

# WNBA Draft

Monday, April 10, 2023

Cathy Engelbert



CATHY ENGELBERT: It's great to be here. This is, I think, one of the most exciting nights on the WNBA calendar. We're going to watch a group of extremely talented athletes really get ready to start the next phase of their basketball journey. I've had such fun with them today and also had fun calling them all.

When you call them, by the way, this is the best part about my job. You know their reaction, like I'm inviting you for the first time live to the WNBA Draft in New York City and this is my dream come true and things like that and thank you and I'm so honored and I can't wait to be there.

Obviously as you know, we're doing a lot to prepare for the 2023 season, our 27th. A lot to be excited about. Nothing more important than having Brittney Griner back here, home safely with her family and preparing to come back on the court to the game that we all know that she loves. We're excited for that.

Also, we're globalizing our game. You saw we're going to have our upcoming first-ever preseason game in Canada on May 13th. Then we're seeing new faces, star players in new places, exciting free agency period, which I know you've all written about. We've expanded the regular season to 40 games. So really a lot to look forward to.

You might have seen today our little announcement about expanding our charter flight program for players this season. I talk a lot to you all and this group about continuing to expand the economic model for this league. We raised that capital. We're deploying key initiatives, which I'll talk about in a moment. As I've said from day one, we've been working hard to then return that to the player experience.

This season, as announced earlier today, we will have charter flights for all postseason games. Remember now we have a best-of-three first round, a best-of-five semifinal round and obviously our best-of-five WNBA Finals. We'll also have, again, charters for the WNBA Commissioner's Cup and for the back-to-backs this year requiring air travel during the regular season. This is something we've been working on since, I want to say since I've come to the league, but certainly hard in the last year.

You know long-term growth is the way you fund things like this, and it's really important. Obviously, in 2019 we approved a couple charters when they were needed on West-to-East playoff games, and last year we had charters for the WNBA Finals and Commissioner's Cup. It was always our goal to broaden the program. I feel good about how we're growing the league, and when you grow the league, you grow revenue, which drops to the bottom line and you can fund things like that. We'll look to do more in the future.

As you know, sponsors and media companies all play a role in this, as well. It's not just coming up with money for one year, like a lot of people are talking about. This is creating a sustainable model and a charter program that essentially can continue in perpetuity.

We will fund this at the league level -- I know that was a question -- because I feel good about where we are and the strength coming out of two tough COVID years into last year, a record-breaking year for us with viewership and consumption and the most-consumed season in 20 years.

The transformation of the league is happening, and it's working. I know a lot of people want instantaneous improvement and change. I want that, too, but as I know growing a business does take patience and time, and the transformation is happening.

We also always look for other ways to pay the players more, like the Commissioner's Cup bonus pool, like the playoff bonus pool, which we upped by 50 percent last year, expanded player marketing agreements this year, where we have had over 100 opportunities available for players who want to co-market with the league to activate with our league partners and during league events. Some of you that covered the NBA All-Star saw a big presence for some of our PMA players there. That is our acronym for Player Marketing Agreements. This all helps to grow their personal brands. We had Kelsey Mitchell here earlier when we lit the Empire State Building orange -- make sure you see that tonight. And then we have DiDi Richards here, who is walking the Orange Carpet with the draftees.

This is all to help build their personal brands. They'll get



more personal endorsements. You'll see more WNBA players in ads of our partners, like a State Farm, a CarMax, AT&T and others. You all feel it, I know, but the great momentum around women's sports right now, we're looking to build on that.

Obviously, the NCAA viewership, at the peak over 12 million and 9.9 million average viewers. This is great.

As I've mentioned before, the regular season expanded to 40 games. That creates more touch points for fans, which is great. The chance for more league growth. In addition to the ESPN network broadcast, we will have nine games on ABC this year. And for the first time ever, the WNBA All-Star Game will be broadcast on ABC in primetime, from Las Vegas.

We're also going to have four national games on CBS television network. That'll be an all-time high for us. Again, really pleased that our corporate partners and media partners are really stepping up for the W.

