

WNBA All-Star Game

Saturday, July 15, 2023

Las Vegas, Nevada

Cathy Engelbert

Commissioner Media Conference



CATHY ENGELBERT: Welcome to Vegas. Welcome, everyone. It's great to be here for All-Star 2023. AT&T, great partner in this. Great to be here in the home of the defending champion Las Vegas Aces. It's just great to be back here. We saw all the support when I was four days on the job in 2019 when we had the All-Star Game here, and then obviously in 2021 a little less about what we're doing this year because of COVID. But I'm really proud to be here.

I'd like to thank the Aces' organization, Mark Davis and that whole organization, who we've worked with through this. As you know, for tonight's game tickets sold out very quickly, which is a great problem to have. I think just everybody is thrilled with the WNBA experience here. With WNBA Live. We had a very exciting 3-Point Contest, as you all know, with Sabrina Ionescu's really historic record-breaking performance. And then the Skills competition, with the Aces' team versus the Liberty team. I thought that was a good format.

Then our fan fest that I hope you all got over there. I know I spent a lot of time there. Fifteen league partners activating in there. Just outstanding what is going on. Exciting meet-and-greets. The players have been very accessible, which was a great part of it. I saw long lines yesterday after the Skills competition with players. So that was great. And customized merch. I've gotten my nails done there as well.

We just saw huge All-Star voting numbers this year, which was great, showing our fans are really engaging with our content. We were up 33 percent there. The draft show that ESPN held with Team Wilson versus Team Stewart to draft the players averaged almost a half a million viewers, up 174 percent from last year. We're really excited tonight with prime-time national television on ABC and then in person here.

The All-Star rosters again show the amazing talent in this league. Second year in a row that A'ja and Stewie are captains. It's fitting that A'ja joined with a lot of her Las Vegas teammates, Chelsea, Jackie and Kelsey, after the incredible start of the season that they have had. And

obviously, then joined by their head coach, Becky Hammon, who is in her second year and second year coaching the All-Star Game.

First-year coach Stephanie White is a great story coaching for the other team tonight. We're also excited to have Brittney Griner here as a starter, her ninth All-Star selection. That's the most of any starters here.

Then we have triple-double machine AT, Alyssa Thomas, who has helped the Connecticut Sun to a fantastic start and leading a talented list of reserves as well. I hate to even call them reserves. They are All-Stars. And while an injury is keeping her out, it was wonderful to see two-time league MVP Elena Delle Donne named as an All-Star for the seventh time. Thinking of her.

We also have five first-time All-Stars. I love that. With Allisha Gray, Ezi Magbegor, Kelsey Mitchell, Cheyenne Parker and our No. 1 pick in the draft this year, Aliyah Boston, who is the first rookie to start an All-Star Game in almost a decade, since 2014. So really excited to see them on the court tonight.

Innovation is always at the forefront of what we're doing here at the W, and the All-Star Game is no exception. You saw we're putting in some special rules that hopefully will enhance the pace of play, add some excitement, for the second consecutive year. A four-point shot will be in effect. I was talking to some of the players about it. There will be two four-point circles at each end of the court placed 28 feet from the basket.

We'll also quicken the pace by shortening the shot clock from 24 to 20 seconds. I'm excited for that. And we'll award automatic points for free throws until the last two minutes or if we have an overtime.

We also did a lot around youth basketball these last couple days developing the next generation of talent, which is a big focus of ours. We had our first annual, hopefully, all-girls Basketball Without Borders global camp yesterday, featured 39 female prospects from 24 countries. We had a Jr. WNBA-NBA showcase presented by Nike earlier today. It included elite 13- and 14-year-old boys and girls from



around the U.S. and the world.

We know how important that is in building confidence in youth girls to stay in sports when they get to that 13, 14 years of age. I know for someone like me, who was a Title IX kid growing up in the '70s, that was really important for me to stay in sports and build confidence to be a leader.

So it's been a packed weekend. We're seeing the buzz around WNBA Live. It's just a part of our whole business transformation. I've been standing up here and talking about -- for almost four years now. I think fans are consuming our content in greater numbers, which is an important part of how digital natives and younger fans are consuming content. But not only is our viewership up 67 percent across our national platforms this year, we're on pace for the most-watched regular season in 20 years. Remember, we're only in our 27th season.

