

NCAA Women's Basketball Championship

Wednesday, March 31, 2021

San Antonio, Texas, USA

President Mark Emmert

Media Conference



THE MODERATOR: Good morning to all of the media who have joined the call today. Welcome to President Emmert's Women's Final Four press conference. We will start with opening remarks from President Emmert and then we will go to questions.

PRESIDENT EMMERT: Good morning to everyone, especially for those that are on the West Coast; it's especially early. But I appreciate you all joining me this morning. And I look forward to answering all of your questions. And we'll make sure that we can do that.

I do have a few opening comments that I'd like to make and then we can turn right to your questions.

First of all, I hope you all have been enjoying the tournament. We've seen some pretty remarkable basketball the past couple of weeks. And we've made it down to the Final Four now. It's always a special time of the year. Here in San Antonio we've seen some especially impressive accomplishments and performances. And I know that the country's really, really enjoying watching these games.

I want to recognize something that I've talked about for quite a while over the course of 2020. And that's the fact that 2021 is clearly already set up to be a really pivotal year in college sports. And it's interesting that today, we happen to be sitting here today on what is the 115th anniversary of the founding documents for the NCAA. It was literally 115 years ago, March 31st, that the association was officially founded.

We also are sitting here on a day that we're hearing a case in front of the Supreme Court of the United States that's going to be very, very important to the way in which college sports is governed. And we're also, as everyone knows, in the midst of debate and discussion in Congress across the country around a number of issues dealing with college athletics, most notably the whole name, image and likeness issue, but broader issues as well that have been brought to the fore. So, that part of it is really

consequential, obviously, for this year.

I think it's also really important to note that this is the anniversary, 2021, of the 100th anniversary of the first NCAA championships. We've been doing this for 100 years now. But it's interesting to also note it's just the 60th, excuse me, the 40th anniversary, the 40th anniversary of women's championships. Men's championships had a 60-year head start. That's three generations -- three generations of women who did not have the opportunity to participate in college sports, to participate in NCAA championships.

Three generations of us not getting to enjoy the kind of games that we saw yesterday and the day before and the day before that in terms of women's participation in competitions. And that legacy, that 60-year lag is something that we need to talk about and we need to be dealing with right now.

When we went through 2020, we saw student-athletes in all sports not just perform at their highest level -- to make it to a NCAA national championship is an incredible accomplishment in any year. To be a successful student and an elite athlete, to make it to a championship, let alone just make it to a Final Four, you have to have unbelievable dedication and work and talent.

But then you roll in a pandemic and you watch and see what these athletes have gone through this year to make it to this moment. And it's extraordinary. The perseverance, the commitment, the patience that they've all had to put in to get them to here is something that we all need to recognize and acknowledge. When I watch the games going on in Indianapolis and the games going on here in San Antonio, I see athletes that have gone through all of that, that have given their all. I see games that are equally exciting equally engaging with audiences, athletes that are giving everything they've got in incredibly athletic performances and teamwork.

And that's why more than anything, I and everybody else in the NCAA have been so disappointed in the shortcomings that have been starkly abundant and recognized here in San Antonio. When you lay the men's and women's

championships side by side, as has been made clear over the past weeks, it is pretty self-evident that we dropped the ball in supporting our women's athletes.

And we can't do that. That's a failure that should not exist. That 60-year head start that men had, that shouldn't exist anymore. That's got to be put behind us. We did not get to this moment because of what happened in San Antonio with the weight room or any other issues, but we are here. And now the most important thing to me is obviously to correct those things that happened in San Antonio -- and we're dealing with that and I think very effectively -- but also we need to use it as a pivot point, as an inflection point to say what do we need to do better? How do we make up for those shortcomings from this day going on and create the kind of gender equity that we all talk about, I talk about, everybody talks about, but make sure that it's a reality, not just language?

And we have to do that. I have to do that. Everybody's got to be committed to that. We cannot let down these amazing athletes ever again.

Now, the NCAA, first and foremost, has responsibility for all of our championships. We run 90 national championships. Forty-five of them are women's championships. We need to make sure that those events, going forward always, we have to make sure that those events are unequivocally the pinnacle, the exemplar of the way we treat men and women in those championships. That is not what we did here.

And we are -- I am sorry for that. That is something that we should never have allowed to happen. I get that. So does everyone now. But we need to then say, all right, how do we assure that that's the case going forward?

