

# WNBA All-Star Game

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Phoenix, Arizona

## Cathy Engelbert

Commissioner Media Conference



THE MODERATOR: Welcome to the 2024 AT&T WNBA All-Star Game. We'll begin with remarks from Cathy and then turn it over to question and answer. Cathy.

CATHY ENGELBERT: Thank you. Hello, everyone, from Phoenix, Arizona. Thank you for joining us. It's great to be here in Phoenix for the AT&T WNBA All-Star 2024 in the home of the Mercury.

This is one of the league's original franchises. This is the third time the All-Star Game has been in Phoenix, but my first here for All-Star, and we're glad to be back here again.

I would like to thank the city of Phoenix, Mat Ishbia, Josh Bartelstein, the whole crew here at the Phoenix Mercury. Everyone has been working tirelessly to bring this event to life.

Last night we, once again, had a thrilling 3-Point Contest with Alisha Gray making history winning both the 3-Point and the Skills Competition. We gave fans a taste of 3X3 basketball since the U.S. will be trying to defend their inaugural gold medal this year in Paris.

The 2024 All-Star Game is a special one with the USA Basketball Women's National Team facing off against the WNBA All-Stars. We're looking forward to a hard-fought, competitive game that sets the stage for the National Team to take home its eighth consecutive gold medal in Paris.

Both teams will showcase the incredible talent we have in our league with a great mix of some of the league's brightest young talent and decorated veterans.

The WNBA's commitment to young people, economic empowerment, social impact, youth basketball has been on full display over the last couple of days. We engaged over 5,000 young people across the Phoenix area in collaboration with our WNBA Changemaker partners AT&T, CarMax, Deloitte, Google, Nike, and U.S. Bank.

We partnered with the Girl Scouts, Arizona Cactus-Pine Council to host our first-ever WNBA Changemaker Day where WNBA athletes, volunteers from each of our

Changemaker partners, and Girl Scout activities focused on life skills, STEM, and the outdoors helping to build confidence and encourage creativity and problem-solving.

I was over there I guess it was two days ago now with Shakira Austin and Sophie Cunningham. We also held a clinic and workshop for young girls to help them learn the fundamentals of the game and support mental wellness with goal-setting, and we partnered with Rise Above to host a basketball clinic with Native American youth focused on developing basketball fundamentals and skills.

Once again, we held one of my favorite events, a Basketball Without Borders Global Girls Camp where nearly 40 of the top high school age prospects from 24 countries outside the U.S. traveled here to Phoenix.

So these engagements are a local demonstration of the impact of our players, teams, and the league. Not only are the WNBA players the best basketball players in the world, but they also serve as role models, community ambassadors -- you've heard me say this many times -- symbols of empowerment for people everywhere. We know girls who play competitive youth sports are more likely to ascend to leadership positions in their careers later in life.

Fans, I'm so grateful to the fans here. It's been great. They have had a top-notch experience this week in Phoenix. Walking through WNBA Live as I did yesterday and today, the buzz was unlike anything we've seen at All-Star Weekend.

We had a record 24 partners on hand to celebrate. Fans partook in activations like U.S. Bank's Nothing But Net Worth. I love that pun having come from the financial world, which educated people on the right financial moves to reach their goals. We had new partners there. La Crema treated fans to wine tasting. There was a pretty long line at that earlier today.

And really fun player appearances. So many of our star players over there. AT&T, Nike, Starry, to name a few others, with just great activations. I did try my hand in a 3-point competition yesterday with my daughter, so it was



all in good fun.

This weekend is the culmination of a historic first half of the season. When I stood in front of you at this time last year, I knew we were poised for big things. We were preparing ourselves for big things, but just so thrilled with what we've been able to accomplish over the last year: This influx of interest leading our league in sustainable growth, continue to chart in new path for women's professional sports.

All that said, to open the season we have seen our highest attendance in 26 years, repeatedly set viewership records. A lot of our teams are up triple digits in attendance, and we have 16 WNBA games this year that have averaged at least one million viewers, the most in any WNBA season in league history, and we're just over a little over halfway through the season.

Our app active users -- you know, we need those young digital native viewers. Our app active viewers are up 530 percent. Our DCT League Pass product is up 360 percent in subscriptions. Again, couldn't be more pleased with the progress that's being made.