Average attendance is up 27 percent during the first half of the season versus last year. That is a good sign and signal. We're creating appointment viewing. We have our WNBA Friday Night Spotlight on Ion, Thursday nights with Amazon Prime Video and our great partners at ESPN Disney with our weekends, and CBS and CBS Sports Network. We're also on Meta and NBA TV. So really, I've been talking about this all weekend too and all season, quite frankly, to have 205 of our 240 games on national platforms -- I think when I came into the league maybe we had 60. Last year we had 140, and I was boasting about that being the historic high. Now it's 205 of our 240, which is great.

Our partners continue to step up and recognize the WNBA, the valuable business property that they want to invest in. CarMax became our most recent WNBA Changemaker. That's our elite group, cohort group, of great partners, our most committed corporate partners. They joined AT&T, Google, Deloitte, Nike and U.S. Bank. Earlier this week, we signed the leading black-founded and women-led beauty brand. They're an official marketing partner of the league, Mielle. I just met with their CEO today for lunch and had a great chat.

We're also seeing kind of team partnership increases as well. This was all part of our strategy to make sure that we're finding partners who share the values of the WNBA and our players. Our investment in digital transformation, the WNBA App and WNBA.com, has given fans more ways to interact. Trying make it easier to be a fan, take away the friction that we've experienced in our fans. We listen to our fans. With the support of our WNBA Changemaker, Deloitte, who played an integral part in this 18-month journey we were on around our digital transformation, the rebuilding of the app has resulted in massive growth and a

huge engagement from our fan base. We're up 147 percent over last year.

This is important work we're doing to set the league up. I tell people not for three to five years. These aren't incremental changes. They may seem it, but it's a broad plan to help us out for a long time. So fully focused on taking the appropriate steps and timing to grow our league.

I know you're going to ask me about expansion. Our conversations with potential ownership groups are headed in the right direction, and we will have some more news to announce about that at a later date this season.

We're focusing on adding additional corporate partners to our roster. Working on right-sizing our future media rights deal, the valuation of all of our assets. We're making a lot of positive progress there. This was the strategy that we put in place a few short years ago. Even with those pandemic years, we've been able to triple player salaries, expand charter flights, increase bonus pools, expand our player marketing deals. I can't be more pleased sitting up here at All-Star talking about the state of the league, and the state of the league is strong.

So lastly, I do want to share our special announcement. Being here at All-Star, I'm also excited to announce that next year the three-time WNBA champion Phoenix Mercury, will host AT&T All-Star 2024. Thank you to Mat Ishbia and the Mercury leadership team for your ongoing support. As All-Star continues to get bigger and better, as you see here in Vegas, we know you'll put on an amazing event. I think Mat is in the room somewhere.

This will be the third time Phoenix has hosted it. Exciting to see one of the W's inaugural franchises step up and want to host this. We had a process. They're incredibly talented at Phoenix. Remember, they hosted our first-ever Commissioner's Cup final a few years ago and did a great job. It will be our third annual WNBA Live event. I know they took a lot of notes on this year in Vegas and will just continue to grow that as part of the WNBA All-Star experience. So looking forward to that.

So with that, I just want to thank you all. Your coverage and support means a lot. It really moves the needle for us, so I'm happy to take questions.

Q. With the All-Star experience here in Las Vegas, what has it been about this market that's worked for All-Star Games? Do you see it potentially coming back in the future? And how would you improve it? Players have had some concerns about distance and the busy period. So what improvements would you like to make if the All-Star Game came back to Vegas at later date?



CATHY ENGELBERT: I think we love Vegas. It's such an entertainment and sports capital. Obviously, right now with their championship Aces and then the Golden Knights winning the championship, I'm hearing a little bit about title town here as well. But it's a great market to be in. Our players love coming here. We at the league love coming here. So I'm sure Vegas will be in our future plans.

But we're kind of looking out three years or so now as we think about All-Star. Next year it's a little challenging year because of the Olympic break next year. We'll have to support our national team athletes, including our USAB National Team, as well as we have plenty of other players who play for other teams outside the U.S. We'll pause for that.

