

WNBA Media Conference

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Cathy Engelbert

Press Conference



CATHY ENGELBERT: So excited to be here in Toronto. Thank you, everyone, for being here. This is a seminal moment for this week to launch our global platform right here in Toronto.

As you know, this is the first time the WNBA is playing a preseason game in Canada, and we're thrilled with the reception. This morning I was with Deputy Mayor Jennifer McKelvie, who presented me with a proclamation that May 13, 2023, is WNBA day here in Toronto, so it was great.

I'd like to -- there's a lot of people to thank. I'd like to extend my thanks to the NBA Canada office, who's been instrumental in helping us put this on, and ^ LSE for all that you are hard work putting this event together, my staff, the Chicago Sky and Minnesota Lynx for participating in this event, and really all -- I just met with a lot of the corporate marketing partners who helped make this possible, as well. It takes a lot.

Again, important milestone in our history. An exciting time, any of you who follow us all the time hear me talk about the transformation we're effecting at the league with our record viewership here in Canada. I didn't focus so much on our viewership here, so focused on the U.S. and globally, but over the last couple seasons there's apparently five million WNBA fans in this country, which we're excited to bring two great former championship teams here with Minnesota and Chicago.

I mentioned globalizing the WNBA is an important pillar of the work we've been doing at the league, trying to grow this thing on a worldwide stage. We're an international league with players from all around the world. Last year we had 23 international players from 13 different countries. We have even more in training camps right now.

Obviously right here in Canada we have Bridget Carlton, and the Lynx will be playing tonight. We have Natalie Achonwa. Won't be playing because she just had a baby. I just met her little one, one month old little boy.

And then Laeticia Amihere who just got drafted by the Dream, and of course Kia Nurse who's now in Seattle. And

I was back with Kia here in the fall in early November. It was snowing by the way back then, so I'm really loving this weather here. Doing a Her Time play event, a -- four clinics around the city during our time here.

Look, all around the world there's a huge demand for WNBA content, and we see this as a first step, a major step in hosting more global events like this in the future, whether here in Canada or -- you know, it's funny. Once we announced having this game we got a lot of interest from cities in the U.S. who don't have WNBA teams to do preseason games, and cities around the world, whether it was in Europe, Middle East, Africa, Asia, so we've heard from a lot of people.

I think that's just a sign and signal as we build the economic model for this league that players are going to become more global brands. They already are. We're trying to build them into household names both here, Canada and in the U.S.

In case you didn't notice tickets went on sale on International Women's Day back in March, and demand was very high. I think the first day we released tickets, 10 minutes later they were sold out. Two days later we did another batch, sold out very quickly.

Again, I know there's a lot of passionate. I've felt it since I've been here. We have a 12-foot statue that yesterday I got to visit right outside the CN Tower, outside of Scotia Bank today. And just really proud of what Toronto has done, the branding in this city.

I just walked in and the fans are lining up outside and they're just so excited. A woman just came up to me and was like, can I get my picture with you, because this is my lifelong dream to attend a WNBA game? Makes it all worth it.

With that, let me open it up to some questions.

Q. Can you update us on where you are on the expansion process?

CATHY ENGELBERT: Yeah, we've been working really hard in the off-season on that. I mentioned to many of you that follow us that coming off those two COVID years, '20 and '21 -- we really didn't have fans until after the Olympic



break in 2021, so last year our first full season, so this off-season we've been working very hard, getting closer, working again -- I think I originally mentioned we did a big data analysis about 18 months ago with 100 cities.

We narrowed that based on psychographics, demographics, arena, corporate partners in cities that we knew would step up, and narrowed that originally to 20 based on the data analysis, and then based on discussions with potential ownership groups, long-term committed ownership groups and all the things they're looking for for their success, we're looking for right about 10 now that we're talking with and doing due diligence on and live analysis on, so we're getting closer.

Obviously I've told you Toronto scored very high on the list, so Toronto is definitely on the list. But we'll continue to work on that through this season and hopefully have something to announce later.

I will tell you I know it's really hard to make a roster in the WNBA. I think that's been true for quite sometime. There's a lot of things to think about, like having an expansion draft and a lot of other things. Our GMs, our players are being signed to longer term contracts. They're making more money in our league and more opportunities not only lead marketing agreements, team marketing agreements, but also endorsements.