One metric I think that's particularly telling is All-Star voting, which compared to 2023 was up over 600 percent. Our fan growth is not just an increase in viewership but is truly indicative of fan engagement. Our fans are engaged. They care a lot about what's going on with our players and the league.

Merch sales at WNBA Live, I just got a report before I walked in the room, have already set an all-time record for All-Star merchandise sales. Many are calling us a growth stock. We've welcomed a number of new partners recently in the past year including La Crema, Oak Hill, Peloton, Skims. Just this week we welcomed DraftKings as an official sports betting and daily fantasy partner, Bumble as the league's first-ever official dating app, and New Balance as an official partner.

As all of you know, I know you are always very anxious about expansion. The Golden State Valkyries announced their brand and became the league's 13th franchise to start up next year, and in May we awarded Toronto the 14th franchise marking the WNBA's first international expansion.

So as potential ownership groups clamber for a piece of the W, we expect to have more news on the front in the coming months on expansion, and the goal remains what I said at Draft, to have 16 teams by no later than 2028.

Importantly, we're using this growth to power initiative that are improving the player experience. Notably, as a lot of you know, in the early weeks of the season we expanded

our partnership with Delta to implement full charter flights for all 12 teams for every regular season and playoff game. We're grateful to Delta's support in this transformative step and look forward to growing our partnership in the future.

As we bring on new fans and new partners, I met with a lot of brands while I've been here the last few days and we continue to look at a transformed economic model creating essentially a new paradigm for women's sports. So looking ahead, we're really excited for the players representing the U.S. Take home the gold in Paris and for the season to resume.

We will also be cheering on, though. We have many other players representing their National Teams in the Olympics. So when we come back in mid-August, I anticipate a very fast and furious run to the playoffs and, as always, a really hyper-competitive, entertaining postseason.

I know there's a lot of interest in our media rights deals. It's still an ongoing process, so I can't get into any specifics on those deals today, but once they are finalized, I'll be happy to discuss them in more detail. That said, I haven't been shy in saying we've been preparing for this moment for many years saying how important media deals are to the growth and the future of this league, and these deals will be historic and a significant step forward.

With that, thank you all, again, for your coverage and support. We couldn't be where we are without you. I'm looking at this room from the first time I stood in this room in 2019 when I just had joined the league four days in and came to my first All-Star and especially this season so far.

Thank you, again, for all your support and coverage. With that, I'm happy to answer any questions.

**Q. Not sure how much you can say about the media rights deal, but reports came out this week that \$2.2 billion for 11 years. Some players, Players Association, were critical even though that's a huge jump from the previous deal. There's been criticism about the size of that number, that it should be larger. Could you share your thoughts on that criticism?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: We are thrilled with the progress we've made and the growth of this league and current viewership. I think we're going to do something historic. I think once we're able to finalize those media deals, I think everybody is going to understand that this is a historic time for women's sports, and the WNBA will be leading that.

I look forward to, again, sharing more information at the appropriate time on where we come out on those deals, but we've been preparing for this for several years. I've



shared with you. We did a lot of work leading up to this on what media partners were looking for, what we needed to do three years ago, two years ago, last year to get eyes on our game and fans in our seats in order to have the narrative around being a historic league at this time.

So, again, when I'm able to share that, I will. Obviously, when those are all finalized, we'll be back to you. Thank you.

**Q. My question is, what role does the WNBA play in growing basketball, not just in the United States? But as you alluded to, there's many Olympians from all over the world in the WNBA. What job does the WNBA have for making the sport grow everywhere?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: I think that's a great question. So making the sport grow everywhere is part of our mission, I believe. Obviously in partnership with USA Basketball and with FIBA, our international federation, and obviously, working together to grow this game because, again, we know that young women, teenagers, females drop out of organized youth sports at alarming rates compared to their male counterparts. We need girls to stay in sport.

I know what it did for me having played three sports in high school, two in college. I was really shy when I went to college. Sports brought me out of that shell, gave me confidence, leadership skills, resilience, captained two teams in college, lacrosse and basketball.

We know how important it is for us to grow the game globally. That's why globalization, if you think about media deals, if you think about expansion, you think about other things we have on our agenda, globalization of the game is it, and working with FIBA and other federations to make sure that we're providing that.