And so we need to -- when I say we, myself, my staff, the Board of Governors that we all report to, including their independent members -- we need to make sure that we understand fully not just what occurred just here in San Antonio but what policies and practices and structures and resource allocations need to be changed going forward so that we know without a doubt that there's gender equity across our championships, with the hope that and the intention that that will drive change deeper inside college sports. So whether it's on a campus level or anywhere else, we see that kind of equity being played out.

And that's what I'm committed to. I know that's what the Board of Governors is committed to. That's what we want to work with, all of the stakeholders in college sports to deliver on.

And I'm completely committed to getting that done. So with

those comments let me pause and have you turn to our audience for questions.

Q. I guess the WBCA sent a letter to you about all the things that's going on. They want their own independent review of everything. I know you're meeting with a bunch of the coaches later this morning. Just what are your thoughts on their letter and what do you hope comes out of this meeting later this morning with the WBCA Division I coaches?

PRESIDENT EMMERT: They did send a letter. And they communicated it really clearly, I think. And I think there's a couple of important points here, Doug. First and foremost, WBCA is a critical partner. They're the experts on women's basketball. They have more knowledge and understanding of the game and what's been going on for a long time than anybody else. So they have to be an essential part of understanding all of this.

I look forward to talking to them. As you've said, I've got a meeting with all of them, all of them that want to participate a little later this morning.

I'm anxious to hear from them and to hear their thoughts and views. I understand their interest in being a part of that and together we can figure out a structure that, I think, we can all feel very comfortable with.

I guess the second point is that while the gender equity review that we need to do has to begin and focus on women's basketball, it's not going to be only about women's basketball. Women's basketball, like men's basketball, those are the two marquee sports for NCAA championships. If you don't get those right you're not going to get anything right. So we've got to get those things right. And our commitment -- my commitment to that is unequivocal.

But we also need to make sure if we're dropping the ball in basketball that we're not doing it in lacrosse or golf or tennis or any other sport that we have men's and women's tournaments in. It's got to be gender equity across the board. So, the WCBA will be front and center in helping us sort out what we need to do here and I look forward to working with them.

Q. I went back and read a lot of the white paper that was prepared by Val Ackerman and it has many of the systemic issues that we are still talking about today. So my question is why has it taken the NCAA so long to have this type of review and more of these conversations?

PRESIDENT EMMERT: As you well know, the NCAA is



... when all is said, we're done.®

governed by the member institutions. And the critical decisions that are made are made by those schools through our governance structure and Val's white paper and other work that's been done. In fact there was a strategic plan done just a year and a half ago, two years ago now for moving forward on women's ball. Those are really, have been and continue to be really heavily discussed. I think they've led to positive changes around women's basketball. But clearly too little has been done and not enough has been executed on them.

The women's basketball community, first and foremost, also has to be determine which parts of those recommendations like in Val's or anybody's white paper that they want to pick up and run with. And there's no excuse other than we need to do better, and we need to get the commitment of all of our governance structure to get on with it. That's what we're doing now. That's why we're doing the review and that's why I want to work with the coach's association and others to resolve these problems.

Q. Looking at these two Final Fours, if there's a positive COVID test among the teams where a team would be affected rather than an individual player, does the NCAA have a contingency plan to delay or postpone the games until the teams can get to full health and play as a full team?

PRESIDENT EMMERT: The protocol that has been established with both championships, and all of our championships -- we've already run about 15 national championships up to this point; they don't get the media attention that these two do, of course -- but the protocols that we've established for all of the championships -- we'll do 65 of them this year; normally it's 90 but only 65 this year -- have been established with a national advisory body of medical experts and public health experts, and then in concert with the local public health authorities of that location where the championship is being run.

So in Indianapolis or here, protocols are slightly different because the county health authorities have slightly different approaches to them. But in terms of the timelines for the Final Fours, there's not a contingency to slide the tournaments back.

If the team or if an individual or a team were sadly had to move out of the location because the local health authorities -- not the NCAA; it's not our determination, it's theirs -- determined that they couldn't participate, then they would have to forfeit a game and we would move on. And that would be tragic, obviously.

That's why we've worked so hard to get protocols in place

to avoid that circumstance. We're at a place now where teams have been testing daily for -- for a lot of these athletes, forever. And they've been incredibly good about following all the protocols. It's been really, really impressive to see how hard they're working to maintain public safety. And we're very hopeful that we don't have to confront that issue.