That will be a challenge next year, trying to fit our 40-game footprint in with an Olympic break. But we've been working on that. And really, I don't see as many challenges as I saw three years ago. I'm feeling such a great vibe here. The success, I think you're going to hear about it from WNBA Live and our partners activating and our fans supporting those partners, because that's what it's all about. It's about helping our partners be successful as well as helping our WNBA players and the league be successful and our teams.

I definitely see Vegas in the future because it's been such a great market to hold an All-Star Game. This is one of our major tentpole events of the year, like our Draft, like our WNBA Finals. We'll be back here in less than a month for the Commissioner's Cup final, when Vegas faces off against the Liberty for that big half-million-dollar prize pool. So really proud of being here in Vegas.

Q. Dwyane Wade, obviously, with the news that he is going to be an investor with the Sky, that coming out, and then my understanding is that you had a conversation with him leading up to that decision. Has there been an emphasis on your part to reach out to these high-profile athletes, whether or not it's men's sports or other sports, to be potential investors and join ownership groups in the league as you look to see what could either happen with current franchises or even maybe expansion down the line?

CATHY ENGELBERT: Great question. Dwyane did call me earlier this week. I had known he was talking with our Chicago Sky leadership and ownership. It's one of those days where my kids think I'm cool when I get a phone call and it's Dwyane Wade, and they're, like, Mom is talking to Dwyane Wade.

But, no, just really support. Anybody who wants to come in

and support our league and invest in our league. I think we're being viewed, especially coming off our capital raise last year, a capital raise of a few of our teams, the investment our owners are making across the board, really being viewed, again, as something I had a goal to be viewed as a sports media and entertainment growth property.

These corporate partners and these media companies and our investors now aren't looking at us just because it's the right thing for them to do, but it's the smart business decision for them to do. Whether it's current NBA players who now can invest in independent W teams under their new CBA or retired players, like Dwyane and Baron Davis and Pau Gasol were investors in our league capital raise, and others. I really think it's a good sign and signal about the view of the value of us as a growth property.

Q. Richard Lapchick's group gives this league high marks every year for diversity. But we also saw this year, we lost one Black coach and gained a Black coach, and then we have Wade coming in as ownership. Can you speak again on diversity and especially in a league that is majority Black players?

CATHY ENGELBERT: Yeah, obviously you know when I came into the league, and along with our head of league and basketball operations, Bethany Donaphin, we put in some incentives to bring in former WNBA players as coaches. That has yielded great results in the diversity of our coaching base. I think 70 percent of our assistant coaches are people of color. Our head coaches, I think when I came in we had three women. Now nine of 12 are women. And so really proud of the diversity that our owners have placed in these coaching positions and the incentives we put in place. It's really paying off. I thought it would take much longer to get those results, but when you look down at the assistant coach and head coach level, we're making progress.

But it is important. It's also important for us to support minority-owned and Black-owned brands. That's why I think it's great some of the things we're doing in our markets. I know our Chicago Sky, our New York Liberty and some of other teams are really supporting local businesses, diverse local businesses, to make sure that we're supporting them.

We do that at the merchandise level as well. You see Playa Society here and some of our other merch partners who are smaller businesses than the big businesses in the merch area. But we're supporting them as well. I hope you all continue to write about that because I think our teams are making a lot of progress there.

 . . . when all is said, we're done.®

But certainly on Richard's report, we're proud to have our A and A-plus in certain categories and will continue to work on that with our team ownership groups as we look to further diversify. I think having former WNBA players coaching and in the front office as GMs, as team presidents, is certainly a goal of mine, as are players who when they graduate from playing on the court, I know some of them want to be involved, whether it's at the league or team level, and want to sit kind of at that intersection of business and basketball. No better place to do that than the WNBA.

Q. You talk about the expansion as far as just the growth of the league, obviously, the fan bases. I know when it comes to preparing for All-Star weekends you guys look at transportation, lodging, and just simplicity as far as getting fans in and out. With the renovations going on at Crypto.com, is there serious talk about having a WNBA All-Star hosted in Los Angeles, which happens to be the second-largest market?

