

Southeastern Conference Women's Basketball TipOff Media Days

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Birmingham, Alabama, USA

Commissioner

**Commissioner Greg
Sankey**

Women's Media Day Press Conference



SEC teams have played on the women's side in 32 of 42 NCAA Final Fours. We've had two Women's Final Four teams on 10 occasions, and the last three national champions were probably from the Southeastern Conference.

I noted it had been a while on the men's side that we've had a team in the Final Four. Alabama returned an SEC program to the Final Four last year in Phoenix. We're hopeful, based on the pre-season indications, that we'll have more of those opportunities.

Besides basketball, we're in an incredible football season, through week seven of 14 weeks. We've been busy. You obviously have seen news around, the preliminary approval granted by Judge Wilken for the proposed settlement in the House vs. the NCAA matter. We are working diligently on those issues. Last Thursday we were able to gather with our Big Ten colleagues, our athletic directors from both conferences, to talk about issues of common interests.

A lot of speculation about what was talked about. The reality was we did spend the appropriate time with our counsel talking about the joint defense issues and the House settlement. We have talked about the College Football Playoff. Really wanted to understand the expansion and growth to 12 this year, the format decisions that will come for the '26 season and beyond.

We did not spend any time talking about those format issues. That's for down the road.

From our conference's standpoint, we need to have a single-division, 16-team, eight-game conference format for our football season, then we'll go into the 12-team format. It will be interesting to see how the Selection Committee evaluates the most deserving teams. We'll come back to those meetings as a Southeastern Conference group in January to evaluate our positions.

We did talk about scheduling. You know what? We have a bunch of games, relatively speaking to our history, already scheduled in football with the Big Ten. We play

THE MODERATOR: We welcome to the podium Commissioner Sankey.

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: Glad that you're all here. I've said that earlier in our visit yesterday morning.

Just a couple notes. One, we announced today that we'll extend our relationship in Greenville, South Carolina, for Bon Secours Wellness Arena to host the SEC women's basketball tournament. We're looking at the years '26, '27 and '28.

From a basketball standpoint, just a few weeks ago we announced the SEC serving as a host role again for NCAA basketball events here in Birmingham. We're looking forward to hosting those in the Legacy Arena.

A couple notes that may go unsaid unless I'm the one who says them. Fascinating similarity between our men's and women's coaches. We have six coaches on the men's side, six coaches on the women's side who have been in the Final Four with teams.

You go further, all 16 of our women's coaches I know, just off the top of my head, have led at least one of the teams they've coached to an NCAA tournament appearance. Just an incredible depth of talent.

We have five coaches on the men's side who have been named National Coach the Year: Rick Barnes, Chris Beard, John Calipari, Bruce Pearl and Rodney Terry.

On the men's side, we have 65 players selected in the last seven NBA Drafts. When you go to the women's side, total of 172 former players have played in the WNBA. I think that's a league that certainly has benefited from the platform that's created by women's college basketball.



them in crossover games in basketball regularly.

I think one of the great stories last year was in Albany on Monday night. While LSU did not win the LSU-Iowa game on ESPN, compared to the national championship game the year prior on ABC, had a higher number of viewers. I think that's a remarkable testament to what has been built in women's basketball and obviously continued to build for the national championship, the Final Four and the national championship viewership.

A lot taking place. Happy to respond to our basketball questions, but give you the opportunity to figure out what you ask. I've been at this a while. I'll figure out what questions I actually answer, I say with a sly smile (smiling).

THE MODERATOR: We'll get to questions.

Q. Greg, what is the latest in terms of conversations on expanding the field in the men's basketball tournament?

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: We've had updates. I think the Men's Basketball Committee and the Women's Basketball Committee, Division I level, have handled the assignment responsibly. We were briefed as commissioners in the summertime about what I would call incremental growth. Whether that's possible or not remains to be seen.

Charlie Baker provided an update. We were together three or four weeks ago about the continuing work.

Obviously we have a format this year, the NCAA has contracts that do go out a while. I expect that discussion and work would continue.

My general view is interested and supportive interest in that discussion. I am curious about the format that might be proposed, if there is growth, how those teams are decided, how those teams are assigned.

We'll continue I think to ask questions and receive updates and appreciate, from my perspective, that both the men's and women's committees are taking this growth effort seriously.

I would contextualize this, people will talk about this should never change. I've seen plenty of that feedback. You continue to see changes around Division I, from conference membership, new members in new places. I think that discussion is the right discussion, given the time we're in.

Q. This off-season saw Coach Calipari move to

another SEC school. There's talks about other coaches in the SEC taking that Kentucky job. Is the healthiest you've seen basketball in the SEC, and how do you like to see a big-time coach stay in the conference like that?

