

Big Ten Basketball Media Days

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Big Ten

Commissioner Press Conference

Tony Petitti



TONY PETITTI: Good morning, everybody. Thanks for coming. Appreciate it. A couple of quick things right before we get to questions. First, you know, we're proud to announce that we're naming our Women's Soccer Goalkeeper of the Year award after Mia Hamant, player for Washington last year who passed away and was an incredible performer on the field and showed great bravery and courage going through her struggles. We're proud to be able to do that on behalf of her and her family.

Secondly, want to congratulate Dana Altman on his career. Just remarkable career. 15th all-time in wins; all-time winningest coach at Oregon. Great program. He's done a remarkable job. We'll miss him, but we wish him well in everything that will come next for him and his family.

With that, we'll get to your questions.

Q. Obviously with the bill, a lot of things to discuss there, but realignment is part of that. Where do you guys stand right now on possible realignment, and what discussions, if any, have taken place?

TONY PETITTI: The first thing to say is we are aggressively supporting the bill. We went through a journey this past summer. The bill, as far as the conference, we think this is the absolutely best path for college athletics.

The expansion language in the bill, we support that language as it's been drafted. It was amended recently, and we're fine with that.

In terms of the Big Ten, there are absolutely no discussions taking place around expansion, and there haven't been for quite some time. There's nothing formal. There's no conversations coming in. We're focused right now on the bill giving direction to our athletic directors and our coaches about what the next system is going to be, and we support the system that's going to be provided by the bill.

Past that, we're also trying to plan across things like the

CFP and scheduling and everything else. We think this conference has got 18 strong members. We're focused on that. There's lots of things that we think we can do inside the conference to continue to grow the position that we have with the 18 members we have.

Q. Then just CFP with the negotiating window kind of winding down here, where do you think things stand on that front, and what do you need to see I guess to move things forward?

TONY PETITTI: Yeah, there's not much I can say out of respect for the process and where we are in the ESPN window, but I think there's just no doubt that the CFP as a property is as strong as anything in sports.

I think there's a lot of work that's been done on the staff of all the conferences and our conference led by Kerry Kenny making sure that we can really get to a point where we can see if this is real or not. So we're engaged with ESPN. We're still in that window, so there's really not much else I can add. I think we've had good conversations.

Q. Toni, obviously you guys put in the pro player ban, but first with football and then with basketball. It seems like the leagues are taking a bigger role in trying to define roles at their level versus at the NCAA level. I'm curious, with the salary cap conversation that we've had with the bill, is that something that you guys would consider trying to enforce at a league level, and where are those conversations at right now?

TONY PETITTI: Yeah, the first thing is we're spending so much time on the bill and trying to use our members to reach out locally. That started over the summer when we got to a yes position. We were calling Senators. I think we had a real impact on getting more support for the bill as you saw in the pretty overwhelming vote that took place.

Look, there's lots of conversation about what if, what would you do next. It is our job to have conversations internally. The focus is the bill. That is the best option. From there, the best options are to work together. We all compete together, right? We play across not only in the conference, but outside.



The best plans are ones where there's collaboration, and so we all as an, A, force support the bill. Virtually every conference does. That's where we're focused. Not on spending time thinking about what the next world would be.

But there are instances like the pro player situation where as a league, you can move more quickly maybe than you could move across all of the conferences or even the NCAA. So we took a position that we have the right to make a rule like that. We think it's the best -- in the best interest of all of our members and our student-athletes to do that, so that's why we acted. Are there occasions when you'll do that? There might be, but that was very specific.

I was proud that we went as quickly. I can tell you, that was a 48-hour process. It was complicated. It was a lot of conversations in a really short amount of time.

Q. Just curious, can you confirm that the ESPN exclusive window has expanded five days past this Friday? I know you're probably limited in what you can say here, but realistically, what finances need to be guaranteed, so to speak, to make everyone on board with giving up the championship game?

TONY PETITTI: First, congrats on the new gig.

Q. Thank you.

TONY PETITTI: What I would say is, you know, we're in the window. I'm not going to sort of hint at a number. I think, more generally, the way to think about it is that at a 24-team format, I think at least in the Big Ten, playing a championship game is not going to happen, right? So, therefore, that is an important revenue day for the Big Ten, just as it is for the other conferences all the way across the board. Not just in the P4, but the other conferences that are part of the CFP.

