBERT: Yeah, it's a really good question. Coming off our successful collective bargaining agreement, you have long-term labor peace, and we put in the WNBA Changemaker program, as well as other sponsors like State Farm and others that aren't Changemakers that have signed on with us. But signing Google and Amazon in the same week last summer was great, and now signing U.S. Bank that we just announced a couple weeks ago.

It is really important to find companies who share the values. The first thing I ask companies when I meet with

them is what are your business issues that you're trying to solve? So that usually, it's like, we're trying to find a more diverse consumer -- check, our fan base is very diverse. We are trying to get more women -- check, we're a women's professional sports league, longest standing. So that's the momentum we're taking advantage of.

I do think we're lifting all of women's sports and leading, and other women's sports lift us. Obviously, coming off a successful NCAA season helps us as well, on the sponsorship they saw. Walking around Minneapolis, it was amazing. I hadn't seen that before at Final Fours on the women's side.

I think the narrative around supporting women's sports, lifting women, because the one thing that resonates with everyone is like, these are professional working women. So company X, you're supporting, you have a whole platform around diversity, equity and inclusion in your company. This is a way for you to show that workforce, that talent you have that you're investing in women by investing in a professional sports league, because many of them are already invested in a men's team or leagues. We know, obviously, the statistics there about how much money goes into the men's game.

I think that's the momentum we're capitalizing on because so many companies share the values and share wanting to support the diversity of a league like the WNBA.

Q. I wanted to come back to the capital raise. I know you've talked about even today what that would look like as far as fan activations in the markets. Can you tell us a little more what the plans are either this season or moving forward with some of that capital raise and how it will impact the teams and how they can engage with their fan bases?

CATHY ENGELBERT: Yeah, so one area is digital transformation. I come from a long career in business where my firm worked on a lot of digital transformation. So think about where our fans first interface with us, our dot com, our app, our League Pass. All of that is being looked at, spending money on making sure that we have the best fan experience.

Innovation, as I mentioned. If we could get an optical tracking and wearables and combine those and integrate them into the broadcast and the second-screen experience -- I don't have my phone up here, but you think every time you see a fan base on television in an arena or stadium, what are they doing? They're also holding that second screen. Innovating, especially as we draw in a younger fan, a digital native fan, a Gen Z fan, they want that experience too.



Things like trying to be more culturally relevant, trying to make sure our stories are told, trying to make sure there are documentaries on WNBA players and teams. Obviously, we put the half a million prize pool up for the Commissioner's Cup last year, and continuing to find ways to pay the players through league and team marketing agreements.

And then a fair amount will go into hiring good people who can really market this league, sell this league, transform this league, both at the teams and at the league level. Human capital. When you do a capital raise, human capital, and I said this I think a month or two ago, human capital is an important part of that, too. We hadn't been able to hire all the capability we need. Now we're hiring engineers and digital experts and data analytics. That takes a while to build up that capability, and now we're able to accelerate that as part of the transformation.

Q. We know players have to go overseas to supplement their income. Do you foresee in the very near future a business model where individual owners can generate positive cash flow, have positive income statements and yet be able to pay the players the market rate so they don't have to go to Europe, so we can avoid a potential Griner situation?

CATHY ENGELBERT: Yeah, it's an excellent question. I think one of the narratives that the players have to go overseas is a little bit outdated actually, I think, and inaccurate. Everybody two years ago, including you all, hailed our progressive CBA, where we're giving a lot more opportunity to pay the players, and obviously we're building an economic model to support that even more so.

I think players have a lot of options. I think growing the game globally is also a (goal) of mine. So to the earlier question, too, growing the game globally is also part of the use of capital. When our players become more global and more global stars, and now only a few of them are and we're trying to build up more, so I never want to shut the door on the opportunity for players to either make more money or build their brand globally. I think that's how the NBA became such a global league. They've done such a great job, and now bringing in a lot of players outside the U.S. to play in the league. I want to globalize the nature of our rosters, as well.

I think the strength of the game globally is really important to me. So I don't want to say I don't want players to go overseas. Again, even our own prioritization rules that kick in in part next year and the following year do not do that for rookies in their first three years of play, because we want them to have opportunities if they don't get enough playing

time here.

And also the tenure of a professional athlete, I played two sports in college and feeling it in my knees these days, but the tenure of a professional athlete is actually relatively (short). Even in the WNBA it's less than six years on average. Now we have Sue Bird, who I call our Tom Brady, starting her 19th year. But again, it's not -- and players want to maximize the time that they play.

While absolutely we're going to give players option, we do want them to prioritize the W more. We are giving them more opportunities to make money in the offseason, that we will pay them and the teams will pay them. As you said, as teams really shore up both their balance sheet and income statements, they'll have the opportunities to do that. We have the opportunity to do that today and we have been doing that. We've been paying players this year to do marketing outside of them going overseas.

