

Big Ten Football Media Days

Wednesday, July 26, 2023

Indianapolis, Indiana, USA

Commissioner Tony Petitti

Big Ten Commissioner

Commissioner Press Conference



TONY PETITTI: Morning, everyone. Thank you for being with us today at the 51st Big Ten Conference Football Media Days.

As I stand here and look out at Lucas Oil Stadium, we're starting the season today, but in just a few months we'll be back here with 67,000 Big Ten fans and two teams competing for a Big Ten championship.

I'm excited to begin my first full academic year as the Big Ten commissioner. This event represents not only the beginning of a 2023 football season, but also the start of a new year for up to 10,000 Big Ten student-athletes across 28 sports.

I cannot help but remember the last time I was at a Big Ten Football Media Day. It was back when I was at ABC Sports. Keith Jackson came with us. I can tell you there's nothing better than traveling with Keith Jackson around college football. He was remarkable. He hosted and introduced the coaches.

As you might imagine, his introductions were memorable. That experience inspired me to leave the coaches' introductions to the pros. Over the next two days, you'll hear from our media partners as they announce our coaches.

I'd like to thank the Big Ten staff for their great work in organizing this event and also acknowledge Diana Sabau and A.J. Edds who lead Big Ten football all year long.

A special thank for the Irsay family, the Indiana Colts, Indiana Sports Corp for serving as our hosts at Lucas Oil Stadium, an absolutely perfect venue for this event.

We have many of our partners here today, including representatives from 12 bowl games. We greatly appreciate the work that you and your volunteers do to provide memorable experiences for our student-athletes, coaches, staff, and fans.

A special thank you to the Rose Bowl. Big Ten teams have made 73 trips to Pasadena, beginning with Michigan's first

trip in 1902. The Rose Bowl has been at the center of the history of Big Ten football.

Thank you to Bill Hancock from the CFP for your dedication to college football and college athletics. It's been great to work with you again these past few months.

Welcome and thanks to our media partners here today, BTN, FOX, CBS and NBC, especially as we begin our new broadcast pattern this fall. More on that in a few minutes.

Most importantly, thank you to our head coaches and student-athletes. A special welcome to our four new coaches, Matt Rhule from Nebraska, David Braun at Northwestern, Ryan Walters from Purdue and Luke Fickell from Wisconsin. All of our coaches have been very generous in giving me their time and support as we head towards the start of a new season.

While not here today, I want to acknowledge the dedication and work done by more than 96 Big Ten football officials led by the best team in the business, Bill Carollo, Ron Gunther and Coach Barry Alvarez.

Thank you to Big Ten Council of Presidents and chancellors, our ADs, SWAs and faculty reps and all of the staff across our institutions that work tirelessly to provide Big Ten student-athletes with both a world class education and a world class athletic experience.

Of course, thank you to our fans who support all of our programs all year long with their time.

Lastly, thank you to all of our media here today and across the country who support our programs, coaches and student-athletes. We appreciate you being here and all you do for us during the season.

As I stand here this morning, I'm about two weeks away from completing my first 100 days as commissioner. To use a baseball phrase: just enough dirt in my spikes to make some observations. I want to share a few with you today.

First I want to say that by far the best part of the job is



being around our student-athletes, coaches, administrators and fans at our games, tournaments, and championships.

I was fortunate that when I started this position, I got to be at the Big Ten women's golf, men's lacrosse and baseball tournaments. Best of all, I was there to watch Northwestern win the women's lacrosse national championship.

Watching the level of play and coaching and the passion from our fans was obviously incredible. Our Big Ten staff does a remarkable job to ensure the student-athletes have the best experiences.

My second observation is more about the state of college athletics, that is that meaningful collaboration with the commissioners of other conferences and President Baker of the NCAA combined with legislative support from Congress is essential to address the changing landscape of college athletics, most importantly to preserve the core mission of providing academic opportunities through athletics. I can assure you that the work is happening in some form every day.

Third, I spent an enormous amount of time speaking to coaches, student-athletes, A.D.s, my A5 partners about NIL. I learned a lot what NIL is and what NIL is not.

What it is is a great mechanism for student-athletes to benefit from their name, image and likeness through real marketing opportunities. We as a conference not only support but celebrate a student-athlete's ability to generate unlimited benefits from true NIL.

However, it is important to say that much of what is happening now under the guise of NIL is not true NIL but rather a move to a pay-for-play system that is driving recruitment and the transfer portal. This system operates away from and without institutional control, nor does it comply with Title IX.