CATHY ENGELBERT: Obviously we put out a process, an RFP, a process for all of our teams to bid on the next three years of All-Stars. Obviously, with the arena situation in L.A. previously, I think as they have looked at, obviously, with the Clippers playing there and the Lakers playing there and the concerts and everything they do there, they have been taking a look at that, their arena situation.

But certainly L.A. would be a top market. Hollywood, entertainment capital, sports capital, great sports town. So, yeah, absolutely we would consider L.A. But it would be up to the team ownership to make that bid to us, and us to consider that bid. But L.A. would be a great city. Every time I go out there I'm always impressed. I always have a great time. Love where it is, near L.A. Live. Can you imagine WNBA Live by L.A. Live? I think that would be fun. I know the ESPYs were just out that way, and obviously, all the award shows. So, yeah, L.A. would definitely be on the list.

Q. Over the last few years, we have seen almost every franchise transition away from the coach and general manager role. Curious what you attribute that change to and if you see a value in those roles being split?

CATHY ENGELBERT: Being split. So for those that didn't follow it, when I came into the league, it was the coach and the GM were the same, and now separate. I think what happened was in our last collective bargaining cycle free agency was much more opened up, so the GM job became a lot more strategic. We needed full-time GMs to focus on that.

Again, it's up to the owners to decide what the structure is, because in some places, we still have it together. We've had some retirements of GMs or of head coaches and things like that where it gave teams an opportunity to take a look at the GM track versus the coach track. But I do think this is the byproduct of a very active free agency system and the GM job now becoming very strategic.

Q. What sort of feedback have you gotten regarding the cadence of the travel and practice schedule with this 40-game season? And do you feel comfortable with the Olympic break next year keeping 40 games for next year?

CATHY ENGELBERT: I think this year, again, we're wide open. There's no FIBA World Cup. There's no Olympics. I think the cadence of games and the travel schedules, while always tough in summer travel for all of us who travel a lot in the summer, I feel good certainly about this year. Next year is a challenge. The footprint is a challenge, because depending how long you have training camp, how we want to get an All-Star Game in next year, I mean, in the past some Olympic years we haven't had an All-Star Game or an All-Star break. Next year we will. I just announced we'll have it and we'll have it in Phoenix.

Then obviously we still want to have the Commissioner's Cup as well because that is important to the players, gives them other opportunities. We're building some rivalries. I've heard some players who were mic'd up talk about, we got to win this game because it's a Commissioner's Cup game. So that's working out. It's building some rivalries and things like that. Yes, the footprint will be challenging next year. But I feel confident. My team has been working. It's a little bit of a Rubik's Cube, quite frankly, but we will have a 40-game season next year.

Q. Kelsey Plum said yesterday she wasn't sure how she felt about team expansion because she felt other issues were more important and should be done first. What have your conversations with the union been like around team expansion and how would you address a concern that it is taking more priority over other things?

CATHY ENGELBERT: Yeah, I think it depends what time of year you're talking with either our players or us about -- you know, we obviously have a strategy at the league that is very player-first, focus on stakeholder success and fan engagement, making it easier to be a fan and find our content and our games. So we're sticking with that strategy.

We talk with the Players Association about that strategy. There are choices that you can make around your

allocation of both your human capital and your financial capital. That's one thing I think I was brought in to evaluate how you do that, and how you do that effectively.

So I think, again, coming off training camps this year there was a lot of call for expansion, whether rosters or expansion of teams. I talked a lot about how hard we're working at the league level on expansion of teams because I think as you look at, again, a country of 330 million people, longest-tenured women's professional sports league in the country by double any other at 27 years, we need to be in more than 12 markets.

I used to run a big firm in a hundred cities. Being in 12 cities, I think, and especially as we get into our next media rights negotiations, and our corporate partners want to see us in more cities as well, and the fan base and the loyalty and the fandom gets bigger. So that's why I would prioritize that. But we do listen to the players and the Players Association about how we balance, how we allocate our, again, finite capital, both financial and human capital.