I been watching the NBA Playoffs, and almost every commercial has a WNBA player in it. Really proud, whether it's State Farm or CarMax or Mic Ultra, or so many other partners that are putting WNBA players up front.

As we, again, embark on this transformation, and we're well into it now, I think the time for expansion is right and ready right now.

Q. On the topic of expansion, obviously there's a lot of data analysis that goes into that stuff, but I'm wondering how much does the feel you get from just being here this weekend, does that stuff matter?

CATHY ENGELBERT: It's a great question because it does matter a lot. So I've not made a secret. I'm going to be visiting this summer a bunch of different markets that we are looking at. Here in Toronto, I was Portland, some other cities visiting. Because it does matter when you feel the support, because women's sports and women's basketball has a fan base that you want to make sure -- like in our cities it's rabid and avid I call it, and these partners show up, these fans show up.

It's really important to be sure that it wouldn't be a one-and-done in a city, that you think over the long-term

they are really going to support the WNBA team in their market. That's why we're looking -- that's why it was like eight at first and now it's getting a feel for ownership groups committed, arena situation, literally down to practice facilities, down to corporate partners, down to season ticket holders and the data that would be there around season ticket holders.

That all goes into the analysis. But certainly the vibe that you get from the passion for the sport, the diversity of the population, which is the psychographic part of what I was referring to and how they support. We've got NCAA women's basketball viewership by city. We've got a lot of data that we can look at to determine what we think.

And then you're right, you also have to visit, which is why I'm down on this little tour of these cities, to make sure that we're comfortable that they'll support a long-term team. The last thing you want to do is bring owners in and not set them up for success, and that's why we've been doing so much of the economic and financial transformation in the league so not only our current owners, but new owners can come in and thrive. I do call it survive to thrive. It's literally happening before our eyes. We're getting a lot of our teams to thriving versus surviving.

Q. Obviously a lot of people here do want expansion, logistics, finances, SI. Is something like this something that could continue year after year? Is coming up to Canada, even if an expansion team isn't in the near future, something that is in your future?

CATHY ENGELBERT: Yeah, I think it's certainly something that given the success of this game, as we're going to see with I think close to 19,000 people here today, and just again the support around the city as I visited a lot of different venues, the inspiration it gives to young girls.

These youth clinics are so important to me and so important to our players to prepare the next generation, whether they end up being WNBA players or not. Get them to stay in sports. We know the girls drop out. So all of that is really important.

And certainly this I think would be viewed as a huge success, and we need to take a look at what our next step is in our global platform and how we would do that, whether it's preseason games or even regular season games, like the NBA went to Mexico City this year for regular season game series. MLB just did that as well.

Looking at all different elements of that. We play 40 games. We have -- next year we have a jammed packed footprint because of the Olympics in Paris next year, so we've got to look at how we fit those kind of travel

conditions and things like that.

But obviously Toronto -- I came from New York. It was like an hour and 10 minutes. Very quick flight. So we'll just continue to take a look at the different cities in Canada, including Toronto, for future games.

Q. I'm curious, obviously you talked about the Olympics and starting to look ahead to next year, and you've spoken at length at a couple different points over the past year about supporting players as they build their individual brands, and the league has marketing agreements and player marketing agreements. But I'm curious, obviously not every player is able to be on those sorts of agreements, and some players have been dealing with the different scheduling conflicts with various leagues overseas and EuroBasket this year. I'm curious what steps you're taking to support those players that are relying on those options and also playing overseas for their national teams and maybe that aren't interested in doing the marketing side of it necessarily.

CATHY ENGELBERT: Yeah, and not every player -- we have a lot of players reaching out to us to do the marketing. And why? Because they know we're part of the league, too. They know they're setting up for the next generation after they retire for success.

So I think there's very few players that I think don't want to do the marketing. And whether they do choose to play overseas and then aren't eligible for at least the league marketing agreement, they can still do team marketing agreements under that.

I think they're also seeing the 10 or 11 we have under league marketing agreements this year who are getting their personal endorsements from our partners, and therefore they're getting that visibility, that followership, other opportunities. Their personalities are showing, the storytelling, and all that.

