

Atlantic Coast Conference Basketball Tipoff Media Day

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James J. Phillips, Ph.D

ACC Commissioner

Commissioner Forum

(Video shown.)

JAMES J. PHILLIPS: Good afternoon, and welcome to the 2026 ACC Tip Off. During this year's event, the spotlight has remained exactly where it belongs. On the remarkable student-athletes and coaches representing our 18 institutions.

To our media members, television and corporate partners, administrators, and everyone joining us in Charlotte, thank you for being here and for your support of the ACC.

Before we continue, I want to recognize the heartbreaking passing of my friend and your friend, Chris Spatola. Chris was a respected and beloved member of the college basketball community, a former Army student-athlete, and decorated veteran who helped Duke win the 2010 National Championship and later became a thoughtful and passionate analyst for ESPN.

Our deepest condolences are with his amazing wife Jamie, their three beautiful children, the Spatola and Krzyzewski families who knew him and loved him. Please join me in a moment of silence in Chris' memory.

Thank you.

Basketball holds a unique place in the history and identity of the ACC. A legacy built by legendary players and coaches, iconic arenas, unforgettable rivalries, and national championships. That tradition is carried forward by today's student-athletes and coaches, rising programs, compelling matchups, and the growth of both the men's and women's games setting the stage for yet another exciting season of ACC basketball.

ACC women's basketball enters the year with tremendous momentum. Last season a conference record nine teams earned NCAA Tournament bids. Five reached the Sweet 16, the ACC's most since 2015, and the league extended its nation-leading streak to 24 consecutive seasons with an Elite Eight team.



Since 2018, the ACC has earned more NCAA Tournament bids than any other conference. That momentum continues this season with eight First Team All-ACC honorees returning, led by Notre Dame's Hannah Hidalgo who leads all returning players nationally in scoring, steals, and triple doubles.

She is also the reigning national defensive player of the year, and Nancy Lieberman Award winner.

The ACC's coaching excellence extends to the international stage as last month Duke's Kara Lawson guided the USA women's national team to a gold medal at the FIBA Women's Basketball World Cup.

We are also pleased to welcome three proven program builders to our outstanding group of coaches. Boston College's Kate Popovic-Goss, Pitt's Robin Harmony, and Virginia's Aaron Roussell.

The season will culminate with an especially meaningful celebration: The 50th ACC Women's Basketball Tournament. First played in 1978, four years before the inaugural NCAA Women's Basketball Tournament began. It is the nation's longest-running Division I women's basketball conference tournament.

This landmark event will return to Charlotte for the first time since 1999 and make its Spectrum Center debut. More than a milestone, the 50th tournament will honor the student-athletes, coaches, and programs past and present who built its legacy and advanced the women's game.

We are committed to delivering a memorable first-class celebration worthy of that history.

ACC men's basketball also enters the season with significant momentum. Eight teams earned NCAA Tournament bids last season, the most since 2018. Since 2015, the ACC leads all conferences in NCAA Tournament victories and men's Final Four appearances.

Six different ACC programs have reached the Final Four during that span, demonstrating the competitive depth that



exists throughout our league.

We have outstanding coaches, exceptional student-athletes, and programs committed to competing at the highest level. We are pleased to welcome Boston College's Luke Murray, Georgia Tech's Scott Cross, North Carolina's Michael Malone, NC State's Justin Gainey, and Syracuse's Gerry McNamara.

Collectively, they bring championship experience at every level, including an NBA title, multiple NCAA championships, and seven conference titles, and two return to their alma mater.

For the second straight season our 18-game conference schedule will provide compelling matchups and meaningful opportunities for teams to strengthen their résumés and national profiles.

Every game will matter. Every road environment presents a challenge, and there will be no easy nights.

The season will culminate with the T. Rowe Price ACC Men's Basketball Tournament returning to Greensboro for a record 30th time. Few places are more closely connected to the history of ACC basketball, and we look forward to returning in March to crown a champion.

Before turning to several broader initiatives, I want to recognize one colleague and welcome another. Paul Brasso will soon conclude more than a decade of ACC service. We are incredibly grateful for his leadership and many contributions, and we wish him and Jane all the best in the future.

We're also pleased to welcome Pualani Spurlock-Welsh, our new women's basketball supervisor of officials. One of the nation's most accomplished and respected officials, Pualani brings extensive experience and credibility to this very important role.

One of the broader initiatives will spotlight at least 37 men's and women's basketball games between ACC programs and historically black colleges and universities. Through coverage on ACC Network and ACC Network Extra, we will celebrate the traditions and communities represented in these matchups while also highlighting the connections between our institutions, including ACC alumni now leading HBCU programs and sharing their stories with new audiences.