As a voluntary membership organization, the NCAA needs to be able to enforce its long-standing rules prohibiting inducements and pay-for-play.

I do, however, feel optimistic about the future of college athletics. Recently I had the opportunity to travel to Washington, D.C. and meet with members of Congress to discuss a fair and true NIL framework and discuss other issues facing student-athletes and college athletics.

Members of the Congress and their staffs are engaged, and there's real momentum for bipartisan legislation that benefits student-athletes, protects the academic athletic model, and recognizes that a national competitive

landscape needs national rules that can be enforced.

We are pleased that Congress is seeking to ensure that critical student-athlete welfare benefits, like continuing healthcare, lifelong learning, and mental health resources, are broadly provided.

Recently the A5 issued a joint statement recognizing the significant work done by Senators Blumenthal, Booker and Moran, as well as Tuberville and Manchin. We look forward to working with them and their colleagues to move legislation forward.

Next I want to give you all an update on the exciting work the conference is doing to provide USC and UCLA with a thoughtful and smooth integration into the Big Ten.

I had the pleasure of spending time in Los Angeles in mid June with leadership from USC and UCLA. Student-athlete welfare, scheduling, and marketing were the primary focus for both institutions at our meetings.

Our football schedule format was an important step towards integrating USC and UCLA. The Flex Protect Plus System as we call it preserves important rivalries, while at the same time the nine conference game format maintains the conference's strength of schedule and guarantees that every member will play at least one home and away game against every other member over each four-year period, truly connecting the conference.

Thanks to Kerry Kenny and our ADs for leading this work.

Led by Diana Sabau and the recent addition to our staff of Becky Penny, we are working hard on men's and women's basketball, also the rigorous post-season formats for each of our Olympic sports. I'm confident you will see creative solutions that address travel concerns, connect all of our members and student-athletes into a unified conference, and promote competitive balance.

I've also been asked a lot on the progress we've made in our media rights agreements. The answer is simply we've made significant progress towards their completion. We appreciate the spirit of collaboration from BTN, FOX, CBS and NBC. I know that our partners will work with us to provide Big Ten student-athletes with unmatched exposure.

Before we turn our focus to football, we need to celebrate the athletic and academic success of all of our Big Ten student-athletes during the '22/'23 academic year.

50 Big Ten student-athletes earned academic all American honors. NCAA. Looking back at NCAA post-season play

for all sports last year, the Big Ten had 36 teams qualify for Sweet 16s, 13 advance to Elite 8s, nine went on to Final Fours, and eight teams made to it NCAA championship finals where Penn State and Northwestern won national championships in wrestling and women's lacrosse respectively.

Big Ten student-athletes earned 19 individual national championships and collected six national players of the year awards. 120 student-athletes were drafted in six professional sports. We wish them great success and congratulate their families and coaches.

Our Big Ten hockey recently completed its 10th season with two teams reaching the Frozen Four for the second consecutive season. Michigan's Adam Fantilli became the second Hobey Baker Award winner from the conference in the last three seasons. Wisconsin's women's hockey program captured a national title.

In men's basketball we had eight teams selected for tournament play, which was tied for the most bids by any conference. Purdue's Zach Edey was named consensus national player of the year.

It was a historic year for women's Big Ten basketball. Iowa was the first big since 2005 to reach the NCAA championship game, and Caitlin Clark was the first women's basketball player in conference history to be chosen as unanimous national player of the year. She also won the Honda Cup as collegiate women's athlete of the year.

We had seven NCAA women's tournament bids and a conference record 13 wins. We also saw season-long viewership records and attendance records at our women's tournaments.

Now on to football.

We had a great '22 season. Last season the Big Ten sent two teams, Michigan and Ohio State, to the CFP for the first time, matched the SEC as the only conferences to do so. We finished with three teams in the AP top seven with Michigan at three, Ohio State at four and Penn State at seven.

The Big Ten had a winning record in bowl games, highlighted by Penn State's Rose Bowl win. A total of 31 Big Ten standouts earned All-American honors, including 15 who are in first team recognition from at least one organization.

Big Ten players earned in six national awards including the Butkus Award and the Outland Trophy.

Last season the Michigan-Ohio State game was the most watched regular season game by a margin of more than four million viewers. At the stadium, the Big Ten drew over 6.5 million fans to home games and featured the top three drawing teams in the nation. Early pre-season polls had five Big Ten teams in the top 25, and the conference welcomes back 99 all conference players.