As for expansion, because I know that's on your list during the Q&A, we are progressing nicely. Earlier this year, you probably saw I visited Portland. Next month, I'll be in Toronto. My plan is to continue to visit a few more markets in the coming months with groups that we're having discussions with, with potential ownership groups that have showed interest. I feel really good.

I'm glad we didn't rush into this coming off of those two COVID years and the Olympic year because I think we're all going to benefit from it, and certainly the new expansion teams will benefit from not rushing into something before we were ready.

Again, opening tip, the first weekend of games will be presented by CarMax. They're becoming a great partner of the WNBA. Then we have our WNBA Changemakers, AT&T, Deloitte, Google and U.S. Bank, are all activating around a lot of our tentpole events this year. Off a record amount of sponsors last year, we are adding more this year. The growth we're seeing as a league, I'm really pleased with.

I always like to talk about the work the players are doing. I call it player led and league facilitated in the social justice space. The Social Justice Council in 2023, a player-led council, will concentrate their efforts on women's health, maternal health, a focus on advocacy in the Black, brown, LGBTQ+ communities. So always proud of what our players do. They're never one and done. They always want to focus on something where they're really going to make a difference in the communities in which they live and work.

You might have seen a little bit of news around that preseason game I talked about earlier in Canada between the Minnesota Lynx and the Chicago Sky. First time since 2011 we'll play an international game and the first time ever in Canada. We're expecting a sold-out crowd for a preseason game. Think of that, over 20,000 people.

From what I understand, tickets sold out in minutes. We released them in two different tranches. And we know fans around the world are hungry for WNBA games. We currently air games in 207 countries. I didn't even know that, by the way, when I came into the league. 207 countries and territories. We see this as a real way to globalize the game and start to figure out how -- because we know WNBA players are ambassadors for the games around the world. I've been to the State Department, where they've talked to me about one of the most requested places, as they liaise with embassies around the world, is women's basketball and bringing these role models into these countries that can help get their game where we have it here in the United States with the WNBA and our college game.

You'll also see this year that we've deployed some capital against an important area, which was fan engagement and our fan experience and our digital capabilities, which quite frankly needed to be totally transformed. You'll see a revamped WNBA App and WNBA.com, which we'll unveil ahead of the tip of the season later in May. This is all tailored for a clearer, cleaner improved design, all tailored with the fan in mind.

We got input from fans. We really took that input, game highlights to behind-the-scenes videos and content. We all know content is king. Rich visuals, enhanced storytelling. Again, this is all to bring fans closer to the court. We're only in 12 cities. We need to bring all of our fans. We have cities where we have more fans than maybe our W cities that really want to consume our content. So bringing them closer and having them follow, again, what we hope we're building into these household names of the WNBA players.

Also new this year on the court will be the Coach's Challenge, which affords coaches the ability to trigger instant replay review on a limited set of matters. Think about what the NBA has around the Coach's Challenge. That'll give our coaches more of a voice in further engagement. I think it will help the pace of the game because now a coach will have to trigger a challenge. That will be great to institute this year and something that came out of our Competition Committee meetings in the fall.

In closing, I really want to thank you for your continued



coverage. Really the work you do does mean a lot to me personally because we couldn't do it without you all.

Now that COVID is largely behind us, I say that with an asterisk, we are going to be announcing some modifications to the league's media policies, which will include an improved, more efficient postgame interview format through which all players must be made available to media, in addition to new, required elements for pregame and the game-day shootaround media sessions.

Whereas in recent sessions, in-person Zoom postgame press conferences featuring a team's head coach and key player occurred at the same time as the locker room access, now they'll run consecutively. The availability periods will run consecutively rather than concurrently. So now following the conclusion of the postgame press conference, any additional players requested for in-person media will be required to be available for interviews either in the interview room outside the locker room or in a suitable location arranged by the team.

What we're trying to do, now that we've come off the quirky COVID period, is modernize and streamline how you have access to our players. This is something we're trying to provide for more media coverage by adding these new required elements. Teams will now be required to have two players available in Zoom for the shootaround media sessions, in addition to access for the in-person media.

