

# WNBA Media Conference

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## Commissioner Cathy

## Engelbert

### Press Conference

CATHY ENGELBERT: First, grateful to the administration, the state department. We've known negotiations were intensifying and a solution was in sight. I was personally emotional at today's events because you never know until the end.

These are geopolitically complex times. And the moment -- and I'm overjoyed that BG will be reunited with her parents. Her mom and dad, as a mom myself, I can't imagine the anguish they've been going through. And obviously you saw Chelle (Griner) at the White House this morning as events unfolded.

And let's not forget BG's fellow WNBA players. They advocated for her every day, and the whole women's basketball system. I want to thank you, the media, for keeping BG at the top of your coverage because that was helpful. And to the WNBA fans as well who continued to advocate for BG in getting her home.

So really grateful today. It's a great day. And we look forward to BG having her time and space and recovering from this whole ordeal, awful ordeal. But we're grateful, again, to the administration, the state department, for getting her home.

So with that, questions.

**Q. You mentioned a little bit, what was your reaction -- forget being the commissioner for a second -- but your reaction hearing the news of Brittney's release? I'm sure you heard along with the rest of us, but what was your reaction when you heard the news?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: Really emotional. I can't tell you what this means to, I think, the whole WNBA community to have her home safely. Basketball aside, by the way, this was just really emotional.

I'm not a hugely emotional person, but I got very choked up. Kind of knew for a couple of days that something might be happening, but you never know, again, until it happens

in that moment. And things fall through at the last minute. So when it happened this morning, I was just emotional. That's all I can say.

**Q. I'm curious if the WNBA had any plans what to do next if and when BG was released.**

CATHY ENGELBERT: So obviously support her family, herself. Chelle's on her way, I believe, to Texas, where Brittney's on her way to Texas. And obviously she'll be evaluated medically. And obviously give them their time and their space and reunite with her parents as well. So we're obviously going to respect the privacy of this very critical time in her coming back home.

And obviously I'd love to call her. I'd love to see her. We're going to give her the appropriate space and time for that, and then follow what Brittney and her family want to do about re-engaging with the WNBA and our players.

So I know our players are very anxious to re-engage and reunite with Brittney as well. So we'll follow the players' lead. We're a players-first league and what they want to do is what we'll try to broker. But let's give Brittney some space and her family. It's been a long ordeal, a horrible ordeal. And really look forward to her return and hearing her voice.

I always call her this gentle giant. I look forward to reuniting myself with her. She had written me a letter a couple months ago. Obviously the appeal occurred and wasn't successful. She got moved, on election day, on the midterm election day, and so we've been monitoring it very closely ever since.

**Q. Can you expand a little just on the synergy between obviously the WNBA, the union, the players individually, the NBA, the work you guys have done? Probably a lot of it maybe behind the scenes over the last 10 months with the common goal of getting Brittney freed?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: I appreciate that question because it has been a total team effort. I mean, we use that analogy in sports all the time. But we could not have done this without the NBA. We could not have done this without Brittney's agent, Brittney's lawyers, the whole ecosystem around women's sports, women's basketball, sport in



general.

She's a star, one of the greatest players ever to play the game. So I think the efforts of everybody have been helpful. The support has been helpful. The voices have been helpful.

But again this came down to the leadership of our government and our state department and they got this done, and I'm so grateful to them, but it was helpful to have all of those players behind her. NBA players, Steph Curry opened up during the ring ceremony, thinking about Brittney. Phoenix has the BG42 on their court when they opened up their season this year. Obviously we did a lot of things this season to remember Brittney so she wasn't forgotten.

Team effort by everybody. I can't tell you that that doesn't happen in every industry, but it happened here.

**Q. Wanted to ask you about your takeaway from the situation. What are your thoughts about players going to Russia in the offseason moving forward? And what type of guidance do you think the league will provide to players or you personally since I know you talk to a lot of players? What will be the thoughts moving forward whether players should go there, how they should interact with teams when they're abroad, et cetera?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: Great question, because, as you know, I've been a big advocate for letting the players do what they want to do with their offseason. This is their time to figure out what they want to do. But we're also chipping away at the economic model and growing the league.

So we tripled the number of player-marketing agreements we did with players this year. In order to do one of those agreements they stay home here in the U.S.