But I think we're building a business. We're growing a business. I think the players are going to benefit in the end. Again, we'll continue to listen to them and talk to them about those choices and educate them on why we think the choices we're making are better for them longer term and certainly setting up the next generation of players for a long time.

Q. On the topic of charter flights, it's fair to say the casual fan knows that WNBA players fly commercial, and players frequently voice that they would like to have charters. Historically, competitive balance has been cited as one of the reasons for this current system in place. But do you think at this point in the league's history that the negative publicity and awareness that is brought upon the league that stems from the flight situation outweighs any possible competitive advantages that any single team would get?

CATHY ENGELBERT: I would say what has held us back on that before is the underinvestment in women's sports, the undervaluation of whether it's our media rights, our assets. You and I talked the other day about the economics of building a revenue base that could fund that in perpetuity, essentially, and certainly for the long term. We're not going to jeopardize the financial stability of this league and do something -- I think it has less to do with competitive balance and more to do with can we afford this long term, can we afford to give this to the players.

As you know, we've been chipping away at it. We'll put a

little over four million into charter flights this year. Our players, some of them have benefited more recently. We've had back-to-backs on that. We'll do the full playoffs this year. As we feel confident and comfortable as our valuations are going up, as we're growing the league revenue to fund this long term, both from the league and the team perspective, we'll get more bold. I think as we get into our next round of media negotiations, that is probably going to be the time of a breakout. But we'll have to be very thoughtful about how we then deploy our current capital and that capital that we gain through any new media rights or corporate partnerships.

That's what we've been doing. We're seeing the returns in the growth of the league, from a revenue perspective, from viewership, attendance, all the things we've been talking about, digital and social engagement. I feel confident we'll get there long term, but we're not going to jeopardize anything in the short term. I think putting a little over four million dollars on the board this year was a big step, and hopefully the players see that we're committed because, as I've said, since I came into the job, there's nobody that wants that for them, more holistically, than myself.

Q. I think Cheryl Reeve said a couple weeks ago that teams were hoping to have full access to Second Spectrum tracking data by the end of the month. What has that process been like for teams and what kind of expansion would you like to see on the team and the public side?

CATHY ENGELBERT: We are very close to getting optical tracking in all our arenas. It's a technology that has to be implemented. In some of the NBA arenas, it's already there. Some of the W-only arenas, it's not. It's an implementation of a technology, just like a corporation would implement a technology that takes 18 months to two years to do. We're going to do it quicker and we're getting very close on that. We'll have something to announce about having that technology in all of our arenas pretty soon.

Q. Last year BG wasn't here. Players wore No. 42 in the second half. What is it like having her back this year and then just how is it different from last year?

CATHY ENGELBERT: Yeah, I think when you take the lens of the whole league, the Phoenix Mercury, Brittany and her family, what -- like, how heartwarming it was. Even when I saw her yesterday at the Skills competition sitting on the sideline cheering on her teammates and just everything that she has done and what a high level she is playing at during our regular season. I'm sure getting into the second half of the season, probably the W's and L's haven't gone the way they wanted, but certainly she is

playing at a high level, which is why she was voted in as an All-Star starter, quite frankly.

I think it was a huge burden on the team last year and the whole league and everybody that was rooting for her to come home from her wrongful detention. So we're thrilled she is here. She looks happy. I can't be more proud of her, how she has performed both on court and the platform she is carrying, around wrongfully detained Americans around the world, off the court.

Q. Last time you were in Canada obviously so many questions about expansion. You kind of hinted just now to a later announcement. Any details specifically you could share and if timing has changed at all?

CATHY ENGELBERT: Right. No details other than how thrilled we were to be in Canada. I talk about it as another sign and signal of the growth and certainly the global platform we would love to build for this league. We can't just be viewed as a domestic league as it relates to fandom. So obviously being in Toronto, 20,000 fans showed up for a preseason game. And, yeah, just need to tell you, when I walked into the arena that day for that game, and I come off the night before, they had, the Maple Leafs were in the Stanley Cup playoffs, came up and I'm like, Oh, nobody is going to come. They were all at the hockey game last night. No, no, no. They showed up. They were inspired. What I was told by fans who came up to me, like you've made my whole year; I've been waiting for this for a long time and you're inspiring the next generation of athletes here, both young girls and boys, by coming here. I think that's a great sign and signal of that market and other markets where we can bring the WNBA and the high-quality, world-class, best-in-the-world basketball to these cities.