I think, again, it's not for everybody. I agree with that. We have 144 players on our roster, so obviously we can't do it for everyone. But I think a rising tide lifts all boats. I'm a huge believer in that. I think we're lifting other women's sports. Women sports are lifting us. The momentum around that, soccer in the World Cup will lift us this year with Women's World Cup. Things like that, we all need to take the momentum and take advantage of it.

I think our players see that momentum that will lift them, as well, even if every single one of them doesn't paid in the off-season through a marketing agreement, but they have other options. We have internships. We have -- one of the

reasons I tell people I took this job is someone told me when I came in that average tenure of the WNBA player is like four or five years, which is not unusual for pro sports to be that short. That's the average. Obviously we have people like Sylvia Fowles and Sue Bird and Diana Taurasi and others who have played much longer than that.

I said, okay, they're college graduates. What do they do for the next 30 years? I'm in my 37th year of a career. So one of the things I want them to prepare themselves for the next phase post-basketball and what are they going to do and what are they going to do. Are they going to be entrepreneurs? Are they going to be social justice activists? Maybe they want to run for office. Maybe they want to be the CEO or the commissioner next time, or coaching or front office in sports.

Those are all the opportunities we need to prepare these players for while they're still playing for post basketball.

There are a lot of options and we're never going to tell them what to do and what not to do. Your question about national programs, we totally honor -- our prioritization rules do not apply to national team commitments for the training period within like a FIFA World Cup or Olympics or something like that.

They also don't apply to rookies in their first year of the two years. So players have those opportunities to get better, to make rosters, things like that. To train, to make national teams, to qualify for the international competitions.

But there's no perfect answer to it all because we're trying to run a business and have a season. We expanded our season to 40 games this year, which makes it a longer footprint, but I think the players understand we're trying to balance all of that with their international commitments, as well.

Q. How would you evaluate ownership interest in this market, and whether you want to or not, are there any groups that you want to specifically mention who have shown interest in being owners?

CATHY ENGELBERT: Yeah, I know there's been press reports about different ownership groups here that are interested in bringing a WNBA team to Toronto. I will just say I'm not going to comment on specifics of any one or two or three or four that we might talk to in any city because there are several ownership groups in several cities, multiple ownership groups in the same cities who are interested in a W team. Look, dawn of a new day. This is a seminal moment for this league, that there are so many cities interested in a WNBA team, including here in Toronto.

We're working with, again, a variety of -- 10 ownership groups around both the U.S. and Canada, and we'll just continue to talk with them as to what the challenges are in their market, what the opportunities are, how they view a successful business platform, season ticket holder platform as I mentioned, arena situation.

We just continue to have a due diligence on all of that, and I think there are a few here in the Canada -- I'll call it Canada, not just Toronto -- that have showed some interest. We continue to work with them, and really just pleased with -- I'll tell you, I'm very pleased with the support of women's sports here. It's definitely something I wouldn't have known as much about in my business life, and I spent a fair amount of time in Toronto with clients at my prior employer.

Now I just see the passion for sports here across the board, and certainly I think women's sports, especially -- I was with the senior national team head coach today who told me that you're ranked fourth in the world in women's basketball. That's amazing. I know soccer you've been successful, hockey obviously very successful and such a great national sport here.

We'll continue to talk to different interested ownership groups who we think would be good partners with our current owners to build this thing into a powerhouse media sports and entertainment.

Q. The volume of corporate sponsorship, I think it's 14 that have been affiliated with this game --

CATHY ENGELBERT: Think about that. That's just one game.

Q. Was that a goal, or did it exceed expectations? It seemed like a lot to me.

CATHY ENGELBERT: Definitely exceeded our -- not the number, but the size and the support of those corporate partners, the names, the marquee names, the smaller companies. At least it exceeded my expectations of what we could do for a preseason game, one game, our first game kind of outside our borders in a very, very long time. I think it exceeded my expectations for sure.

Q. Are there any obstacles to having a team, a franchise in Canada?

CATHY ENGELBERT: You know, someone asked me that yesterday, as well. I don't think there's obstacles or barriers for any one city. Whether it's in Canada or the United States or elsewhere I think it's the same issues that

we face with our current teams. Do we have the right arena situation, the right practice facility? Do we have the season ticket holder base? Will the owner be in it for the long-term?

