

WNBA Draft

Monday, April 14, 2025

Commissioner Cathy Englebert



CATHY ENGELBERT: Good evening, everyone. Welcome to the 2025 WNBA Draft presented by State Farm. Tonight is, for me, one of the most special nights on our calendar. We officially welcome the next generation of basketball talent into the WNBA family. This is truly one of the most rewarding parts of my job, calling the prospects over the last couple weeks, as they finish their NCAA season, and we have a couple international players this year here in New York, and seeing the pure joy and emotion on their faces when they're going to cross the stage tonight. It's a moment they've dreamed of and it's an honor for us to share that with them.

Seems like just yesterday that we were all here in New York at that epic final game during the WNBA Finals. So for those in the room, thanks for being here. Your coverage and the depth of it has made a difference.

As we look ahead to the upcoming season, there's never been more excitement around the WNBA, certainly since I've been here. The momentum from last year has carried over in a big way, fueled by obviously incredible fan engagement, rising TV viewership and a league stacked with extraordinary talent.

We have been pleased to welcome a few new partners recently. You saw last Friday Ally Financial joins us as our latest WNBA Changemaker, another testament to the league's rising influence. Ally has consistently demonstrated a deep commitment to elevating women's sports in a way that drives real impact. This partnership really reflects a shared vision for growing the game and increasing visibility.

As we announced on Friday, Ally will serve as the presenting partner of the WNBA's first-ever Rivalry Week, a showcase of must-see matchups from August 9th to the 17th. For me, that time of year will be particularly interesting as teams start to make a huge push for the playoffs, and I think we're going to have a ton of parity in the league this year.

Coach also just made its debut as a new WNBA partner by presenting the iconic Orange Carpet here at the draft. We

just came from that. We had the players looking amazing. So Coach bringing its signature style to one of the league's most exciting moments. This marks the beginning of a dynamic collaboration with Coach and the WNBA, set to work together on various and innovative activations throughout the season, engaging fans and players. The players all have their Coach bags now. Sitting at the intersection of sports and now luxury fashion. So that's kind of cool.

One thing we've been working hard on in the offseason is a comprehensive platform around a multidimensional approach to combatting hate and vitriol in the forms experienced by our players, teams, staff and fans. We want to ensure that the WNBA remains a space where everyone -- players, fans and partners, corporate partners -- feels safe, valued and empowered.

We actually assembled a dedicated task force, collaborated closely with key stakeholders, including league and team representatives, and worked with external organizations and experts. The platform, and I mentioned this at the Finals, but now it's coming to fruition, will be four-pronged.

It will include, one, monitoring of social media and other digital platforms using advanced technology solution to detect and monitor comments and threats. Two, strengthening our conduct standards across all WNBA platforms, including in arena. Three, there will be added security measures put in place at the league and team levels. Four, there will be continued services of dedicated mental health clinicians addressing concerns that players have in a timely manner. More to come on this as we get to the tip of the season in May.

But other storylines coming into the season are endless, from major player movement during free agency to the debut of the Golden State Valkyries to the incoming rookies to the ongoing growth of our game. We have a slate of exciting preseason games this year with many of stars returning to their college markets, including Caitlin, Sabrina, Jewell, Arike, Angel and Jackie, and then Kamilla against the Brazilian national team in a preseason game. So that's going to be fun to watch those just here in May.



The All-Star Game will take place in Indianapolis. For the first time ever, we will hold a regular-season game north of the border, in Vancouver, with Seattle versus Atlanta. Plus, as many of you already know, we're introducing a best-of-seven format for the WNBA Finals this fall.

We're not stopping there. We're continuing to expand. Obviously, the Valks this year and two new teams set to tip off in 2026, in Toronto and Portland, and conversations about future expansion remain ongoing. This growth is another testament to the strength of our league and the demand we're seeing from our fans, and from cities and from owners who want to be a part of the WNBA's future.

Some of you know, who cover us on the business side, there's a lot of capital coming into women's sports. As you know, we raised capital ahead of the trend in early 2022. That has served us well, and that has driven a level of confidence by many others, including corporate partners, media partners and certainly by our owners, who see huge growth prospects. They're all investing heavily in the player experience. You see how current owners are announcing new practice facilities and new player-experience items. They're making significant investments in the confidence of this league.