And I think more and more of our players are taking other opportunities here at home. Like what Chiney (Ogwumike) is doing with ESPN, Candace (Parker) with Turner, Sabrina (Ionescu) was announced working with Oregon, Skylar (Diggins-Smith) and Kia (Nurse) doing broadcast things with their respective NBA teams. And many others. We've got current WNBA players coaching in both the G League and the NBA and at the college level, et cetera.

We're starting to chip away at that. I think the players are going to do what they think is best for themselves but we definitely inform them all the time of the security risks of where they might be playing.

This just happened in Turkey, was that explosion in

Istanbul. So whether it's Turkey, Russia, China, wherever our players go to play -- Italy, Spain, Germany -- our players play everywhere.

We also have 23 players from outside the U.S. who don't live in the U.S. in the offseason and play in Europe or live elsewhere from 13 different countries. So we're globalizing our game as well.

So, again, our players are going to do what's best for them in consultation with their families and their agents. And we're certainly here to help them think through the security risks and things like that.

I think you're seeing players take advantage of other opportunities, and we're certainly going to provide them more opportunities to do things with the league in the offseason and keep the momentum going around the great play that they put on the court every year.

**Q. Following up on that question, what about some of the players that maybe don't have the name recognition or the star power to get those endorsements, those marketing opportunities? What ways can you advise them or help them so that they feel like they don't have to go overseas?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: Again, I think there are some opportunities here in the offseason for them to either play here in the U.S., or there's also internship opportunities that aren't part of big marketing agreements like the stars might get or endorsements from corporations.

But there's internship opportunities to hone their skill set for what they do in life after basketball. And that was one of the reasons I even took this job, for those of you that were on my presser in May of 2019, I said one of the reasons I took this job is someone told me the average tenure of a WNBA player was five years or so.

I said, okay, they're college graduates, they're maybe 28, 29, 30 years old. Now what do they do for the next 30 years? We need to do a better job from the league of placing them in internships, in apprenticeships, in skill sets. Nike has been a great one to take former WNBA players into their training ground.

We need to make sure that our players know these opportunities exist. They're focused on playing basketball during their young years, I call it, and not everybody's body will hold up, like Sue Bird's did for 20 years. But we're providing more and more opportunities should the players want to take those opportunities.

But I know as a former D-I college athlete there wasn't a

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WNBA back when I came out, but if there was, I would want to play and play year-round because it's such a passion. The game is such a passion for these players and they're elite athletes.

I understand why they want to play wherever overseas, here in the U.S. But I think the more opportunities we can give them at home the better we'll all be.

**Q. Is the WNBA going to take any steps now to support the pledges that Cherelle made to campaign for other Americans considered wrongfully detained overseas, especially Paul Whelan?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: You might have seen in our statement, we shouted out Paul Whelan. Also, wrongfully detained Americans. I've learned a lot about the process of how many wrongfully detained Americans we have around the world, not just Russia but other countries.

I think it's admirable that Cherelle and I'm sure BG -- and I know Trevor Reed, who was returned through a trade back in the spring is doing a lot of that advocacy. So I think it's admirable and we'll continue to support that.

But right now Brittney's on her way home and we're just hoping that can get settled here with Brittney back in good physical, mental and emotional health, and then support any efforts.

But I will tell you, it takes a lot of courage for leaders to do what the administration and the State Department did here. And so we're very thankful. And we know -- I now know, because I had a front seat to this, how hard these State Department officials work, how hard the administration officials work, and I'm sure they're working hard -- you probably saw Secretary Blinken talk a bit about the hard work continuing on Paul Whelan.

But this deal was on the table for Brittney and our government thought it was the right deal to do at that time. But I think they're working on all the wrongfully detained Americans and we'll continue to support those efforts.

**Q. How much information had you been given prior to today to know that something like this was happening or something like this was close to happening at this time? And the second part of that is, in terms of how the CBA is structured for mental health services, does the league have any plans or have anything that they can possibly consider doing to support Brittney's mental health coming back to the states after this ordeal?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: Yes. So I can just tell you that

obviously I've been involved in this since the day Brittney was detained. I think it was April when she was deemed wrongfully detained, which was a very important designation for it to go to the part of the State Department called the Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs.