A long-term commitment in sports, whether it's male or female, is a long-term commitment. Every owner of a men's team knows that and every owner of a women's team. Those are the challenges, and our challenge continues to be the under investment in women's sports, by a corporate partnership and media perspective.

If we can right size the valuations like we are doing in the WNBA with some of our new media announcements as well as we get longer term into media negotiation, we can right size that. The barriers will disappear a little bit around the economic part of this, because that's the hard part for owners coming in, to say I'm committed. But need bigger media, corporate partners, bigger dollar numbers, and they need it locally.

The whole media landscape is changing and streaming and RSNs and all the disruption going on there.

So those are all the challenges I'd say, in the thinking about starting a startup. A new WNBA team is a startup. It's a startup franchise. Just like if you started up a tech company, you're starting up in another industry. Those are all the things you have to think about.

Do you have access to capital, raise capital if you want to build a new practice facility or something like that? Interest rates up, inflation is up, the cost of running -- look at this arena and running all the back of house here to put on this game today.

They're not challenges specific to Toronto or any Canadian city. They're just challenges overall, as owners think about investing in us and we think about partnering with them.

Q. It's said that Blacks in Toronto love sport. They love basketball, but they don't know how many will come to this game because of the fact they felt that maybe they would get a lot of ^ information. Are you hoping that that's not true in terms of all the hype and all the numbers that have been thrown around by people?

CATHY ENGELBERT: Yeah, I've seen firsthand the diversity of the city, matching our data, by the way. Hugely diverse population here, whether it's race, whether it's LGBTQ+, whether it's indigenous. Really fascinated and very impressed with the diversity of this city.

I have demographics on who's actually attending the game.

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

I know we have a lot of youth girls. I know the clinics we did there was huge diversity in the youth girls who attended these clinics, and even just some of the other events I did around the city.

Yeah, again, we're certainly hoping for a very diverse crowd today. I think we'll have that. But we'll certainly take a look at that. I think the marketing and branding here was amazing. The fact that we have this 10-minute sellout on the first day. Yeah, Taylor Swift had that, because nobody could get her tickets.

But yeah, we want to make sure access to all different groups and everybody knows we're here, and I think now that we've had this one, I think everybody is going to know next time we come, get in line and make sure they get their tickets.

Q. You talked about players from all around the world. Global ecosystem is growing, but you also have some identifying players in your league. But right now in France women want to play professional sport who want to wear a head scarf are not allowed to do so. Any comment on that?

CATHY ENGELBERT: Yeah, no, absolutely. I think we've been known as one of the most diverse leagues in sport, one of the most inclusive leagues. Inclusiveness is much more important to me to make sure everybody feels like they have a space in this league.

And so I didn't know -- I don't know the specifics of other countries, but certainly here in the WNBA we have coaches who wear head scarves, we have players, and then at the NCAA level, as well.

We would tolerate that certainly if it was the WNBA.

Q. You were mentioning about surviving to thrive, and that's kind of where you see some franchises. How do you assess individual franchises in terms of health, and also an overall scheme of fostering safe growth so nothing collapses? Is the goal to get a franchise to where Aces are when building world class facilities for practices?

CATHY ENGELBERT: Right. So obviously our franchises are made up of 12 different businesses with 12 different owners. Some are NBA affiliated. Some are independent. It's hard to do the pure apples and oranges comparison. Some play in smaller arenas. Some play in bigger arenas.

Obviously look at what Seattle did last year, and they raised capital off that; \$150 million valuation. I think you're going to see some other teams raise capital at healthy

valuations.

Yes, we're certainly monitoring kind of the financial wherewithal of all ownership groups. I think we in a really good place versus three, four years ago. Remember the year we played in the bubble, we literally flipped the business model opposite what it should have been.

Now the league took on all the expenses. There were no fans, no fans in our arenas, but there were still leases and arenas costs and things like that. So the owners had tough year.

But because we were able to put on that safe season in the bubble, media money, corporate partnership monies, we were able to maximize as much as possible. And I always say, if we had been out of the media landscape for 20 months, had we not played that 2020 season, I probably wouldn't be standing up here right now as the commissioner.