Across both men's and women's basketball our responsibility is to provide the strongest possible platform for our programs and student-athletes. That includes competitive schedules, continued investments in officiating

and technology, energetic home environments, and the national exposure our teams have earned. The response from fans last season reflected the ongoing interest in ACC basketball. Men's basketball viewership increased 44%, the largest gain among all conferences, and the ACC was the most watched conference on ESPN.

Women's basketball audiences also grew with viewership on the CW increasing 25% and nearly 1 million viewers watching the ACC women's basketball tournament championship game, the largest audience in the event's history.

Our partnership with Disney, ESPN, ACC Network, and the CW remain critical to those efforts. Throughout the season, ACC basketball will be showcased across ESPN and the CW, providing extensive access to our teams and audience across the country.

New this year, every ACC game airing on the CW will also stream live through the ESPN app. We are grateful for their partnership and shared commitment to the ACC.

College athletics continues to experience unprecedented change with eligibility, transfers, revenue sharing, enforcement, and the future of the collegiate model remaining at the center of the national conversation. Our approach remains guided by the same fundamental priorities: Protecting opportunities for student-athletes, establishing clear and consistent rules, preserving fairness, and maintaining the connection between athletics and higher education.

These priorities remain front and center as our conference continues to lead nationally, and I commend our presidents and chancellors for their outstanding leadership.

In late August the ACC Board of Directors unanimously approved a resolution prohibiting participation in ACC football and basketball by individuals who did not appropriately withdraw from a professional draft, signed a professional contract, or appeared on a professional roster.

This action protects fairness and roster opportunities, which is essential for incoming high school student-athletes and the integrity of the collegiate competition across all 18 institutions.

The Senate's recent passage of the Protect College Sports Act represents an important step in the ongoing discussions surrounding the future of college athletics. We appreciate the bipartisan work that brought the bill to this point, and as the process moves to the House, we will continue supporting all 18 of our member institutions as they engage directly with Congress and other stakeholders.



Today, however, our focus is on basketball. Year after year this league continues to add to its unmatched legacy, and we look forward to watching our student-athletes and coaches compete on the national stage. Once again, thank you for being here. Enjoy ACC Tip Off. Now I'm happy to answer any of your questions.

Q. I wanted to ask you about NCAA Tournament expansion. You're not only the ACC Commissioner, but the head of the -- chair of the Board of Governors. With the tournament expanding, does that put pressure on more teams in this conference to make the field now that there are more opportunities available?

JAMES J. PHILLIPS: I wish I could say great to see you, Mitchell, but I can't see you. There you are. Thanks for the wave. I got ya. Silhouette back there.

Here's a few things. Access to championships is something that I think I've been pretty consistent on, and I know that there's an other side of that thing where you start to wonder about does it water down the regular season? I don't think that that's the case.

Our student-athletes have four years, sometimes five years, to play their particular sport. Every one of those student-athletes wants a chance to compete for a championship in their conference as well as for an NCAA Tournament championship.

So I have always tried to err on being on the side of access for our student-athletes. In today's world there's added pressure as it relates to the investment schools are making. Record number of dollars being given to student-athletes who have earned those dollars, for certain.

So when you just do some of the metrics about just the observation of other championships -- and there's only one college sports. When you look at the NFL and you have I think it's 14 of 32 teams that make the playoffs, it's 44%. That's why I've been advocating for 24 out of 136, which is about 18%.

To your question about basketball, the NBA now has a seven to ten play-in game. They have 30 teams, so you have 20 of the 30 teams are playing either to get into the postseason or in the postseason. Once the play-in games are in, they have 16 of 30. That's about 52%, 53%.

The WNBA has eight of 15 teams. So when you look at men's and women's basketball and going from 68 to 76, you're in the low 20 percentiles. Far cry from where any of

the professional organizations are. I really do believe it's the right thing.

With the NCAA Tournament bid expansion, there's been a reduction in the NIT and the women's NIT from 32 to 24. So at the end of the day, it's 100 schools out of 361 or so that are playing basketball that will make the postseason play. I feel good about the NCAA and what they've done, and it's been I think a thoughtful process.

Appreciate the question. It's always good to see you.

Q. 44% ratings up. Most watched on ESPN. I think football also sees a jump in ratings so far this season. Just kind of a two-parter: How are these things getting measured now that everything is sort of fractured, right? Linear cable is down, but streaming is up. How are you getting that information, number one? Number two, what do you attribute the increase to? Now that everybody is in their bubble they might be more focused on other conferences, but the ACC seeing an upward trajectory.

JAMES J. PHILLIPS: Really good question. To go a little bit further, we're coming off a year in football last season where we were up 57%, No. 1 in the country. Men's basketball, as you mentioned, 44%. Women's basketball on the CW 25%. It was a lower positive rating for their other platforms.