Also, we work with the State Department from time to time on their sports, and embassies around the world are looking for female role models, professional athletes, and the WNBA is very prime to be someone to talk about their path to their success and really inspire young girls around the world.

**Q. Could you discuss where the Valkyries are at right now as far as their progress goes going forward for 2025? Then, also, just how waiting until now for expansion may be paying off just because of the historic growth that you're talking about.**

CATHY ENGELBERT: Yes, so the Golden State Valkyries announced their brand a couple of months ago. Love it. They are doing great with, and I think they've talked about their season ticketholder deposit base.

They've obviously hired people. As I always say, to grow a business, you have to hire great human capital, great people. So they've hired a GM. They've hired a team president and others. They're filling out their team.

Then, obviously, later this year we'll have an expansion draft where they'll draft players and then they'll participate in the college draft next year. I mean, they're gearing up from a business perspective and a basketball perspective.

I'll let them speak for exactly everything they're doing behind the scenes, but I know some of their leadership is here at All-Star. I know they're really excited to join this league, as you say, at a high-momentum time. I just think having a team in the Bay Area with that fan base, I think it's going to be great for the league.

**Q. I wanted to follow up on the question knowing you might not be able to get into specifics, but if the reports of this deal are true in terms of the media rights agreement, do you feel confident that it will help you build a transformational business model that you've been talking with that will help really move this league forward, and how so?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: So we've been working on transforming the business from every aspect of the business, whether it's digital, whether it's reach, whether it's fan engagement, whether it's data, whether it's hiring people who know data capabilities. So I think our next round of media deals will allow us to continue to transform this league.

I think there are so many positives. We're hitting the confluence of hitting so many positive elements of this league right now with generational rookies coming into the league, with the decorated veterans, with everything that's happening in globalizing the game, and fan engagement, making it easier to be a fan, all the things we've been working on over the past couple of years. In order to capitalize on that momentum, I think the players, I think we know that one way to do that is to drive revenue through media rights, which funds a lot of things on the men's side. That's why this is an important moment for us and a historic one that we'll be able to obviously talk more about once we finalize those deals.

Really excited about that. I can't be more pleased with the moment we're faced with. It's not just this class of rookies. Look what we're seeing next year and the year after and the year after. I mean, from what we can see in college, three years of great draft classes coming in. Then after that, someone was telling me the other day, the U17 girls are amazing.

I just feel so blessed to be in women's basketball, blessed to have the fans and the new fans we've brought in who are all really passionate and avid about helping us grow this league as well.

**Q. Two-part question: I don't know if it's too early to ask this, but with a new team coming in next year, are you going to expand the schedule to potentially 44 games to make up for that? Second part is you mentioned globalization a few times today. There's been a lot of success by the NBA playing games overseas. You had a great job playing exhibition games in Canada. Is there talk of playing a regular season game potentially somewhere overseas?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: Great question. As far as the number of games we play, under our current collective bargaining agreement, we can play up to 44 games. So we're looking at the footprint for next year.

One of the reasons we're looking at that footprint so hard is we don't have an international competition like the FIBA World Cup or the Olympics next year, so we'll be able to look at our footprint without any interruption or break like we're breaking this year. Obviously in a FIBA World Cup we generally accommodate that to help grow the game globally.

Yeah, we're certainly looking at play the max games up to 44. Also, looking at playoffs and what we can do with our playoffs. So we'll be back to you on some of the decisions around that that we're working through with our teams and our owners.

Your second question was related to?

**Q. Overseas games.**

CATHY ENGELBERT: Overseas games. I hugely admire what the NBA has done with their global games platform, and we started ours after the pandemic with Toronto and then last year in Edmonton. We would love to expand that further. Whether that's to Europe or Asia longer-term, or some people mention Mexico City, Middle East. Africa, longer term as well. We're looking at all of that.

Looking at, you know, it's an allocation of capital, deployment of capital around where you would go. Do you do neutral sites in the U.S. to test out expansion markets? That's another option to do either preseason games or regular season games. So we're looking at all of that right now as it relates to the 2025 footprint where we should have a pretty good schedule.