With that, thank you again for all being here. We're looking forward to a great night tonight. I'm happy to answer any questions you have.

Q. You mentioned expansion. Is there any further timeline for 16, and potentially if it would be more than 16? And obviously CBA discussions, anything you can say about those?

CATHY ENGELBERT: Timeline on expansion, no specific timeline. We talked about going to 16 by no later than '28. I think we're still on track for that. We're evaluating the huge demand from cities and ownership groups and investment from a variety of cities. We've had a process. We're using an outside banker, so we're still evaluating that. Nothing to report today.

CBA, I knew you would all ask me about that. Obviously, we've had several meetings with the Players Association. We continue to talk. This is something we do every five, six years. So we're in process of discussing what's important to the players, owners, et cetera.

Nothing to report. We're in I would say kind of the early phases, but certainly it's something we'll continue to talk about with the Players Association. Again, I'm expecting -- I'm really optimistic about the future of this league, based on my comments I just made, and certainly optimistic about

coming to a transformational CBA at some point.

Q. I'm curious where the league is at with the investigation of the Las Vegas Aces following the \$100,000 bonus payments to each player by the Las Vegas Tourism Board from last season. Where is the league at with that investigation?

CATHY ENGELBERT: Thank you. So that investigation is ongoing. We have hired outside counsel to do an investigation. I think there's a lot of document requests and things like that, so it takes time. Nothing to report at this time. Still ongoing on our outside counsel. When we have something to report on it, we will let you know.

Q. With Unrivaled, the announcement that Paige Bueckers is going to get a three-year deal with them, and in the first year of that, she's going to make more than what she's going to make in her entire rookie salary. What was your reaction to hearing that? And how does knowing the salaries that players are getting paid in a startup league that lasts only 10 weeks is better than a league that's been around for over 20 years?

CATHY ENGELBERT: Yeah, I think, first of all, I think Paige already announced that like six months ago maybe or so. So quite some time ago I think it was already announced that Paige was signing a three-year deal with them, had equity in the league.

Obviously, I'm really proud of what Napheesa Collier and Breanna Stewart have thought through with that league. I've talked to them. I went and attended back in February. So really proud of what they're doing there. Of course we'll have, by the time we get done with 16 teams, over 190 players we need to take care of. I know it's a lot easier to do 30 in one spot. We obviously travel the world and the U.S. and have a big platform.

I think what the WNBA offers is a huge platform to our players around corporate partners, around activating. There's not one ad spot I think today, not one sporting event where you don't see an ad spot with a WNBA player in it. I think it's pretty cool. Whether it's State Farm or Nike. Nike's first Super Bowl commercial in many years had WNBA players in it. You just continue to see so many of our corporate partners step up and put our players into their ad spots, and that's a great sign and symbol.

Anything that raises the game of basketball, too, of women's basketball, obviously we support. We are thrilled with the momentum we have coming off the NCAA season, coming off Unrivaled, but certainly thrilled with the viewership we have and the momentum we have and the



capital coming into our league, as well, and the investments our owners are making.

Q. I just wonder what your thoughts were on so many top prospects deferring to declare for the draft and returning to college for another year?

CATHY ENGELBERT: First of all, I think we have an amazing potential rookie class that you're going to see tonight. Obviously, college is something that players are going to make their own decisions of when they come out, when they don't. We don't pressure them. We're not disappointed in any of them. We love the fact that the NCAA has been such a strong feeder into the WNBA. The fact that some players choose to play an additional year is absolutely okay. We are a league so full of talent.

By the way, the next decade of talent coming in is going to be amazing. I was at the McDonald's All-American Game two weeks ago. Those high schoolers can play, and they're going to come into our league at some point. So whether you want to take advantage or an extra year or not, as long as we get you next year, I certainly don't have any problem. We have so much talent coming in this year and over the next -- I would say the next decade because those who watch U-17 girls' basketball are telling me how strong the talent is.

If players choose to stay for an additional year if they redshirted -- I think the COVID years are now technically over -- but no problem with that.