Important that we'll be putting something out about that shortly, but it's important that what we're trying to do -- we took feedback from you all, from our players, from the Players Association, from our teams, because our team personnel hold a big burden. This is something that we're going to do on a trial basis this year, and as things work or don't work, we'll make adjustments. I just wanted to mention that because I know that is important that you have the access that you want to the players, that you want at the times that you want, and so we're going to work hard on that.

Again, with that, I'm going to open it up. I know that was a lot. I'm going to open it up. Thank you again for all your reporting and coverage. I'm going to open it up for some Q & A.

**Q. I wanted to ask about the big news of the day obviously that you just touched on. Could you share more details about the sustainable model? The next step of having not just back-to-backs, the full regular season, and what it takes to kind of get to that point?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: Thank you. So there's no one that wants the full season and full playoffs more than I do. But

again, as I said and the question is the right one, talk about how do you build a sustainable model to fund it. Because remember, travel is an operating expense. It's an operating expense on your budgets and your company's budgets and an operating expense on our budget. It's not something typically you can go out and get funded through either equity investment, debt investment. It has to come from the revenues of the company. Every place I've ever worked, every client I ever served in my prior life, that's how you fund operating expenses. So it has to come from revenue and revenue growth, if you're going to expand it.

I feel comfortable we've been growing revenue at the league, which is why I feel comfortable with this particular program this year, and yes, in the longer term, as we look at a next media rights deal, as we get more corporate partners and more significant amounts as we drive the valuation of our franchises up. You saw the news when Seattle did their capital raise this year, they had a post-money evaluation of \$150 million. That's being driven by their revenue, which is being driven by the lift that we're all seeing and the momentum in women's sports. This is how you fund things like this is, build a revenue model, take a look at expenses, too, but have enough dropped to the bottom line that you feel comfortable funding something for a decade or more.

That's how we're looking at all of our expenses, not just charter travel but all travel experiences, because there's other things the players would want, too, as they travel that we'll take a look at over time.

Yes, we intend to do more, as I said, the release said. But we do need some patience and time to build it so that we feel comfortable funding something more substantial as we get into our ensuing years.

Now, next year will be a challenge because it's an Olympic year. So that's always a challenge because we have to take a month off or approximately a month off from the league as we support our national team players, not just in the USA women's national team but also -- I think last year we had 23 players from 13 different foreign countries. This year, obviously rosters aren't set yet, and when we get that number we'll provide it. But we're globalizing our player population, as well, and when you think about what that means going forward.

I look forward to continuing the conversation, but it'll always be on the list for me until we get the full program.

**Q. I have a two-part question for you: One, we saw some college seniors decide to go back and use their fifth year of COVID eligibility instead of going into the draft. I know that COVID year won't be a factor down**



**the line, but there is a discourse that some of these college athletes would have a better kind of lifestyle if they stay in college versus go to the WNBA. I was curious what your response to that discourse and conversation is. And my second question, when you look at the momentum that you saw from the Final Four in particular, where do you think the league and the college game can have synergy and work together to capitalize on the moment as a whole?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: Right, thanks. So there's a lot being obviously talked about and written, and what a great day to be talking all the time about the momentum and players staying, players coming. I think we have a fabulous draft class this year. Everyone we were kind of looking at to come into the league, and I think our general managers were looking at, is in this draft class this year. Obviously, there were a few that decided to stay.

Look, I was a Division I both college basketball player and lacrosse player. If I could've played for one more year -- by the way, if I could go back and play today at the age of 58, I would go back and play today. I totally understand it. I understand the opportunities to stay in college.

But I think, again, we're going to have such depth in our next few draft classes, so I'm not worried about the extra COVID year. I think next year technically is the last year of the extra COVID year, and so if players decide to stay, I think some players were looking at where they might fall in the draft class and things like that. I think it's great that we have these options and the depth in this league and the quality of play in this league.

Just on your question of coming off the outstanding March Madness tournament, I was in Dallas. It was amazing. It was everything you thought it was going to be but more. And then the viewership being on ABC on Sunday -- we do so great when we're on ABC, as well, at the WNBA. But we do need to do, as I've stood up here and said before, a great job of taking kind of these really star players who have huge followership, whether through their NIL deals or just through their social media following.