I'm not sure some of our teams -- it was really a critical time for everyone, and now I think all of our teams are investing and all rolling in the same direction. Not everyone is going to build everything that everyone else is.

Seattle is breaking ground on a practice facility as well. New ownership groups have told us we'd be willing to invest in new practice facilities, as well. So really proud of what our owners are doing right now. They're all in. They're all investing. We do monitor financial situations. I'm not worried about anybody right now.

Q. I happened to read that the WNBA is turning into a more international league. My question is, how could the league do it, to get more international players? Especially if you compare the WNBA with the NBA, the number of international players is still small.

CATHY ENGELBERT: Right, but compared to our total -- so if we were 23, and I think we'll get a few more this year out of 144 or 140, it's actually a bigger percentage than everyone thinks. We are up towards -- we could be up towards the 20 percent.

One of the reasons is our big feeder system is the NCAA system, so if we can get more international players into the NCAA system -- it doesn't have to be.6 we draft people directly from Spain, France, Germany, others.

But generally where a lot of that occurs by our GMs and head coaches, et cetera, and the league, is through the NCAA system, who's obviously a huge feeder from a viewership, from popularity, for games of consequence, all of that.

Still amazing viewership. Average about 10 million, and 12 million at peak. We would like more international players in our league because that helps us grow the global brand of the business, the global brand of the players. So yeah, we would love that.

I think development programs in countries -- and obviously there's huge development programs in the U.S. and Canada, but strengthening those at earlier ages, getting more youth girls to stay in sports. They drop out at alarming rates compared to male counterparts by the time they're 13, 14. Those are critical ages to have mentoring, coaching, female coaches, too.

There's a lot of data that if you were coached by a female coach and you get to that 12, 13, 14 you're going to stay in the sport.

I think we have to look at all those things. But I think each of the federations of each of the countries under kind of our FIBA or international umbrella needs to take a look again at those development programs early on, get them either into NCAA system or great development programs where they can feed right into the WNBA so we can expand our footprint.

I really do admire the NBA and what they have been able to accomplish something like that.

Q. ^ Kh started as the league has continued to grow and build momentum, it at least feels like the media coverage is also growing, as well. What do you make of that growth, and are there any particular areas of growth you'd like to see from the media in terms of how we cover the WNBA?

CATHY ENGELBERT: Yeah, we know and I know from studying other sports that are in the trajectory that we're in, at the age we're in and tipping off our 27th season that you all make such a big difference in telling our stories. We're a very player-first league. You tell more human interest stories outside of the game, certainly reporting on the game, and there's no day of the year I love more than our draft and the tip of the season because I get this warmth ^ Check discussion about basketball and these players come to the court and there's stories on and off the court and comeback stories and stories of super teams and stories of the play on the court and then rookies and changing of the guard from our veterans to these young amazing players coming out of college or coming from international.

You're a huge part of what we do, and usually -- I was going to end this press conference with thanking you for your support and your coverage because it needs a ton. I

mean, the consequences of not having the media coverage and not having the stories told, this league doesn't thrive and this league doesn't grow. It is really important.

When I walked in the room, I said, wow, I was really impressed with the number of you in this room today covering this. It's really important to the future of this game.

Again, it's important to the future of the leadership, I think, because I did -- a clinic yesterday out at the University of Toronto and I walked in and saw these 40 diverse young girls, and I said, you know what I see? I see a future CEO when I look at you. I see a future government leader, I see a civic leader. I see a future commissioner. I see a future coach, head coach, and I really do see that.

I know from my own upbringing where I was in a very male dominated world that sports gave me the confidence to thrive in my career, gave me the confidence -- I was very shy going into college, and played in two sports, and no WNBA back then, nor would I have been good enough, but I played for Muffet McGraw. Again, having these role model coaches, Muffet McGraw who's been a Naismith Hall of Fame coach and just such a mentor who sponsored so many players, including in our league, is so important.

Your coverage, your storytelling, especially at this time -- we're at this really seminal moment -- last year I talked about valuation and feeling like we're well on our way, and this year it's about taking these players, making sure as many people know what their stories are and what they represent and that we do a good job marketing that and you do a great job reporting on that and creating interesting content that then people are going to want to come watch them play, and that's where we are. It's a very seminal moment, so it's a great question to end on, so thank you.

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