And there hasn't been a week or a couple of days that have gone by that we're not in touch with this SPEHA group. We knew earlier this week negotiations were intensifying, that a solution might be on the table and it was in sight.

And so I had a little bit of upfront, but again recognizing with all my experience in the corporate world before coming here, very geopolitically complex and a deal isn't done until it's executed and gets transacted, it wasn't until this morning that we knew Brittney would be on a plane coming to the United States.

But we knew there were some intensifying efforts and that the administration was trying to get a deal done for quite some time, since back in May, quite frankly. So, again, our gratitude, excitement, and everything from that perspective.

The second part of your question?

**Q. The second part was regarding mental health services.**

CATHY ENGELBERT: Because I get emotional when I talk -- what I knew a couple days ago I was so emotional and then this morning.

So, yes, again, at the right time -- we don't want to bombard Brittney. She'll get evaluation and care through kind of, call it a repatriation system here into the U.S. through the government resources. And we are here, the Players Association, I'm sure, is already working on this as well.

We have our mental health resources certainly ready. But let's let her get home, reunite with her family, go through the processes that she'll go through. And then we're here.

I think the players really want to see her. And they'll fly anywhere to go see her.

Again, we're going to give some time and space, but she'll know we're all ready to help emotionally, mentally, physically -- all that has to be evaluated. And then we'll certainly be there for her and use our mental health resources at both the NBA, WNBA to help in any way she may need. Just like we have available for our players.

**Q. What I was curious about, can you give us like specifics on did you wake up to this news like the rest of us did? I know those who are on the West Coast, I woke up at 5:30 to 12 text messages from people. What time did you know that it was a done deal? And then you mentioned that she is headed to Texas. There's a reintegration center there, that's where Trevor Reed went when he flew home, do you know if that's where she's going?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: I don't have the specifics on exactly where she is going. As I mentioned, we knew that negotiation was intensifying. We knew that there was some reach-out on the other side because, again, as the Biden Administration has disclosed, they've had a deal on the table for quite some time that they thought was a reasonable deal but at the time did not get responses back from the other side.

So, we've known for some time that something was possible. And then it was within the last couple of days that I was made aware that this actually could happen. And I really had this anxious excitement about something happening, especially thinking about with the holidays upcoming and just to be reunited with her family at a time when everybody should be home with their families.

And I know we have a lot of people sacrificing a lot in our military, et cetera, but to get her home during this holiday season was great as well and good timing for Brittney. So that's what I knew.

Then this morning -- I was expecting maybe something last night before I went to bed and stayed up very late and had flown in from Chicago and stayed up late. But nothing happened last night, which is why you never know whether these are going to happen until they actually get executed.

So then was in contact with the State Department this morning and our liaison to the State Department, who was -- we knew Cherelle had been invited there very early there this morning so we knew there was possibly some good news coming.

And obviously then the President appeared with Cherelle and the press started reporting on the great news that Brittney was coming home.

**Q. I want to ask about, over the course of the time this took and the many months, there was a lot of skepticism in the public that it would actually happen because they didn't see transparent and sort of tangible things. And dealing with Russia, maybe you were never going to get transparent and tangible things along the way there. But now that it has**

**happened and there was some reaction sort of this morning, "oh, my God, I can't believe it actually happened", do you think that there might be a lesson in this for the fan base, especially the younger fan base in women's sports that hasn't been through something like this before, that the patience will pay off that sometimes these things do take a long time, but the patience is worth having, that they might not have been through something like that before?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: It's a really good perspective because I, too, had that perspective that everyone's, like, she has to come home immediately. I was like, number one, she has to come home safely. Like, this is life here. And she's in a country not known to support women's rights and LGBTQ+ rights and racial rights.

So from the time she got arrested I knew it was geopolitically charged. I think there are some lessons there. But also the support and the outpouring of love and sympathy and empathy for what Brittney was going through from the whole ecosystem, I can't highlight that enough. And the strategy.

So I spent a long time in business, had government relations report to me. And public policy and geopolitics is so complex today.

Obviously we're divided in this country and obviously there's a lot going on geopolitically. With the Russian invasion of Ukraine, that obviously heightened the geopolitics of this particular situation.