So we've got to have a financial plan that makes everybody whole and then leads to whatever comes next. That's always been the case. When we talked about 24, we were very careful to say that there's got to be interest that justifies making a change like that. So I'm optimistic that we'll get there, but that's what the work is over the next few days.

ESPN has got some more time in the window, and then if we get out of that window for some reason, then we will make a decision about what comes next.

Q. Tony, what do you make of the that \$49.1 million cap on potential player compensation? It seems like the market keeps going up for especially football and

basketball. For the Big Ten, I feel like a few of these schools would probably have to lower amount of money they're playing players to get under that. Where do you fall on that?

TONY PETITTI: Look, I think what I'll say about it is every school knows where they are currently, but all 18 in the Big Ten support the bill, so they've already made that decision that these are the right numbers.

We got to yes 18-0. I think our members really like the retention idea. I think there's value in trying to keep your own players and creating an incentive, and the fact that that rev share comes directly from the institution is a better path both for the institutions and for the student-athletes to have that as opposed to more NIL deals coming off through NIL Go.

Really the answer to your question is, if we felt that that was the wrong number, you know, we would have maybe been in a different position on the bill, but we're not.

So everybody is a different spectrum. There's 18 different, and we need to go across the league. I think we've answered that by giving it the support that we did.

Q. With all the successes that have come out of the Big Ten last year -- Iowa, Illinois -- what's the next step for the conference as it pertains to men's basketball?

TONY PETITTI: Yeah, I'm really excited about our basketball. You know, I had the opportunity to work on basketball a lot in prior role at CBS, and they were watching a lot of great Big Ten basketball teams.

When I got the job and the position here, you didn't realize, like, oh, it had been a long time since we won. Not because we didn't have a lot of great basketball teams. It's just how difficult it is actually to win.

So to have that three or four days that we had last year with the back-to-back wins on the women's side and the men's side was really remarkable. I think we've got great coaches in this league. We're really deep. The returning players, the acquisitions in terms of new talent coming in both from the high school and the portal on the women's side, the same thing.

This league has a really deep commitment to basketball, men's and women's. That is playing itself out. I'm really excited about where we are and how deep we are. We'll see. We'll go play, and then we'll see.

There will be unexpected success, and there always is. That's the great thing about any season.



Q. Tony, back to the bill. We're into October now. I am curious to hear your thoughts on the timeline for anything that could happen in the House now that it's out of the Senate and just with where we're at in the calendar?

TONY PETITTI: Yeah, I mean, look, the members control the timeline of how they do their work and when. I've learned more about that than I probably ever thought I would over the last three years about what goes on down there.

I think what our role is to actually lobby and have conversations, so the timeline for that is now. We've been doing that, and we'll continue to do it. That's an effort that goes across from, you know, presidents and chancellors to athletic directors to coaches across all of our sports making phone calls, explaining why this is good for us, why it's good for college athletics, student-athletes, and everybody in the system.

How they actually come back and what the timing is and when, I think we have some general ideas of the parameters. There's a lot of work. But, look, this bill has already kind of outperformed. I think if you had said back in the summer it could get the support that it got and bipartisan, and tribute to Senators Cruz, Cantwell, and Schmidt for the work they did, and I know all the leagues lobbying. So it's already done better.

I'm just going to continue to be optimistic that members of the House will, you know, listen to the groups that are involved and take guidance. While I don't think anybody says anything is perfect, but it's a compromise that's bipartisan, and we really need it to happen.

Q. I know SEC, Big Ten were the big debate in football. When it comes to men's basketball, do you feel more confident you have the best conference in the nation?

TONY PETITTI: You know, I get asked. Here's what I'll say about that. I love the rivalry across. You started with football. So, yeah, rivalries are great for fans. Having that debate about who is better, who is this, who is deeper, who wins, that's all great. That's what fans want.

I'm just glad that we have that organically. We don't have to try to create it. It just exists. Our fans talk about it. So that's all good.

On basketball it's the same thing. You know, we're going to go out and play. At the end, there will be one team as champion, and we'll see who that is. But we are very excited about our chances. I can tell you that. We feel

really good about the depth in the league and across on basketball. Again, both men's and women's.