A couple of things. I'll take probably the second part first, and that is our investment in football and basketball has never been greater. I think the product has never been better. I think we've done a really good job of being thoughtful and strategic. In football it's been about playing really good non-conference games. Basketball, again, really good non-conference games.

That switch that we made from 20 games to 18 games and allowed our schools and our teams to go out and play a great neutral site team or play another really good opponent has elevated certainly that interest, and at the end of the day we've performed well.

We performed well in football last year. We performed really well last year in men's and women's basketball. We had eight NCAA Tournament teams on the men's side and nine on the women's side, which were a high mark for a period of time.

Nielsen and other areas that we can grab some of that information, we do. And it's really important now, Joe, and you and I have talked about this. Now that we're distributing dollars based on viewership those metrics matter, and us being able to know as exactly as possible in

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that type of situations what those numbers are are critical. Thank you.

Q. You mentioned parenthetically a couple of times investment and revenue sharing. The CSC last week announced the first year numbers of nearly \$2 billion shared with student-athletes thus far directly from schools. How would you assess where that process is now that we're in year two, and also, as it regards NIL, an approval of those deals?

JAMES J. PHILLIPS: So, David, I want everyone that was here a year ago to think about where we were with the CSC. It had begun on July 1st of 2025, the decision by Judge Wilken and the settlement ended up going into effect in April of 2025, and so there was a start-up of payment to players and the rest of it even before we even had hired Bryan Seeley.

I don't get a lot of things right, but I got that one right when I said to the group, you just have to be patient with the organization. We have the right leader, and Bryan Seeley has done a terrific job. It has absolutely done what we had hoped it to do, and that is what you indicated. \$1.8 billion for student-athletes, about 35,000 student-athletes participating within rev-share. You have, I want to say, it's 34 conferences.

You think about that. There's only 31 conferences in Division I, so that has now trickled down to Division II or Division III. 45 different sports. You know my background. I'm pretty entrenched in following the NCAA and trying to help where I can. I didn't even realize we had 45 different sports at the NCAA level.

So all of that is to say we're on the right course and we're headed in the right direction. It certainly has helped men's and women's basketball. I think it's really helped our conference because of that investment that they've made.

But there's more to do, and one of those things is enforcement with the CSC, and to be able to give Bryan and his staff the tools necessary to have actual enforcement, that will be the next step.

Q. You mentioned the Protect College Sports Act in your opener. Four of your member institutions, leadership from those schools, recently sent a letter to Congress asking for revisions to be made to the bill as it currently looks, specifically relating to conference realignment. What have your conversations been with those four schools since that was sent, and what do you make of that matter overall?

JAMES J. PHILLIPS: I would say a few things. Great to

see you as well. Federal legislation is an industry-wide effort. So I could probably say three or four things to that.

So you have the individuals, the elected officials, that put this thing together. You certainly get input from various groups, whether they be donors, whether they be the president's commission on college sports, whether they be conferences, athletic directors, coaches, student-athletes. So they come together to try to create the best bill that they can.

That's one.

Two is that it's rare to have unanimity on anything as it relates to a Bill in particular. The 171-page document, there's an awful lot that people like and don't like, so you have that piece of it and the significance of the Bill.

I've said from the very beginning and will continue to do so, my job is to state and support all 18 schools. We don't have unanimity in our league, and you just pointed that out with four schools. So making sure that the Senators know and making sure that those schools, whether you're for the Protect College Sports Act or you're against a portion of it -- I don't think they're against all of it -- but a portion of it, they need direct access to state their case.

The final thing I'll say is I've been very consistent about I have always tried to make sure that this was a conference that people wanted to be in, and I'm really proud of what we've done. We're as healthy as we've ever been. I said it in July because I mean that. If you look at the metrics of revenue generation and what we're going to give out to the membership next year, it will border \$1 billion for the first time. It's up 57%. Competitive success. 36 national championships in the last four-plus years. Academic success. No. 1 ranked FBS conference in the country for 19 straight years. And then innovation, all of those things. I can go down that list. I'm not going to bore you with all that.

We'll continue to stay in contact with all the schools. My job is, again, to facilitate those conversations, and at the end of the day, the people that have written the Bill and are in charge of the Bill, they can do what they think they should based on the information that they're getting.

Q. We talked about the Protect College Sports Act in July in reference to all the things that it is or is not, and you were in very much so full support of the Bill then. With some of the amendments and the mercurial nature of like you said the lack of unanimity, is this something that you're still in full support of, or is it something you're more critical of now? Where do you personally stand with the Protect College Sports Act at

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this point?