Yes, it's a lesson to be learned about how complex the world is in which we live, the risks we take in our everyday lives. And, again, I think there are some lessons to be learned here. But the transparency issue, I mean, it's really important to have a good strategy, which I think her agent and her lawyers, they should all be commended for this process as well of having a strategy of how to get through the court system in Russia and then how to get an appeal done and how to get basically Brittney deemed wrongfully detained.

So all those were steps that led to the successful negotiation today. I can't highlight enough the administration and the state department, especially this Special Presidential Envoy for Hostage Affairs for their strategy here.

And, look, it's really tough to go through these type of negotiations, and presidents get elected to make tough calls. Leaders lead around very tough and conflict situations like this. And it takes a lot of courage to get these kind of deals done.

So I got to see a little more than most on the thought process, the strategy, and again overjoyed at the result today.

**Q. Obviously the league is going to move to a 40-game season which provides more opportunity for revenue and things of that nature. How extensive have the talks been or going to be as it pertains to making sure that a lot of these young ladies don't have to feel like they're being force today play overseas due to the economic value of playing overseas versus playing at home and not having to deal with some of these things, unfortunately, that Brittney Griner had to deal with because of the strict rules and regulations in some of these countries that they have to play in?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: So I talk a lot during All-Star and Finals and Draft pressers about the economic model we're trying to build so that we can pay the players more and give them more benefits that we know they want. Obviously just three years ago when we were negotiating a progressive collective bargaining agreement, we added a lot of that, tripled the top players' pay. A top player can now make up to \$700,000. The benefits are better.

But we have to build an economic model. We're only 26 years young. We're not 75 or 100 or 110 like some of the men's leagues. So we're working on that and studying history. We're building rivalries and building household names. That's part of the player marketing agreements is to really put a lot of money -- we'll spend \$1.5 million on that. Have a half million dollar prize pool that didn't exist before for the Commissioner's Cup. And we bumped up our bonus pool for playoffs to a half million.

So we are chipping away at paying the players more so they have more opportunities here. We have internship opportunities. They're finding other employment. They're getting more personal endorsements because we've been throwing a lot of marketing dollars behind marketing them.

But Rome wasn't built in a day, as I say, and we need a couple more years of this transformation. As I came in, I said it's a 3- to 5-year transformation. We hit the pandemic. That put us a little behind. We raised the capital in February.

We're deploying that against a lot of things, bringing new fans in, building out our digital footprint and our digital products. Hiring human capital to help us grow the league even more so that the players will be able to say this is where they want to play 40 games. We'd love to play more. Right now 40 is where we're at. It will be an all-time high. Media exposure is so important for these players.

The "if you build it, they will come," last year we had more games on national platforms than in our history. And should be no surprise, we had our most-viewed season in 15 years, our most-viewed playoffs in 16 years, our most-viewed Draft since 2004, since Diana Taurasi was drafted.

So, again, chipping away at all that. We still need some time for full transformation to take effect. And the deployment of that capital we just raised in February. We're well on our way. I understand the question.

But again, I think some of our players will still want to play overseas because one they're either from there -- because we have 23 players, over 144, from 13 different countries, or they don't get a lot of playing time in the WNBA. It's highly competitive here.

And, again, as a former college athlete, I would have wanted to play year-round when I got out as my craft. And they are the best in the world. So we look forward to working with them on an economic model to thrive in the future.

**Q. To follow up on your last point, I'm curious what you could share about those expanded player marketing agreements this offseason.**

CATHY ENGELBERT: So this was something that we negotiated in collective bargaining was to do more around player marketing. We have to build more household names in this league. People are interested in the game and content, but they're interested in the players and rivalries that you create.

And so I think we'll have 10-plus players under player marketing agreements this offseason. We had three last year.

Coming into COVID and the Olympic year last year, we couldn't do much more than that. But now we can start to blow this out and get players under these agreements. Already, one of the players from last year's crop, I was talking to one of the heads of one of the media companies, and he's like, wow, I really see her showing up everywhere. She's amazing. She's great. We'd like her to come on.

So that's the purpose is to try to get these players more exposure. So not just we pay them to stay here in the U.S., but also that they get to build their brands and they get to connect with, whether it's media brands or corporate brands and get endorsements.