Remember, the NIL deals have been actually a positive for players coming into our league if they have national brands like Gatorade and Nike. They're our partners, too. They can come in with those NIL deals and then they can get activated even more broadly because those are our deals.

Now when they are local deals for just the local area, maybe that is not as relevant. But certainly these national NIL deals -- I was wrong about that. I thought it's just another area for women to be undervalued in sports, but I was wrong about that because the NCAA women's

basketball players have been highly successful in signing these NIL deals. I think it's a huge positive for us.

So we'll welcome them in and especially them building their personal brands. They come in with a huge following, social media following, and look at some of these generational players that are going to come in the next two years.

I think the attention on the women's basketball game, I went from the Final Four in Dallas to the Masters. Everybody at the Masters was talking about women's basketball. It was pretty incredible.

Now we have to make sure we take these great players and as they come into our league we continue to market them, put the marketing dollars behind them. I know Phil Cook, our CMO, is working very hard on making sure that integration from NCAA into the WNBA is something that we can take advantage of that momentum, rather than what we might have done in prior years, which is okay, now they're in our league and they're on a team where you don't have the loyalty of that college town following them. Now we've got to bring those fans along with us.

I think the attention this year on the March Madness tournament for the women's national champion -- think about LSU and 102 points. How many points were scored [by the winning team] in the men's final? [76]. Think about that, [nearly] 30 more points in the same amount of time scored by LSU, and just what a great testament to the quality of the game and these players coming into our league.

**Q. I was hoping you might say a little more on the expansion. We've talked about it for three years now, saying it's progressing nicely and things are going well, we're finding the right fits and stuff. Do you have a timetable? Other women's leagues seem to be expanding at a very rapid rate, which may not be the best choice for them, but it seems teams -- there are people out there want to have franchises. Do you have a timetable saying, I'd love to have this done by X period or Y period?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: Great. As soon as I give a timetable, I assure you it won't be right. So I'm not going to give a timetable. We might have been talking about it, but as you know I have a philosophy that we needed to have more transformation of the league economics because the last thing we want to do is bring new owners in who are going to fail. I had a philosophy, and I think it was the right one because I think the valuations are going up for all of our teams and all of our assets. Because it's not just about a valuation of the franchise. It's the patch on the uniform,



it's a placement on the courts, it's an ad buy, it's a media right fee -- all the things that new owners coming into the league from these cities that we think will be great cities for the WNBA will benefit from.

So I am so glad we didn't rush it. Yes, now it's time to really get into the due diligence phase with some of these cities, some of these ownership groups. Start deciding on what an expansion draft might look like. We've got great drafts coming up in the next few years.

As I said, yes, I'd love to bring in at least two teams over the next few years and maybe longer term four. So that's where we are today, and that's what we're working on.

**Q. You started your remarks talking about Brittney Griner, and I think it's safe for all of us to say that she's gone through an experience that's truly unprecedented, certainly for this league, which we hope we don't see again. To that extent, though, have there been any considerations that the league or the Phoenix Mercury in particular have made, whether it's with respect to Brittney's transition or to safety and just kind of media concerns with regard to her unique situation?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: Yeah, so I'm glad you just used that word "unique," because I think her situation is unique. I was able to spend about two and a half hours with Brittney about a month or so ago, talking with her about her return to the league, talking about physical, mental, all the things. Obviously, her story is going to be incredible when she chooses to share it. She is just inspiring. That's all I'll say.

Yes, we've been working substantially with our security experts, with the Phoenix Mercury, with Brittney's team about -- given her unique conditions -- some things that we'll do this year. By nature of the fact that it's a security plan, it'll be confidential. We're not going to share the details of that security plan. Obviously, people will know where she's playing and when. But we'll keep those -- rest assured, we're working on it because it is a unique situation. I think we all want to protect all of our players. So we're looking at additional security for all of our players, not just Brittney, but Brittney definitely being a unique case this year.

We've worked on that plan and we're putting some finishing touches as we get into training camp and then into the regular season. Thank you.