**Q. Given the metrics you mentioned the attendance, 16 National TV games, 14 of those are Caitlin's games. What have been your impressions of Caitlin's rookie year, and how do you hope to springboard that into greater growth for the league?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: I've been so pleased with Caitlin and all of our rookies. If you look back in history, a lot of our rookies don't immediately start. It takes them either a year or a couple of years, or certainly they don't all start off the bat. So many of this rookie class, they're so strong, and they're performing at the highest level. You guys are all writing about it, which we love.

Yeah, really pleased with how that's working out. Again, the number of new fans we're able to bring into this league is exponential from my expectations of what we were going to do and provide them.

I mean, as we look at on all four of our top networks we're averaging over one million, including ESPN, ESPN2, ABC, CBS. On ION we've had several over-million viewer games on Friday nights, and even on the non-million viewer that we're pulling in huge, huge triple-digital increases with that appointment viewing.

I think fans are finally knowing where to find us. I think this rookie class has brought a lot of attention and is lifting all of our games and all of our players.

**Q. Just talk about the diversity initiatives that the league is doing and how are they doing expanding it in some ways, especially across the board, not just on the court but also behind the scenes as well?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: Yeah, Charles, thank you for the question. Our diversity initiatives span on coaching diversity initiatives. They span on corporate partners. They span to merchandise partners, media partners. I think it's a very multi-dimensional strategy we've been focused on.

You see on WNBA Live some of our diversity partners there representing the things we've been doing in the community. We're looking, again, at three-quarters of our coaches being women. Our assistant coaches, people of color, I think is at 60 percent, 70 percent. We're really thrilled with some of the progress that we've been able to make.

The work is never done on this, and we'll continue to work with our teams. A lot of our teams are engaging local minority-owned businesses in their markets. I think they all have a list they can share with you too. When you are in our markets, ask our team owners and our team leaders

that because it is a focus of ours. We talk about it every Board of Governors meeting as to how we're progressing. We get that report card every year, the TIDES Report Card, where we're very soundly in the A category on our score card, our report card.

Always more work to do, but it's something we're really focused on. With focus, you see results. That's what we're seeing. Thank you.

**Q. Two quick clarifying questions, if I may: One, you mentioned the Expansion Draft. Teams around the league don't know the specifics of the details. You mentioned later this year. When can teams expect to know the details of what the Expansion Draft will look like? And, two, real quick, do you have a status update on the investigation into the Las Vegas Aces?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: On the Expansion Draft we have been talking with our teams, GM, head coaches, and our owners about the expansion draft. It will most likely in December of this year because we need to do it and then we have the Draft Lottery and then the NCAA season concludes and then we have our draft.

Yeah, our teams are aware. We'll make final decisions and make those announcements in the coming months, but we're focused right now on this All-Star Game, the season, the playoffs, but we'll certainly be out with some information related to how that will work.

On the Las Vegas investigation I, again, have dealt with a lot of investigations in my prior life. I always let the lawyers do the work before we speak about it. So that work is ongoing. We hired outside counsel. They're continuing their work. When there's something to report, we'll be back to you.

**Q. Just wondering about the '96 team for Team USA was very influential for growing and marketing the game domestically. Do you see this 2024 Team USA team in the same position for globalizing the WNBA brand overseas as the '96 team was in Atlanta?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: It's a really great question. For those that didn't follow us way back in '96, '96 was the year, the first year of the stretch of seven consecutive golds, now going for eight, where the WNBA was born out of that gold medal in Atlanta.

That team was so iconic. It was the Dream Team at the time, although women we don't necessarily get all that great branding. So really put, as you said, women's basketball on the map here in the United States, leading, again, to this moment that we're experiencing now.

I think the '24 team absolutely has the opportunity. I think it's all the teams. The quality of the play of the product on the court and everyone I know, all these new fans coming in, are so blown away when they go to a game. The pace, the strength, the physicality, the athleticism, just everything, the game. Men tell me, this is the game I played growing up.

I always replay, Yeah, I played the game too, but it's so much better than the game when I was growing up.

I do think this team has the ability to become global stars because that's part of our strategy, and also, I think we're now at 18 percent, 19 percent international players in the WNBA. So we're growing our ranks with global players as well, not just United States players.

I think while the '24 USA Women's Team has that opportunity, whether it's Australia or Canada or Germany and some of the other teams that are going to compete for this gold, and the competition, the U.S. has lifted everybody around the world. Just like a few college programs here in the U.S. lifted so many other college programs culminating in the last couple of years of great competition.