So that's the purpose. And then they can make more

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money. They'll stay here. They'll rest their bodies in the offseason. They'll still train. A lot of them still obviously train in the offseason even if they're not playing overseas.

So that's our goal with those marketing agreements. And we hope to expand that even more next year.

**Q. And about BG, I think what I'm most curious about, is what did you and the league office not only learn about BG in the past nine months, but what did you all learn from this whole situation in order to make sure that something like this never happens again?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: I'd say, look, this is a very complex situation with when she got arrested, with the Russian invasion of Ukraine, with the leadership in Russia. And again, I'm grateful to our leadership here stepping up on this.

But you learn. You do have to have patience, as one of the prior questions talked about. You do have to -- learned an enormous amount of patience. Learned enormous amount about strategy.

There is geopolitical strategy that you need to follow in these situations. Sometimes you don't need to be out front of these issues, and sometimes you need strong advocacy around these issues.

So certainly learned a lot about that. And then really just the one thing that I learned was, first of all, about BG personally, I mean, I had obviously spent time in the WNBA Wubble with her. Also spent time with her even when I first came into the league. And just how resilient she is.

Although I didn't get to talk to her live, wrote her a few letters. She wrote me back. Just her courage in the face of this enormous adversity, which is what I put in my statement because those are my words -- enormous adversity. And just the will to continue fighting for herself and I'm sure was thinking primarily of her family and her friends and her players back here at home.

And just learned a lot about her resiliency and that's -- a professional athlete has that usually anyway because that's how they've grown up and trained, and you lose big games and you win big games. But this was beyond basketball and learned a lot about her courage and her resiliency.

**Q. How big was it for the whole WNBA organization to hear NBA stars like Steph, Deandre and more speak loudly about Brittney, BG's case and make this case not only an American case but a global case because of the interest of the fans in Europe especially was**

**really big?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: Really good observation around the support. And that's why I did shout out the support of the NBA and the NBA players earlier because we needed all hands on deck. We needed all the resources we can. The NBA players have huge brands, huge followings, as you mentioned, not just here in the United States but globally, and it was really important to have their advocacy.

I mentioned Steph Curry on the day of the ring ceremony. And when they were celebrating an NBA championship from the prior year and he starts shouting out "Brittney Griner." Same thing during the ESPYs this year. He and others shouted out Brittney Griner.

Dawn Staley, coach of national champion South Carolina, every day is tweeting about "Brittney is our player."

It's great to have both NBA and WNBA players and especially in markets where the NBA and WNBA share a team like in Phoenix, like in Brooklyn, Indiana, Minnesota, Washington. The players are really advocating -- I'll never forget Chris Paul on the Phoenix Suns talking to me last season about the ability to go shoot around with Diana Taurasi and Brittney Griner and Skylar Diggins, how important that was to him especially because he has a daughter. So really important. And I think that was something that Kobe Bryant started, his advocacy as a girl dad, and that has really factored into, not only support when we were in our WNBA Wubble, but certainly for Brittney Griner throughout this whole ordeal.

**Q. Ever since you became the commissioner of the WNBA, you've been tasked with some of the most difficult situations. CBA, expansion, the pandemic, and now this situation with BG. What have you learned about yourself as a leader over these last few years?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: When you take on leadership roles, especially a leadership role of a brand that's as important to the society as the WNBA, you never know what you're going to be faced with. I certainly had no expectation what I was going to be faced with. I worked really hard for 33 years, led a firm of 100,000 people, had a lot of complexity, including geopolitical complexity, but nothing like what we faced here.

And everybody faced the pandemic, but live sports was even more unique, and especially a small league like the WNBA in a big sports ecosystem during that summer of 2020.

And then the political nature of what happened in Georgia,

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then George Floyd, and the players stepping up and the launch of our Social Justice Council. And then obviously this news about Brittney last February. And then culminating in the great news today that she's coming back.

So definitely I learned a lot about just always using all of your energy around the strategy.

Some of you have followed, since I came into the league, I put a very simple strategy: Player first, stakeholder success and fan engagement, fan experience. So every decision I've made -- so I learned, like a lot of times I have to go back and make sure that I'm following those three pillars of the strategy, because this brand is important. These players as role models are important.

I learned a lot about being an advocate but also managing through crisis. And never a dull moment here at the WNBA, for sure.

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