But players are still going want to play basketball. One thing I learned, and I didn't know this before I came into the league, they want to play basketball year-round. So, obviously, we're going to support them, but we're going to do as much as we can to give them a compensation package. A player can make up to \$650,000 now with all the compensation that we offer through bonuses, special competitions, league marketing deals, team marketing deals and then their base salary that you often report on.

But there are many other opportunities. This year we have a lot of examples of players who stayed in the U.S.. We have players who are now in coaching. We have players doing internships at corporations. We have players in broadcast, as you know, and a variety of other opportunities. A few players that are just doing marketing for the league in the offseason and getting paid for it.

Give us a couple more years for that to take hold and get a broader set of players, and I think you'll see a move. But we're never going to prevent a player from wanting to play basketball, because that's their craft. They're the best in the world at it. We want to support them and we want to support the growth of the game globally.

Look at the U.S. -- won the 3 x 3 gold medal this (past) year in the Olympics. That's a very popular sport globally, the most popular urban sport globally. So we want our players to play all formats, as well, and come back and play in our season and play hard and compete for that championship.

Q. I have two if I could. First is kind of a jumping off of what you were just talking about in terms of marketing agreements. I am wondering whether the

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

capital raise means you have more discretion to be able to make more of those marketing agreements. And then the other one, obviously expansion is so dependent on you have to have the right ownership group, you have to have a place to play, you have to have all these things in place. But there are of course other ways to expand opportunities, whether it's expanding rosters, whether it's the introduction of an injured list. In the NBA's case, the G League, which they grew over the last 10 to 15 years. 57 of the 60 players who were drafted in last year's NBA Draft are still with their original team, whether that's the team itself or the G League, and obviously it's fewer than half are going to be out of 2021 able to do that. Those are things the league can obviously do independent of expansion. Can you take me through what of those are realistic and when you think we could see them?

CATHY ENGELBERT: The latter part of the question is interesting to me because we are 25 years in. I would love to be 75 years in and have a very, very great development feeder into our system. Right now, that's the NCAA, and by the way, that's a great feeder system. But you're right, we don't have enough roster spots.

We'll look at all that kind of stuff as we get into phase 2, once we transform the league, get our economic model right, get our current owners in the right place who are working very hard and investing now. Coming off just our seasons the last couple years, and the capital raise, they're feeling really confident coming off the work we're doing around the valuation of women's sports assets. As I mentioned before, what that means is a patch on the uniform, a placement on the court, their digital signage around the arena, the media rights fee they get from a local regional sports network or we get for the entire league deal. So those are all things that are undergoing enormous change.

So as that economic model takes hold in a few more years, I feel very confident that we're going to be talking about the things that Howard just brought up. But again, we're not there today, and we don't want to burden the current owners or any new owners with a model that's not going to work for them. Because guess what, sports leagues have done that -- they've expanded in the hopes that they get the economics right. We're not going to jeopardize the momentum we have and the economic model we're actually building right before our eyes right now positively in order to accelerate anything like that.

But I realize there are challenges. I would love to have a development league longer term. That's why I'm so interested in this 3x3 format, as we see that take hold. You're going to ask me about AU (Athletes Unlimited), I

know. I think that was great competition this year and short term and something that keeps players in the U.S., as well. anything that grows the game of women's basketball and grows the names that are both playing in the W and those that may play in the W in the future that didn't make a roster in a certain year. I think you're going to see opportunities for that all around.

Your first question?

Q. It's been uncertain the number of players who can sign those --

CATHY ENGELBERT: Oh, the marketing deals. Yeah, so we have about --

Q. Are there more in light of the 75 million?

CATHY ENGELBERT: Yes, there will be more. We'll have, between the league and teams, I think I mentioned it's about 30. I think it's technically 29 under different levels of marketing agreements. Today we have flexibility in how many we pay, how much we pay. We have minimums that we have to meet under our collectively bargained league and team marketing dollars, and obviously the teams have to be careful. But teams can give other opportunities to players around internships. So can we.

I think if you put the whole package together, we're giving them more and more opportunities, whether it's in league marketing, whether it's in team marketing or whether it's in internships or broadcasting opportunities or coaching opportunities.

I think even some of the things we did around our diversity and coaching initiative. Early on when I came in, I never thought it would take hold. But today we've had an influx of so many coaches that were former WNBA players, now sitting on the bench leading teams as the head coach. I'm really proud about that.

More and more opportunities as players both during their career, but to set them up after their career, as well, which is very important to me.

Q. I've got a two-parter. I'm curious as to going forward how maybe this idea of roster expansion rather than team expansion could come into play when there is a new TV deal that you all negotiate? And the second part is I'm very curious about what your diversity in coaching initiative looked like and how that began?

CATHY ENGELBERT: Okay, I'll do roster expansion first. Again, I love having this conversation about roster

expansion. We did just have only two years ago collectively bargained where we stuck with the 12, but obviously opening up opportunities to pay players in other ways and to introduce bonus prize pools and things like that. I don't see that in the very near term, but as you said, if we are in a different economic model in a couple years because if I get my way and we disrupt the media rights fee model and we're able to afford that, we'll absolutely take a look at that. I think everything will be on the table in a couple years. In fact, I expect that.