We get to say who is best at the end of the year.

Q. With a 32-game college basketball schedule, another exhibition available now, the oversight committee is looking at possible summer competition. Do you feel like there's an appetite for maybe expanding what college basketball could be maybe in terms of number of games?

TONY PETITTI: Yeah, there's a lot of talk. What I think about, and this is, again, as a result of talking to coaches and ADs about how we approach our playing seasons. What I would say is that what we've learned is the best way to do that is taking a 12-month approach. Looking at how many games you're playing, when you're practicing, when you're recruiting, what the demands are on the student-athletes, what we're asking our coaches to do 12 months a year. Looking at it holistically.

What I would hope we do, we try to express to the NCAA outside of our league is we want to look at the whole calendar. If there are better ideas, let's start working on them. Let's figure out what the right schedule is. How many games we play, when we play them. All of those things should be constantly evaluated.

That's what leagues are supposed to do, right? Look at what you're doing and playing. How you play, when you play, is an ongoing thing. It shouldn't be something you think about every four or five years. It should be something you think about every season.

So I don't have a specific, you know, answer about whether some of the ideas in the summer are good or bad. I just wish that we were looking at it across everything we're trying to do. What is the best college basketball season for everybody involved from start to finish?

Q. Obviously, the bill and all these things are huge stories. One of the things I've actually heard a lot from my readers in the last couple of years is channel fatigue when they got the Big Ten schedules. The team that I cover is on at least eight different channel this is year. Is there anything that can be done about that? Is the league sensitive to that at all? Have you gotten feedback from viewers, listeners that, Hey, I don't know where to find the team that I care about?

TONY PETITTI: It's a function of the changing system in the media landscape. When there are more entities getting into live sports and are interested in acquiring rights to games, I think, you know, we have a lot of competing



forces. You're trying to make sure you provide the right resources to the league in terms of revenue, trying to find the right scheduling patterns, and then you're trying to find the widest distribution.

It is in the interest of the league to make sure that where people are aggregating, our content is there. We don't necessarily control all of that, right? When I was doing this a long time ago, I started with basically there was no FOX Sports when I started at ABC. You just talked about three networks, and then ESPN and then ESPN 2 was launched.

Things evolve and change. Fans generally are there, but your point as well is an important one, which is we have some obligation to make it as easy as possible, right, and where the content flows, how we inform things, and how we move throughout the day, but I don't think it's a Big Ten or college sports.

I think it's an entire ecosystem where you are seeing content in many, many places, whether it's MLB, the inform, NBA, and obviously college sports. It's just we've got to make sure we're doing the right job to promote and tell people where to find it and what the expectations are.

Q. I've never heard you articulate this, so I apologize if you have in the past, but you mentioned before you have to give up the -- if you go to 24 in college football playoff, you have to give up the Big Ten Championship game, so therefore, there's no established Big Ten champion on the field. So you give up that, you give up the money for that. What does college football and what does the Big Ten get out of a 24-team playoff? What's the value?

TONY PETITTI: There's a couple of things about the championship game. Number one, you know, crowning a champion on the field is incredibly meaningful. The teams play really hard. It means a lot. You see the reaction from the teams who win in those games. We've had some great games the last few years and very high-profile matchups.

But when you are about to go on a journey in the playoffs, whether it's 12 or 24, to have those teams compete while others are waiting, it's just not necessarily the right thing. That was expressed to me from the coaches. So what's the best football thing to do?

Secondly, what we gain is access to something that's become a definition of success. The definition of success in college football is qualifying for the CFP. That's the definition. That's where you start, and then you hope that you're the last team left and you win.

What we are focused on is giving more programs a chance

to have that level of success. You know, if you look at it, you know, we want more programs competing, we want more games in November. We've got a lot of teams that if they were thinking about 24 right now, the amount of teams that are alive and playing games right now would be even greater, and we're five weeks in. That would continue all the way across.

What we think we get is just an incredible race at the end of the season competing both inside the league and out. And, yeah, giving up something that's been built, I worked on the first SEC Championship game. When Roy Kramer was a Commissioner, I was at ABC. I remember, like, we had no idea you could even create one of those things.