When I think about the season ahead and the future for Big Ten football, I believe the conference is positioned to continue its historic success. It starts with our incredible history and traditions, great players and coaches and a passionate fan base across 12 states. With a population of more than 125 million people when UCLA and USC enter the conference in 2024.

With our new media partners, our reach will be unprecedented. We have done a great deal of scheduling work the past few months to ensure we have strong matchups in every telecast window.

Thanksgiving season weekend this season is a powerful example of that work. Iowa at Nebraska on CBS Thanksgiving Friday at noon. Penn State at Michigan State on NBC Thanksgiving Friday in primetime. Then Ohio State at Michigan on FOX Saturday at noon, followed by a 4 p.m. Big Ten matchup on FOX as well. Each of these games will receive significant promotion in NFL Thanksgiving games.

The power the broadcast TV cannot be underestimated. Last season 27 of the 30 most watched college football telecasts were on broadcast TV. This season the Big Ten will have more football games on broadcast TV than any other conference, a projected 34. When the new deal is fully implemented in 2024, we are projecting 45 broadcast TV games each season. Big Ten fans will move seamlessly from FOX to CBS to NBC.

As I conclude today, just 87 days in as the commissioner of the Big Ten, I'm excited about our future. With committed leadership from our COPC and ADs, energized conference staff, the addition of USC and UCLA, new and exciting media partners and expanded platforms, support from our coaches with the goal of winning national championships in all sports, and a strong belief in the academic athletic model, I believe that we are really just getting started.

Thank you for being here. Now I'll turn it over to our moderator for any questions.

THE MODERATOR: Questions, please.

Q. Commissioner, with the recent allegations that



have come out of Northwestern's athletic program, is the conference launching an investigation? Will we expect to see first punishment for Northwestern?

TONY PETITTI: Yeah, with the process right now Northwestern's launched two investigations. The process in the conference on these matters is led by the institution. There's no investigation being launched by the conference.

We'll wait to see the results of those investigations and will have further comments at that time. Thank you.

Q. Along those lines, does this behoove you to take a look at hazing within the conference, not just Northwestern, to see if this is an issue in other schools?

TONY PETITTI: Yeah, I think when something like this happens, I think our member institutions are going to take it upon themselves to do that, right? The obvious result would be to look at practices to make sure that's what happening on campus meets the standards we expect, to provide a safe and healthy environment for student-athletes. I think that's where that work needs to take place.

I know in talking to some of our directors and coaches, that they understand that.

Q. I know you're obviously new on the job, realignment, expansion is still being talked about nationally. What is the feedback from your leadership in the conference about the future of the Big Ten and whether it should be larger than 16 in the future?

TONY PETITTI: Yeah, look, I think this came up earlier. It came up a lot over the last couple months.

What I'll say is all the direction I'm getting from leadership, our presidents and chancellors, athletic directors, is to focus on UCLA and USC. I'm proud of the scheduling format we created in football. I think it touches on all the right things.

We have significant work to do on scheduling of other sports, especially our Olympic sports, to come up with the best solutions. I believe we have a good plan in motion. I think we'll learn from it. Like anything, there will be tweaks and changes. Overall that's really where we are. I'm not getting direction to do anything else other than that in terms of just what the conference looks like right now.

Q. Tony, when you talk about USC and UCLA coming into the conference, obviously big changes coming next year with the College Football Playoff too. How

do you balance staying focused on this year while also preparing for those big changes?

TONY PETITTI: I appreciate that.

Yeah, I think, look, when it comes to the schedule, we have work to be done right in front of us. Today is the start of that. We owe that in the conference to all our existing members to make sure we put everybody in the best place in season.

I don't think there's any distraction. I think we're able to do two things at once, look forward and at the same time do everything we need to do day in and day out for this football season. Not just for football, but for the rest of the schedule this year for Big Ten sports.

I feel like we have the staff and the depth. We've done some things internally to shore up our staff to be able to do that, to put more energy into the integration of UCLA and USC. I feel like the staff adjustments we've made will allow us to do that effectively.

Q. You touched on it in your initial statement, the transfer portal. Seems like it's way out of control with the number of athletes in this now. What are some really ideas that you have put forward to put the horse back in the barn?

TONY PETITTI: One of the things that we're most focused on is the incentives for students that are considering leaving. When you have a system that's providing potential benefits for entering the portal, a lot of athletes unfortunately aren't realizing those benefits when they enter the portal. There is a little bit of the grass is greener on the other side.