But for today, I think we're going to stick with where we are. I think it's have a strategy, with our free agency rules now, very strategic around how you build a roster. I think GMs are really thinking about a lot strategically, both in the current term and medium term and long term, about how they're building a championship team. I think all of that roster expansion is great, but I also think that team expansion, because I want to get to more cities and build more fans, roster expansion really doesn't do that. It does provide opportunities for more individual players to come in the league, but it doesn't help us grow the league more longer term. So that's why I differentiate those two.

Then the second question?

Q. The second one was following up on the diversity in coaching.

CATHY ENGELBERT: The diversity in coaching initiative. What we did when I came in was we put together something that said you could add an additional coach on the bench in the WNBA, as long as it was a former WNBA player, as long as you had a former WNBA player on the bench. Never thinking that two years later we'd have the representation we now have, not only in the head coaching ranks but also down the bench of former WNBA players. I don't have the data off the top of my head, but it's been amazing. I think the owners, with every meeting we have with our owners, we talked about it for two years. The owners have stepped up, made decisions and put former WNBA players and diverse coaches in positions much quicker. It usually takes a while for a diversity, equity and inclusion initiative to take hold. In this case, it took hold very quickly. I give all the credit to our owners for stepping up and making decisions to get those former WNBA players on their bench, because so many players want to coach. They want to find opportunities.

Obviously, seeing Becky Hammon return to the league this year and coach the Aces is an amazing thing. But there are also many others. Tanisha (Wright) and Vickie (Johnson) last year. So many other coaches out there that I'm proud that have been put into this league initially and now have risen up to the head coaching ranks or the

assistant coaching ranks.

But more to come on that. Certainly, it's not one-dimensional, it's not one-and-done. We're going to keep pushing it and we're going to keep talking to our ownership groups because they are the ones that hire into these positions, and I think it's important they get the credit here.

Q. You mentioned Brittney, and I know this has been a really delicate and difficult situation. I just wondered if you can give us a sense of how you sort of navigated that between various constituencies, including the government, just what you've been able to do personally.

Then a very different question, coming off such a strong NCAA Tournament in a WNBA city, what areas did you see that there can continue to be this nexus between the college game and the WNBA, especially since we're going to be in another WNBA city next year?

CATHY ENGELBERT: Right, so let me address Brittney. Obviously, we're in a very complex geopolitical situation with Russia, Ukraine. This continues to be complex. Obviously, we're getting a ton of support from the government, from specialists. Her representation is able to visit with Brittney. We know she's safe. But we want to get her home.

It's just a very complex situation right now, and we're following the advice. There's not a day that goes by that we're not talking to someone who has views on what we've been doing and how we're moving forward.

I know we're all frustrated, but we do need to be patient. I know the players have been amazing at following the advice that they're getting and we're getting in order not to jeopardize her safety in any way. We just continue to follow that advice and continue to work on it.

I told the players, quite frankly, I used to tell my daughter when she was little and still now that she's in her 20s, I would go to the end of the earth to help you if you're ever in trouble. I say the same thing about Brittney Griner. It's really important to me that we get her home safely as soon as we possibly can, but it's a complex legal and political and diplomatic situation right now that we're working through.

I love this second question because one of the things when I came into the league I was like, what do we do to integrate from the success and the popularity, especially at some of these big programs like South Carolina, the champion this year, and Stanford last year, to integrate

those efforts and that popularity into the game. So being in Minnesota, and I just know the Minnesota Lynx fans are so amazing, just when the USAB Women's National Team had an exhibition, they packed the house for that exhibition. It was like maybe a half-hour or 45-minute exhibition. It was fun, and just seeing the fans come out. Now tonight is kind of the start of our integration with NCAA with these players that will be drafted into our league, and a lot of them went far into the March Madness tournament.

Also, I think I definitely saw a difference, hope you did, too, if you were there, in the way they were marketing themselves as the March Madness tournament with all the sponsorship, with what I call the event -- I forget what it was called over at the Convention Center, which I thought was fabulous, took some notes on that for some maybe WNBA integrations off that, as well.

I think there's enormous opportunity here to take these players, especially who are very popular in their states or in their markets, and bring in their fan base over to the WNBA. We're doing some work on the analytics of who were their fans, how do we make sure they come in and they become WNBA fans in the city in which that player gets drafted or for the team that player gets drafted. Doing a lot more work on that, which quite frankly wasn't happening in the past.

I'm hoping, again, coming off what was close to 5 million who watched that Final Four, that game on that Sunday night -- which, by the way, competed with the Grammys; I think it would have been even higher had there not been a big awards show on that night. Really lots of optimism and lots of thinking around how to integrate and get players who are popular at the college game, very popular and bring those fan bases in from the NCAA game.

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