No further specific updates, but was thrilled with the outcome there. People are still talking about, there's still a lot of buzz. We appreciate our counterparts in Canada making it so successful with us.

Q. With BG we all kind of, it brought everything to the forefront about the travel and how that might impact players. And now there's the Unrivaled league with Stewy and Napheesa. How do you feel about that and is the W going to support that in any way?

CATHY ENGELBERT: Yeah, I think we've talked with Napheesa and Stewie and others on their team that are thinking about it. I think it's great that the players are thinking through these type of things that they want to do in their offseason. We'll definitely support it from a marketing -- we've supported AU, for instance, and we put it on our League Pass last year because we want to kind of become

the center of women's basketball, not just during our season, but all year round, and maybe longer term the center of women's sports. So we're thinking a lot about that as we have -- as you think about how the media landscape is changing and direct-to-consumer products. League Pass is our DTC. So we like to brand it that way.

We'd like to certainly support what Napheesa and Stewie are doing from a marketing-specific perspective and see what they can put together, how they're thinking about it. Having raised some capital recently last year, it's a tough market out there. It's a tough economy. But we hope it's successful, and we'll support them in a lot of different ways from a marketing perspective.

Q. We talked in Dallas at the Final Four at their activations and fan engagement. So I want to get your thoughts, with WNBA Live and just kind of the entire city of Vegas, how do you feel like the W has done when it comes to engaging with the fans and how is it grown since last year in Chicago and what areas have All-Star weekend improved in?

CATHY ENGELBERT: We knew last year coming, off a couple pandemic years, that WNBA Live last year was a test and kind of baby steps to get to what we have this year, and hopefully further growth in it. To have 15 corporate partners activating this year, who are all getting big crowds and all seeing the benefit of the consumer and the type of fan and the diversity of the fan we have supporting their businesses and coming to their activations, that's what this is all about.

So I think we learn every year from it and we hope to improve it next year as well in Phoenix. But taking a lot of notes, getting a lot of fan feedback, a lot of team player feedback on what we can do differently better, what worked, what didn't work. We'll do all that debriefing over the next couple weeks with my team and our teams and figure out the best way. We'd love input from you as well -- what you saw, what you liked. But I think the fan engagement was great. As I went around, not just here at Mandalay Bay, but also around the city, a ton of W branding. The airport having W branding. Having the hotels light up in orange. We had a drone take some footage last night. A lot of the hotels lit up in orange last night in response to the W being here. We really feel so welcome here, and it's been, I think, a great experience.

Q. The interest in the WNBA is big in Europe. Is there any plan about a potential WNBA game in Europe over the next years?

CATHY ENGELBERT: Yes, great question. When I say we want to have a global platform, that's exactly what we're



talking about. We did Canada this year. Are there other places we can go? We're actually getting a lot of interest from cities that don't have a WNBA team even in the U.S. -- "Can you bring a preseason game to our city?" -- as well as from cities across the world. This is great issue and problem to have. But it's also part of our strategy, to essentially expand the storytelling, the exposure of our players, to a global audience, not just to a U.S. domestic audience.

I think Canada was our first foray into that. I think we would have gone faster had it not been for those COVID years. At least that was part of our initial plan, to have a Canada game in 2020 and then already be in Europe, Asia, Africa maybe longer term. That's still part of our plan. We'll thoughtfully think through that. But again, that's another allocation of your capital, financial and human capital, as you think about all the things we're trying to do to transform the business of the league.

But I definitely think there's a lot of low-hanging fruit globally. I've admired what the NBA has done with their Global Games platform. I think some of other men's sports are doing things. Obviously football last year in Europe, and I think baseball as well. So certainly something we would like to do as part of our plan.

Now next year the Olympics are in Paris. Again, with our challenging footprint, we probably won't do a lot of global expansion next year. But certainly 2025, where we'll have a great footprint with no international competitions to disrupt our season, that will be a time when I think we'll be looking at that, for sure.

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