When I spend time with our coaches, the portal is an absolute priority. I think the combination of what's happening in terms of the benefits that are being provided with the freedom to move, that combination really came together at the same time.

You've seen this system now operate together. It's creating all kinds of different incentives that are fueling lots more kids to get there.

I think when I talk to our leadership, what I get is the real deep concern about what's going to happen with graduation as students move at the levels that we're seeing today. Moving credits and major changes, all those things are important. I think we're going to see the results of that pretty shortly with the data that comes out from this flood.

The first idea is, what can you do around the incentives?



We need to really spend a lot of time on that. That's what I think our focus is. That's why I talk about the difference between true NIL and NIL that really isn't NIL. We got to do a better job of explaining what each thing is, right? They're two very different things.

Q. An article came out a couple months ago about there was a lack of communication from the conference office down to the universities as to what was promised to the television partners, what could be delivered. Under your watch, is it going to be your mandate that you bring everybody involved in these discussions, as much as you can, somebody has to lead them, but at the end of the day these are still events on college campuses being played at off times, it ruins the fan experience in some instances for night games in November, these kind of things? What do you say about that whole discussion that came out that things were promised but hadn't been fully vetted through the colleges?

TONY PETITTI: Yeah, I'm not going to speak to the work that was done before I got here.

I would say overall that scheduling is the most collaborative process in the office. It doesn't work unless the conference staff is working with our athletic directors and SWAs on a daily basis to come up with solutions.

There are historic things that are carried forward in every conference, who you play, when you play, when you want to play. Those things are all there. We respect those. So specifically I think the first thing is collaboration is obviously a big part of it.

The second part of your question, gets back to the old balance between in person and TV, right? We hear that all the time. How do you balance the need of fans when they're traveling, at the same time trying to expose our programs to the biggest audiences, especially our national power programs that carry the load of most of that.

We understand that. I think some of the historic things that have been traditional in the conference in terms of when teams will schedule, when they won't, are carried forward. That's forward and we respect that.

Our job is to work with that to see if there can be exceptions and changes, but at the same time understanding that those institutions are advocating for their fans and student-athletes, and we're respectful of that.

Q. You mentioned a lot of the NIL stuff that's happening, you don't think it's true NIL. Why do you think the system is operating that way? How can you

through legislation or increased scrutiny by the NCAA track that stuff and correct it?

TONY PETITTI: Look, I want to provide some clarity with what true NIL means. When I say 'true NIL' I mean the ability of a student-athlete to take advantage of their marketing rights from either local or national companies. That depends on your ability, your exposure you receive, the strength of your social media, all those factors. All of that is great. That should be unlimited.

What we're seeing, though, is a sense of, because there's been a lack of enforcement around traditional things like inducements for pay-for-play, we're seeing money move in different places. It's away from our member institutions.

I think what we can do is, number one, we have very long-standing rules to address this. We need to have the ability to enforce our rules. Partly we need support from Congress to be able to be put in a position to do that without litigation or anything hanging over our heads. That's the balance. Try to explain the differences between those two.

Look, in addition you're seeing states come forward and pass legislation that is really obviously driven for one thing: to create more competitive power in that state. That's just not the right place for us to be.

Q. Commissioner, following the hazing allegations surrounding Northwestern, what conversations have you had with Northwestern's athletic director, interim coach, specifically about this upcoming season and the culture and safety for the players?

TONY PETITTI: Yeah action I I've spoken with Derrick a few times. Our focus has been on moving forward, what they're doing, keeping me informed about the investigations, what they're doing on campus.

When respect to Coach Braun, we've been able to connect, first to congratulate him on the opportunities. I'm sure that didn't happen the way he envisioned in terms of becoming a head coach on this level. At the same time, I want him to know we are here to support him going forward.

I think that's what their focus is. The investigation will yield results about what has happened, but I think there's a commitment to understand what's expected going forward.

Q. How close do you think college football or major college sports are to actually paying the players themselves as opposed to them seeking income from NIL?



TONY PETITTI: It's tough to predict. What I will say about that is I think there's a commitment to understand that student-athletes can and be entitled to additional benefits. What form that takes, how that's tied to academics, all of that needs a lot more discussion. I don't want to predict on when that can happen in terms of a time frame.

There is a lot of discussion on what future miles can be. I think the understanding among my colleagues is we have to consider a lot of different changes to the system while at the same time encouraging the true NIL to keep happening.

FastScripts by ASAP Sports