So, yes, I think we do have that opportunity. Not just with this team, but all the WNBA players populated throughout the Olympics this year.

**Q. Firstly, I wanted to ask you a little bit about the charter flight program you mentioned with the expansion of the partnership with Delta. Now, with respect to that, can you walk us through what, if any, amendments to the Collective Bargaining Agreement had to be made since travel has usually been something done through the CBA? Then, also, with respect to the CBA, now that charter flights are a part of the program, where would you say that salaries and/or expansion of the roster size is in the priorities of the WNBA given those are other things that have been talked about in the past?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: We'll come back to the second question. Charter: It's really important with the footprint we had this year. You saw how many games our players were playing the first part of the season. So this was the year.

I've always told you I always want a charter for those players. We weren't going to do it until we felt it was fiscally sound to do so. I felt we were at a point in our growth and our transformation that we could afford this for the next couple of years, even before a new media rights

set of deals would kick in. That's why we did it. I'm thrilled that we did it.

The charter program is, again, every game. We're going to see when we come back from the Olympic break that continue into the playoffs. So, obviously, we did not amend the Collective Bargaining. We just did it as a benefit to the players, to pay back to the players some of the growth we're experiencing and the ability now to afford to do something like that.

We weren't in a position coming off the pandemic where we were just barely surviving. I felt we were in a thriving position now, and we had the financial wherewithal to do it. So that's why we did it. We didn't need to amend anything. It was just an extra benefit we gave the players.

Let's come to your second question on the next round of Collective Bargaining Agreements. Our Collective Bargaining Agreement was an eight-year deal, opt out after six. That sixth year is the end of next season. So, obviously, we look forward to working with the players, having done the charter travel, working with the players on what's on their list. Obviously working with our owners, who we negotiate on behalf of and with as to what's on their list.

So we really look forward to capitalizing on the momentum in this league and looking at how we return more to the players in that process. That's what we'll be doing over the next year or so.

**Q. With the Expansion Draft, do you have any updates on what the format will be of that? Then going back to the charter flights, some players have said that the planes are kind of small and stuff like that. How has the program in general gone in your opinion?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: So, again, on the Expansion Draft, we'll be out with more details. It will occur most likely in December. We'll hopefully make a show out of it.

Again, the details will come out, but the Valkyries will have the opportunity to select players from current rosters and then, obviously, participate the following spring in the college draft.

Again, just more details on that. Give us a little more time to further socialize, and we'll be out with that.

On the charter program, when you do charter when you only have our travel size, you don't necessarily do planes that fit 180 people when your travel size is in the low 20s. Yes, some of the planes are small.

I fly on a lot of small planes to a lot of markets where I don't get big planes commercially even. Obviously, it's something that we work on, particularly for cross-country flights.

It's really logistically complex. I've learned a lot about private jet travel, where the logistics are, how the pilots are in a pool. There's a pilot shortage. Obviously, there's aviation fuel logistics, maintenance logistics and everything like that. Different airports don't allow you to fly into, out of privately when they make commercially so they may be used to an airport that they're now not flying into.

All of that just to say it's logistically complex. We continue to work on upgrading the experience for our players on that, and I think when we come off the Olympic break where we're hitting our stride more on this program, we'll see some improvements on the things that the players. We listen to the players, and we'll see some improvements off the Olympic break.

**Q. With the expansion and the massive growth with the WNBA, has there been any thought or research for the WNBA to further target Spanish language coverage in the LatinX community?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: It's a very good question. One of the things we're seeing in our fan data -- so thank you for just bringing that category up. One of the things we're seeing in our fan data is a huge, huge influx of Hispanic fans. I think that's great.

Maybe some of our players now who have that heritage are drawing more interest. They're getting more reported in Spanish language and things like that. That's something we definitely have on our list to work on and make sure that we're bringing the game to our fans culturally wherever they are and certainly in the Spanish language. Yes, that's on our list to work further on.

Thank you for bringing that up because I've seen the data now, and I think it's definitely worth investing there.

THE MODERATOR: Cathy, thank you.

CATHY ENGELBERT: Thank you, enjoy the game tonight, everyone. Thank you, again. Don't forget about us during this Olympic break, and we look forward to seeing you for the big run to the playoffs back in mid-August. Thank you so much.

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