Q. Looking back over the last couple of weeks when the photos and videos were pointed out from the athletes and coaches, is there anything you wish you personally would have done differently to respond?

PRESIDENT EMMERT: I think there always is, obviously. I wish that there had been, both from me and from everybody, greater attention to exactly what was going on on both platforms, the men's side and women's side, so we didn't have these issues -- whether it was the weight room issue or the food differentials. Those things just shouldn't happen. And we could have and should have avoided them and we didn't.

And that's a miss on my part. That's a miss on everybody's part that we were really focused on making sure we could get through this during the pandemic. And we weren't as focused on that kind of equity that we needed to be.

So the thing I'm most regretful for is we didn't catch it up front. During that time period, we've been scrambling. My teams at both locations have been working incredibly hard. One of the biggest frustrations is that the team that's down here in San Antonio -- the women's committee, my staff that works on women's basketball, all the volunteers around the community -- they've been working unbelievably hard. It's just been really, really hard for everybody.

And then to have this incredible event marred by these incidents is just wrenching. And anything that we could have done to avoid that I would have happily done and obviously wish we had. These athletes deserve that. They earned it. They deserve it. And we let them down. And that shouldn't have occurred.

Q. I wanted to go back to something you mentioned at the very beginning of this press conference about the case that's going to go before the Supreme Court today about college athlete compensation. It's part of this larger dialogue about whether in the future we should be paying college athletes. If I could ask your personal opinion, what effect do you think that would have on college sports?

PRESIDENT EMMERT: Well, first of all, I'm glad you asked the question because there's a lot of confusion

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

about the case, which the pleadings began at the top of the hour, so it's imminent. The case is not about pay for play. There's a lot of belief that it is. The case is not about name, image and likeness, which a lot of people think it is. The case is about an antitrust issue that really focuses on who has the authority and the ability to make decisions around college sports in general.

And so this question, regardless of what the Supreme Court does or doesn't decide, won't resolve whether or not student-athletes should be, in quotes, paid.

My opinion, and more importantly the opinions of the universities, the 1100 schools that participate in college sports, is that student-athletes need to be students, not employees of the universities, that the relationship between a university and a college athlete needs to be one of university and student, not employer and employee.

Everybody wants to provide, and indeed I think we're doing a very good job around providing students with support for their educational needs. There's doubtlessly more that can be done and should be done. And I don't think that's a question or doubt either.

The issue of NIL isn't about whether student-athletes should be paid or not by the universities; it's whether or not they should have an opportunity to generate revenue from monetizing their own name, image and likeness. And I believe they absolutely should and have been clear about that and so have the schools.

And so that's why we're in the midst of working with Congress to try and create a single rule for the entire country, rather than 50 individual state rules that will allow students to have that opportunity.

And some of them will generate a lot of revenue off of that. And that's great. I think that's terrific and want that to happen. But we need to have the pleadings and the court case occur today. Then we'll know where the court is probably in June or thereabouts, and we'll move from there.

Q. I'm wondering, when you look at the fact that the men's tournament is such a money-maker, and I know that's not the stated goal, if you will, of the NCAA for its championships to make money, but the enormous amount of money that the men's tournament makes and what a cultural phenomenon it is, versus the women's tournament. What ways can the women become more profitable? How can they be better marketed so that has a similar resonance, if you will, to the men's tournament?

PRESIDENT EMMERT: I think the profitability question complicates a lot of the fundamental issues. The issue of gender equity needs to, in my opinion, sit aside from the profitability component.

The reality is that the men's basketball tournament generates around -- in 2019, the last year for which we have hard data, its net revenue was about \$861 million, and it's wildly profitable, if you want to use that term. But those dollars are used to support all the other championships. They are distributed, 600 million of those dollars are distributed out to the schools. We use the money to run the other championships.

And so that revenue is essential to making the college sports enterprise work. So we want it to be successful obviously for all of those reasons. I don't know that the goal for women's basketball that it should be profitable or any of our championships. There's only a few that are run cash-flow positive, if you will, or have net revenues.

The goal is to improve and develop the game and move towards gender equity. To do that, we need to promote the games more effectively through our media partners and through our corporate sponsors and through the campuses themselves and through everything that's around the women's game. One of the things I'm looking forward to coming out of the work we're doing in this review is to understand more effectively what the realistic opportunities are to promote and grow this game.