Q. With the growth of the league, how do you envision the WNBA's role in promoting women's sports on a global scale?

CATHY ENGELBERT: Yeah, it's a great question around global scale. We've generally been a domestic league. Obviously in 12 cities, soon to be 15, including north of the border in Toronto with the Toronto Tempo launching next year. But we have a lot of opportunity globally. The sport is very popular. I went to the Paris Olympics, very popular in Europe, obviously in Asia and Africa. That's kind of our next step once we get through expansion and collective bargaining, is really to make an impact globally.

You might have seen recently a trip that Sabrina Ionescu made over to Asia with Nike. I think back to when that happened with either Kobe Bryant or Stephon Marbury and those who came after building these players into big global brands, and that's what we aspire to, as well. So we'll take a look at what that looks like and what that means as we come off of this season.

Q. Leagues borrow ideas from other leagues all the

time. Since you spent time at Unrivaled, what are some things you saw or experienced that you think you want to implement with the W, even if it's not this year?

CATHY ENGELBERT: Yeah, obviously I went for two games. I think the players played hard. They had fun. It's 3x3, so it's a little different. Two-thirds court or even a little less than that. We're not going to take that away. We like our full-court game here.

Again, I think just player engagement, that would be the No. 1 thing. But I think the game is very different. 3x3, some of the bigs struggle a little more than the guards, and it became kind of a guard and small forward game. There's nothing particular on the basketball side that I would do.

I think on the kind of fan engagement side -- most of the people I met there, I think 75 percent of their fans fly in for the games. Obviously, it's a very small fan base, 800 or so that go to their games. Obviously, we'll have 17, 15, 18, 20,000 at our games. So it's a different scale from a fan perspective.

But again, I think it's great that -- again, growing women's basketball in a different way. Obviously, a different version of 3x3 is in the Olympics, not two-thirds court but the half-court. So looking at that difference.

I love the faster shot clock, quite frankly. I think our game is already fast. For those of you that sit lower in our arenas, really fast. A little shorter shot clock is interesting. But we've piloted that in the past during our All-Star Weekend, so that's kind of just a fun thing to do.

We'll look innovatively at anything that we think works that we could incorporate into our game.

Q. There was a report that came out today that said the union presented an outline for a CBA agreement in December that included significantly higher raises and that the league hasn't responded to it yet. I'm curious if that's accurate, and if so, what's holding up the league's response?

CATHY ENGELBERT: Yeah, inaccurate that any proposal was offered in December. Accurate that we continue to meet and work together, staff to staff, and we recently got a proposal from the Players Association, very recently. So we'll work on that as soon as we get through tonight. We'll be meeting with the Players Association on that.

But again, we've been here before. These things take time. They're partial proposals. We want full,



comprehensive proposals in order to determine what the future looks like. Again, I'm very optimistic that we'll get something done and it'll be transformational. But that report about something in December was inaccurate.

Q. At the top you mentioned changes really to security and hate. Were there incidents in particular that came up that sparked the need for changes in the policy, and is the changes that you are starting to outline kind of an admission through conversation that the league previously was not doing enough to endure player safety in this new era?

CATHY ENGELBERT: Yeah, there's cyber safety, there's physical safety. I think we're doing a lot, obviously, in the physical safety space. The cyber safety, if I could figure out not to have someone type all this vitriol in social media, I'd be in a different job than the commissioner of the WNBA. But that's why we wanted to tackle it, because there's no space for hate, and I think there is just a continuing drain on all of us, on players, on staff, staff at our teams. I'm sure on all of you, too. Just continued unaccountability for people who type things in social media. Our players are digital natives. They're in their young 20s, and then obviously more veteran players are 20s into 30s, and they take everything very hard and it's a toll on them.

I think after last year we just really wanted to do something. I've wanted to do something since I came out of Deloitte into the WNBA and this space, but obviously we hit the pandemic and we had a lot of things going on.

I also think with AI and technology, technology was a little more nascent five years ago. I think now is the time to -- and we've demoed a bunch of technologies and selected one that I think we can offer to our players, our players' families, our fans, because I know myself I could use it to filter out some of the negative comments that people believe that are totally untrue or inaccurate.