**Q. The Final Four, as you said, introduced us to some future WNBA players. Some are here tonight and some are not, but will be in the future. I'm just curious,**

**with the current roster size system, how you're looking at making sure some of these new and talented players that come in with talent but also social capital have room in the league?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: Yeah, it's a great question. We're often asked about that roster size question. We think today our rosters are the right size. We've talked obviously with the Players Association about that. We've talked about the 22-year age. We've talked about a lot of different things, as we're thinking about the league quite differently than we thought about it in the past.

I think for now the roster sizes are set for this season into next. But that'll be for sure a discussion in the next round of collective bargaining, as will a variety of other issues. And I think with expansion on the horizon, my personal view is to give 12 to 24 and hopefully more roster spots will be something obviously that expansion will afford us. So to do something shorter term with roster size for the 12 teams versus bringing in 24 new players or opportunities for 24 players, I think is the right answer. It helps, again, extend us into two new cities where you expand fandom. And that just all is part of transforming and growing the league versus adding a spot here or there, which actually doesn't do any of that, quite frankly.

It does give a few opportunities to a few more players, but I think in this case we're looking to expand the opportunities for players broadly. One of the ways to do that is expansion. So that's what we'll be looking at in the future.

**Q. Do you just have an update on the league's investigation into Las Vegas Aces and if there's any information you can share?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: So obviously one thing I learned in my prior life, where I had to conduct a lot of investigations, is that these things do take time. The investigation is ongoing. We'll definitely share an update when it's ready. I am letting the lawyers do their work. So no update at this time, but the investigation is ongoing. No timeline, either, because again, depending on the outcome of the investigation, but we will share the findings when we've completed the investigation.

**Q. I want to get your overall impressions about the type of draft class that's about to enter the WNBA this season.**

CATHY ENGELBERT: Yeah, so the overall draft class, I think the quality of the draft class is outstanding. The personalities of this draft class, as I've learned today by spending the day off and on with them, is great. I think you're going to see obviously there's -- you all have your

mock drafts and I know you know these players and what they're capable of on the court. I think you're going to see them integrate and assimilate into the league very quickly. I think you're going to see a lot of them fighting for starting positions.

I think it's going to be a tough choice on Rookie of the Year already this year. I'm going to tell each of them when I come up and read their names that their goal is to get into training camp, work hard and make a roster and ultimately get a starting position, and I think you'll see that in this class this year. They're really, really a talented class.

Again, all the discussion on roster sizes and expansion, but you want to make sure you're doing it not in just adding, adding, adding, just because you don't want to degrade the quality of the game. That's one that's important to protect. I don't think the quality has ever been better in this game right now, the women's game, both at the collegiate and at the professional level. That's why I think this draft class is going to be great and the next few years is going to be great.

But we've got some veterans out there vying for some roster spots, who are playing at the highest level of their game, as well. It's going to be an interesting season to see what's happening with the teams and the free agency and now these rookies coming in fighting for those spots. I think it's going to be great.

**Q. I just want to jump off of the prior question, because what's been alleged in the Las Vegas allegation speaks directly to competitive balance. So from that perspective how important, do you think it is to have a resolution prior to the season?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: Yeah, again, I do think we'd love to have a resolution prior to the season tip. Again, I'm letting the lawyers do their work. That's what a commissioner should do. These things do take time. But I agree -- I don't disagree that it would be important to get a resolution by the season tip. We're working hard on that. These are complicated investigations typically that require a lot of time and interviews of a lot of different people.

Yeah, and just to the competitive balance thing, I think everybody is talking about the two super teams out there. But I see some teams -- we're going to have a ton of competitive balance in this league this year and a ton of parity, just like the college game had this year with No. 1 seeds losing. That didn't happen in the women's game five, ten years ago. Just really proud of the product that's on the court right now, both at the collegiate level and as a feeder system into the WNBA.

**Q. You kind of talked about the carryover of the momentum of this year's college basketball season, as many fan favorite players enter the W this year and another group right behind them next year. Curious, can you be more specific about what the league is going to do to capitalize on that momentum? Obviously, the media contract runs through 2025, but before that, what the league is really going to do to capitalize on this momentum?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: Yeah, the number one thing to capitalize on the momentum is to continue the plan around marketing the players into household names and building rivalries.