It goes way back, and I understand the value. There's a lot of history, and it's created great moments, but now we want to create more moments in the CFP for our fans.

Q. You have dozens of student-athletes fighting for their eligibility in court with the 5 for 5 rule. Outside of the ones with professional experience, the ones that would have otherwise qualified for an extra year, do you believe the NCAA kind of failed them in the roll-out of this rule? Do you think they should be fighting all of these athletes at every turn in court?

TONY PETITTI: Yeah, that's a tough question. Look, what I think is if student-athletes go to court and establish their eligibility, we respect that. That's the way I would sort of think about it.

I think it's kind of hindsight to say, could this have been rolled out differently? I think you'll get a lot of opinions on that. For student-athletes that want to come back and they feel like the legal avenue is the best way to establish their eligibility, we have a number of those student-athletes now competing in the Big Ten or are about to in the winter season.

We support that. I think it's a difference, though, when you cross the line to becoming a professional.

Q. I spoke with an athletic director last week, and they said that they currently have seven lawsuits that they're dealing with and in the previous 20 years they had none. How important is it to get this partial anti-trust exemption to maybe put some guidelines in and just stop all the lawsuits? How many are you currently dealing with?

TONY PETITTI: Yeah, there's a bunch of ongoing. I think the bill does a good job of addressing some of the core things that we should be able to establish, like how long you can play for, how you move across, like transfer rules,



those types of things. The bill does an excellent job of establishing a system where we don't have to fight that anymore in court.

The problem is not just the legal. It's state by state. So you don't even know where the cases are coming from, so the volume is just all over the place. It's lots of different entities that are doing it, lots of different nuances and topics and exceptions and waivers.

We just got to get to a cleaner system that allows us to compete nationally and just slows down all that. It won't be -- look, we're not going to -- the bill isn't going to stop every possible thing. That's not what it's intended to do, but in areas like eligibility, transfer, litigation around NIL and states trying to come over the top of the system and the settlement, this will clean all of that, so that's really critical.

We just got to get to a place where the future isn't like the last three or four years. That's for sure.

Q. With this bill, if it doesn't pass the deadline by January and party control flips, do you expect the Big Ten Conference and other conferences to still lobby for maybe a new bill, but the process has to start over?

TONY PETITTI: I mean, look, we've been lobbying since I've got here. I don't think there's any sense that if for some reason -- and, again, we're really optimistic it's going to pass. If it didn't, we still think there are many motivated members on both the Senate and the House that want to do something to help college athletics.

So we will work with anybody who wants to be a part of that process. We will continue to do that work.

Q. Going back to football for a second, there's been a lot of conversation about the TV ratings for this year and whether the average and the total viewership, but when it comes to September games and those nonconference games, how important are those when it comes to the TV side of things and those numbers?

TONY PETITTI: Yeah, I mean, look, it's the media piece of it. It's attendance. It's everything. We need to play more good games. I think we've been really clear about that.

We think that the season can start way better than it does. We're committed to that. If we get the 24-team playoff, you are going to see many more competitive games scheduled. That's my belief. We'll commit to that. We don't need to say we'll do it. We'll actually commit to doing it and working. We're spending a lot of time trying to prepare for that.

It takes a little bit of time to change schedules, as you know, as teams have commitments, but you're going to see many more games. If 24 does happen, you'll see the incentives change, and I really believe that you'll see us start to schedule more.

We really want to do it. It's the right thing for fans. It's the right thing for our student-athletes and the competition. You know, I think it's just got to be sequenced with the expansion of the playoff first.

Q. Do you have any idea maybe an expanded NCAA Tournament might impact the Big Ten in terms of numbers you might expect to get in?

TONY PETITTI: We've done really well the last few years. I think part of and talking about expansion and why we support is in a league of 18 and the way we travel and play, you're going to have teams that are really, really good that tend to look like maybe .500 in conference play, .500 in conference play or slightly better. So giving those teams access and a chance to acquire more spots is going to be really critical.

It's very consistent. We feel like access -- we want more access in football, and by definition, more access in basketball makes sense for us. I think this is a good number. It will help, especially in the league as deep as we are with the 18 teams.

I think one of the things the NCAA did and Gavin did a really good job of is recognizing how conferences have expanded and changed and how that impacts the need to have access to the tournament.

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