I think that was a little bit of the impetus, like we've had it, let's go. Let's do something with the technology provider. But it has to be multidimensional because it also has to include cyber safety, physical safety, mental health and monitoring, too, for physical risks and physical threats.

I think there were some reported physical threats, as well to some of our players, both in college and in pro. So that's all part of it. I think it was time to put this task force together and really hit it head on. So that's what we're going to do.

Q. You mentioned the explosion of capital in women's sports. I think a trend we're seeing not just in women's

sports but in sport more broadly is the growing involvement of institutional capital in sports. I wondered what the league's philosophy is around interest from sovereign wealth funds or pension funds or private equity and whether there are specific policies in place, and if there are, are they different from the NBA's?

CATHY ENGELBERT: Yeah, we have very similar policies to the NBA. Ours have kind of come more recently because of the explosion of capital into women's sports and the WNBA, but nothing different to report here. We'll obviously evaluate them. They're all subject to approval by the Board of Governors when we bring new ownership or new capital in. So we'll continue to follow the process, but it is very similar to the NBA.

Q. Here we are at the start of a brand-new season and I can see the excitement all over your face. If there is one matchup that you're really looking forward to this year that's marquee for you, who do you think that would be?

CATHY ENGELBERT: Well, I mean, during Rivalry Week you're going to see a lot of matchups, but obviously the returning reigning champion versus who lost the game, so Minnesota-New York. I think Vegas is going to be interesting with some new talent this year, and they were tough last year. Seattle, I think, and we'll see who they pick No. 2 tonight, will be interesting.

I think Indiana has added some really big talent, veteran talent that they maybe didn't have last year. The list could go on and on. I think a lot of teams are going to strengthen themselves not only tonight but in free agency and going into the tip of the season, which is literally practically only a month away.

That's why Rivalry Week is going to be so cool. But I think more looking at the free-agent movement -- obviously Dallas with the No. 1 pick tonight. And with the players they have, Phoenix is going to look different. I mean, it's really going to be a lot of parity in the league this year.

So I don't want to pick one. Obviously, I'm looking at Minnesota-New York as the return of the two teams of that epic five-game final. So I think that's the one I'll watch first.

Q. Surprisingly another expansion question. A few months ago the Sports Business Journal had a quite detailed piece on the subject and it named three cities in particular, Cleveland, Houston and Philadelphia, as being toward the front of the line with Cleveland at the front of the line. Set some timelines for when they might come in. It's better to hear directly from you on



these things, so why not ask you directly.

CATHY ENGELBERT: Again, nothing to report specifically other than we had huge demand in our bidding process for a WNBA team in not only those cities but a lot of other cities. So really excited to be evaluating which cities would be -- city or cities would be the best going forward, and just evaluating whether it is more than one, quite frankly. We've got to put all that together. You don't want to degrade the quality of the game, already going to 16. We're adding 33 percent additional roster spots by adding 48 spots to a league of 144.

So we're in the process of evaluating all that. But those are all on the list. But there's several others that are on the list, as well.

Q. We've seen the union come out and say what they want in these negotiations, a new economic model, higher pay, retirement benefits. We haven't seen exactly what the league considers a fair deal. We saw the joint statement of course in December the two parties released, and you all have met a number of times since then. What do you consider fair and what do you want out of the next CBA?

CATHY ENGELBERT: Yeah, we're not going to negotiate in the media. We're going to negotiate with the players across the bargaining table. So I'm not going to comment on specifics other than we've been building a new economic model, quite frankly, leading women's sports to build that model with our new media rights deals, with all the corporate partnerships.

So yes, we want to have a fair deal for all, but it has to be within the confines of a sustainable economic model that goes on for 10 years. Even what we did last year with full charter travel, that was over a \$20 million expense. That has to be recognized as part of the economic model that we've built. I'm glad we did it, and obviously we're going to continue that hopefully for many, many years going forward.

But you need to make sure that -- we've had a few years of great growth, hyper growth I would call it. But we need to continue to make sure that we can fund the things that the players are asking for, that we want for them, too. We all want the players to make more money; that will happen. We'll do something transformational. But again, nothing to report exactly today because we're not that far into the negotiation to report any specifics.

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