JAMES J. PHILLIPS: Yeah, it's great to see you. Listen, my directive is I serve the membership, so I try to push what the membership wants.

We have 14 schools that feel really good about it that want to sign it, and we have four schools that have an issue with a portion of it, so that's what I'm going to continue to push towards the decision makers and those that have written the Bill to date.

But there's been a lot of work across the country on this thing. We'll see kind of where it goes. It passed the Senate 77-22, which in this day and age is -- I think it's a pretty strong statement. But it now has to go through the House, and there's a recess right now, and there's going to be an election in early November.

I'm not sure what that will mean, but that's kind of where we sit today in early October.

Q. The CSC that you made mention of, the College Sports Commission and the NCAA, the dance between the two of them and working together and what that future means leadership-wise for student-athletes, for conferences, what can you say to that respect of how the CSC and the NCAA can work together, how they're working together, kind of where we go?

JAMES J. PHILLIPS: Yeah, Dan, thanks. It's gotten better. I think with the footing of the CSC and the work that Charlie Baker has done from an NCAA standpoint, there's been more synergy over this last year. And there needs to be because they have to work in unison.

As I look towards the future, I only think that that's going to get stronger as we go forward, but when you don't have all of the tools necessary in enforcement, whether the NCAA or the CSC, it still leaves a hole in enforcement.

You know, there's a lot of cases that are out there. We have some in our conference with student-athletes and tampering and the rest of it, but until you have the authority necessary to do some of these things, there's always going to be a little bit of a lag, but I feel good overall.

Bryan has been great. Charlie has been great. So we're making progress, but I don't think it's at the speed that anybody wants. So that is what I think part of the target goal for us moving forward.

Q. Let me follow up on the question about the four ACC presidents and their letter. You know, if these four presidents get their wish and the conference

membership cap goes up to 22 schools and the waiting period provision gets removed, you're the Commissioner of the ACC. Do you feel like if these presidents get their wish, there's going to be an exodus of ACC schools, or do you feel like that's going to eventually happen no matter what happens with this Bill?

JAMES J. PHILLIPS: Thanks, Mark. Appreciate it. Hypotheticals, I don't want to get into hypotheticals. I stand by what I've said. The conference is in a good place. Healthy, functioning, achieving at a high level. We'll see where all this takes us.

So you have to be ready. You have to be ready for anything, but I feel good about where we're at, and we'll see what this Bill ends up doing.

Q. In July 2025 the ACC enacted fines for rushing the court and/or fields. So with the first season of that under your belt, how do you think that's improved?

JAMES J. PHILLIPS: Can you state that again?

Q. The ACC enacted fines for colleges for students rushing the courts and/or fields.

JAMES J. PHILLIPS: Got it, yeah.

Q. How do you think that's improved, and has that really helped out a lot?

JAMES J. PHILLIPS: It has, because we just had too much of a rush. Thank you for being here and thanks for the question.

We had too many episodes where there were quarter field stormings and really put student-athletes at significant risk, fans at significant risk, as well as personnel, coaches, and event management folks.

I think the membership did a really good job of making sure that they took it to heart. Everybody had to do a self-analysis with an outside agency to come in.

I think the fines are hefty enough where it motivates people not to have an incident like that, but it's never going to be perfect because there's such great excitement and enthusiasm in college sports, especially with students, that you can't guarantee that that's not going to happen and won't happen coming up either in the basketball season or in the second half of football season.

So we'll continue to monitor it. We want to make sure that our venues are safe for everybody inside of that particular

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venue. The teams in particular, but also the fans. Thanks for that question.

Q. Protect College Sports Act, we've heard from various stakeholders; we've heard from TV; we've heard from conferences; we've heard from schools; we've heard from coaches; very vocal on the coaches. You use the word "serve" a lot, so the question is who is serving the players' interests in all of this conversation, because we don't get to hear that aspect?

JAMES J. PHILLIPS: Thank you, Joe. Good question.

So I think any of you that know me know who my north star is, has always been, and continues to be. We engaged our student-athlete advisory council, which are two student-athletes from each of our 18 institutions, to participate and help us along with the Bill. We've had several of them go to Washington D.C.

I think other conferences -- not that we're unique -- I think other conferences have done the same. On the calls -- hasn't been many calls recently, but on the calls leading up to what ends up being, you know, the version that you see today, there was an awful lot of interaction with the student-athletes.

I'm really proud of the student-athletes in our conference because they were vocal; they were engaged; they were aggressive in making sure that they had a chance to state their case to the Senators involved on both sides of the aisle.

That has to continue. No matter if it's the PCSA or it's what we're doing with rev-share or what we're doing with court and field safety, the players and student-athletes continue to need to have a big voice in all of these really important issues. Thanks

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