We have an enormous opportunity this year to build fandom around rivalries in this league, so no matter which team a fan might be following, we've got to build compelling content so that that rivalry or those players that you follow are part of what you want to do every other night or every third night as these players get on the court and we get the viewership and we get the fans in the seats.

That's the number one thing, especially in advance of thinking about all the disruption in the broadcast and media world around linear, around streaming. Streamers are being disrupted because they were disrupting linear. Households using TVs, people using TVs are going down, but what does that mean? More people are using the devices that they have to stream games, and we've got to be in that game, as well. Those are all the things that we need to capitalize on the momentum.

There's no doubt like what just happened with the NCAA and the number of viewers for both that Friday night, the Sunday night and just the enormous capitalization on people waking up to say, this game is great, and people now who have watched it, they'll come back.

How do you, again, digitally engage a fan? How do you get younger fans who will be the ultimate consumers of tomorrow to be digitally engaged in our game?

So all of that is exactly what our strategy is all about. It's all about transforming the digital part, the fandom, bringing the fan experience, bringing the fan closer to players. Again, when you're only in 12 cities in a country of our size and scale, you've got to work really hard to bring fans from outside those 12 cities. That loyalty you see at the college level, and how do you transition that into the professional level. Those are all the things we're working on, but it ultimately comes down to marketing, building household names, rivalries.

These players are killing it on building their personal

brands. Social media helps us with that. I was joking today, someone put me on TikTok, and I go, I guess now I need to get a TikTok account. It really is important to that younger fan to see our players across those platforms because that's how they're consuming their content.

Short form, medium form, we've got a lot of interest in documentaries and docuseries on our players, on our league, which we're entertaining all of those right now to see if we can again draw in that casual fan. Sports betting, fantasy basketball – that is, again, drawing a different fan into our game. I think it's all coming together at the right moment, but those are the types of things we're thinking of to capitalize.

**Q. I just wanted to ask real quick, we talk a lot about players being paid properly, and I know that's important, but when you think about the importance and the impact of someone like Becky Hammon, how much emphasis are we placing that coaches can see the WNBA as a first option and maybe not a stepping-stone and that we can pay them properly so they can make the impact, as well?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: It's an excellent question and one where clearly Becky is setting the stage as a role model, especially given her number of years in the NBA as an assistant coach and then coming to the WNBA as a head coach and winning the championship, the WNBA Finals her first year.

Really an important question as you think about, but I think a rising tide lifts all boats in this area, especially when you look at the compensation of coaches and assistant coaches.

We're so proud of the diversity we're achieving in our coach and assistant coach -- nine out of 12 of our head coaches are now women, and 77 percent of our assistant coaches are women. Of that, 70 percent are women of color or people of color. Really just an amazing transformation of that part of the league, the diversity and that pipeline to feed into becoming the next head coaches, whether it's in the WNBA, which I hope, or even in the college game, where they struggle a little more with women coaches more broadly, given our numbers.

Really proud of what our owners -- this is something, the owners actually appoint and pay the coaches, that our owners have stepped up to do. I think it's something we have our eye on, we had our eye on as soon as I came into the league.

With Bethany Donaphin's leadership about diversity and coaching, we've really made enormous strides in a short

period of time that I didn't think were possible. Those numbers I threw out were proof that you can build a pipeline of diverse coaches who are going to really be the future of this game from a coaching perspective and then pay them. That's how I think our owners are thinking of it.

**Q. As much as the players are excited about coming into the draft and this night, can you speak on your emotions about doing the draft for I think the third time in your career?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: Right. I remember the first time I did it was in my living room with my two children as my stagehands. Literally we were steaming in my dryer the jerseys right before because they came all wrinkled in a box. It's really good to be here in New York City at Spring Studios. It's really going to be fun.

But personally for me, calling those players, as I said in my lead-in, calling them, having the excitement in their voices that you are going to make their dreams come true. I met their parents and their families today, as well, in a session, and they're so excited. Just to see that you can have that impact and that then they're a role model for future girls and boys to look up to. Favorite part of the job without a doubt. Handing out the WNBA Finals trophy is great, and the rings. But this night is unique because it's a new chapter in all of the lives of these 36 players who will be drafted tonight.

Definitely excited, as you can tell in my voice.

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