It's been great fun. We watched some wonderful basketball the past few days. And it's incredibly compelling. When people watch, they tend to watch again. And we need to have more of those.

Q. A number of high profile coaches, Olympic coaches of the women's team over the past couple of years made compelling statements about inequalities in the women's tournament. Have you spoken to any of them listened to their concerns? And how did those conversations go, if you could tell us anything about them?

PRESIDENT EMMERT: Yeah, I have talked to coaches. And I'm going to do a lot more of that going forward. I've been particularly interested in those that have been involved in this tournament. And of course I don't want to interfere with their work while they're involved in the games.

And part of our review that we're conducting and that the Kaplan Firm is conducting for us is to also reach out to those coaches through the WBCA and individually, so coaches can provide an unvarnished and even anonymous

voice to this process so they don't have to just tell me; they can tell an independent body that's going to report it directly because that's going to be really important so you don't have to mince words in any fashion. You can be forthright.

Everybody recognizes, everybody I've talked to recognizes -- and I listen closely to what they have to say because it's very important -- they recognize that the issues are not just what happened here in San Antonio.

Candidly, the issues that are here in San Antonio are things that can be fixed and fixed relatively easily. That's not the fundamental problem. The fundamental problem is that 60-year head start I was talking about -- that we have for a long time had systemic disparities that have been a problem for gender equity. It's not just in basketball; it's across all sports. Indeed it's in many things that go on in our society.

And we need to focus on those things we control, our tournaments, and use them as exemplars, listen to what those coaches are saying about the issues that have been out there for a long, long time. They're extant not just in our tournaments but throughout the sports system, from youth sports all the way up.

Again, we're going to focus on what we can control and work with those coaches to make sure that we've eliminated those issues for the NCAA's championships. And then we're going to try and make sure that it drives itself, that comparison drives itself down into sports.

Q. You've spoken about the things that can be done relatively easily. And so I'd like to highlight two and just ask you both the decision-making process that led to them and whether you can commit to changing them. One has to do with something as simple as the logo. The logo for the women's Final Four reads "Women's Final Four." The one for men's reads "Final Four." And the other is -- it's something I've heard from a lot of stakeholders as something that has bothered them for a long time. The other is, as was reported in the Wall Street Journal, the fact that March Madness was something the women's side had asked for the rights to be able to use for marketing purposes and was denied by the NCAA, which obviously impacts the investment on the front end, which also impacts ultimately how profitable the tournament turns out to be. So if you could take me through why the NCAA made those two decisions and whether you're prepared to commit to changing those two things here today.

PRESIDENT EMMERT: I'll answer them in reverse order.

There's no reason at all why those two logos can't be whatever the women's side wants. So the women's staff are part of the NCAA. They're part of my national office. We all work and live in the same building. This is not somebody against the NCAA; it's part of the NCAA.

The March Madness logo can, and if the women's committee and the women's community wants it used, there's no reason why they can't use it similarly. "Final Four" is used by both, and whether or not one wants to use the logo with a gender identifier is up to the committee and they can certainly do whatever they'd like to do with those things. So, yes, I'm fully committed to doing that.

The details of how and why those decisions were made, we're going to get to through our review. And that's something that I want to make sure we all understand unequivocally. As you heard earlier, there's been a lot of studies around how to promote the women's game, and there's always a debate and discussion around how distinct it should be in the way it's promoted versus how similarly it should be promoted.

Those are debates for marketing people and those who want to promote the game. But I'm committed to making sure that we use the marks of the NCAA as effectively as we can in promoting women's basketball.

Q. Right now, as a girl who wants to play Division I basketball, seeing all the inequities between the men's and women's tournament is frustrating. But where does the NCAA want to be in 10 years in terms of eliminating the disparities between men's and women's basketball?

PRESIDENT EMMERT: Well, I don't know where we want to be in 10 years. I can tell you where I want to be in one year. And I want a young woman or anybody who cares to look at our tournaments to see that the women athletes, these incredible women athletes that are here in San Antonio, are being treated with the same respect, the same level of support, the same level of energy and marketing and clout that goes into these games as the men.

It doesn't mean they're identical, because they shouldn't be necessarily identical. They're very distinct in many ways. But gender equity between these tournaments is something that can and should be and must be addressed and in short order.

There's no reason for this to go on for another 10 years while we debate and discuss it. And I want the girls and women you're talking about to know that and to see it.