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: The transfer portal is there for coaches, too, right? We've had that in different sports.

I said yesterday it's good to have John in the league. It's great to get to know Mark and come to know him. I saw Eric Musselman back in Vegas around the LSU-USC game. I enjoyed working with Eric and the energy he brought.

From an evaluation of health, if you go back to 2004 and look back a little bit, we had remarkably competitive basketball at the highest level broadly in this league. When I took over in 2015, really in preparation for the interviews, but then as you're trying to make decisions, looked at what happened in that 2014, '15, '16 window. A lot of change. A lot of lack of continuity, if you will. We had a cycle of coaches changes.

If you go back, Billy Donovan and Kevin Stallings at that time, in 2014, were the longest tenured coaches and had been at that level of sustained success. John came in, won a national championship. We had a lot of churn.

We also had the Academic Progress Rate and the Academic Performance Program, where I think we hadn't adjusted quickly to meeting the expectations in those programs. Programs adapted. Our APR scores improved I think even over time in men's basketball, our graduation rates improved. There's a lot there.

I think is been really healthy before, really competitive. Arkansas joined, won the national championship. Kentucky in '96 and '98. But others were close.

The depth right now is not something we've seen in a long time. I'm not sure even when we had those high, high-level teams you saw the depth.

Now we've grown to 16. We have nine of the top 25 on the men's basketball side and seven of the top 25 in the AP poll on the women's basketball side from one conference. And everybody wants to grab that mountaintop. I do think it's an enormously positive story about the health of our basketball, both on the men's and women's side. I think it's an indication of meeting our own expectations, which when our men's performance lagged, I spoke about in rooms.

I hope we can exceed our expectations, not just attain the national championship opportunities we've seen on the



women's side, but multiple teams playing for those championships.

Q. You mentioned the football, possibly eight or nine. Any discussions about basketball going up from the 16 women's games and the 18 men's games with two more schools coming into the league?

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: I did not mention eight or nine, but you've asked me about it. All I talked about was football scheduling that we talked about last week, so...

Yeah, there's been conversations about 16 to 18. We've taken a lot of input, sometimes probably incoming from our women's coaches, about increasing that number. They think they've benefitted from the non-conference scheduling from the byes, the open dates they have, that have been filled with some prominent non-conference games. That conversation does continue, however.

I think just this fall, being at 16, seeing different teams rolling through on a more regular basis than what we've experienced in the divisional format, the notion of doing that in other sports is very much on our mind.

Q. There's been a conversation about court and field storming fines. Three in the last week happening across the SEC and how those numbers have gone up. Conversations about NIL, things like that, going in house has been going on too, should be more money coming from athletic departments. Any thought about revisiting the tiers of the fines for court storming and field storming?

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: Let's talk about court storming and field rushing first.

It is not related to name, image and likeness and what happens with the House settlement. That is a separate event, separate act.

I can go back to videos outside of our league and stories, and you can Google these easily, of people putting themselves on a court or field and getting hurt by a falling goalpost, by an encounter with someone, by jumping over a wall and breaking a leg. That seems unwise. I get the emotion that builds up. That's one element.

The second element is you can see encounters with fans and players. It's an emotional moment. Those players, those coaches, belong on the field. They are there to be on that field, to be on that court. Our fans are there to be in the stands.

Two weeks ago, plenty of social media activity. You've

seen this. Well, the players are trying to exit. This conflict that can happen, it concerns me. That's at the top of my concerns, not fines and whether that affects name, image and likeness. The ability for teams, for cheerleaders, for medical staffs, for coaching staffs, to move away safely and without disruption. That's on my mind.

Sure, I get phone calls, Why do we do this? It doesn't stop anything.

I would actually represent there would be more court rushes and more field stormings if we did not have the system we have in place.

We have adjusted. So now the visiting team is the recipient of the fine money, not our scholarship program. So when we had the events we've had this year, there's a transfer of \$100,000 or \$250,000 to the visiting team.

That's a big deal. Our fans are writing checks by rushing the field to their opponents. I think that will become old. It goes from 100,00 for a first offense under our new policy to 250. If you're at 250, it goes to half a million dollars. I don't think anyone wants to give their opponent free money.

That's how I view the issue.

On the NIL issue, there's going to be budget strain. There are efforts on my part, efforts on our campuses, how do you continue to grow the revenue knowing that 22% of that, sponsorships, media and ticket sales, are going to be part of our economic relationship with our student-athletes should the House settlement be approved. That does create strain.

I would just position that those are two very different issues. Maybe they link economically. But the first one is still one that has to be a serious consideration for us and I think for our colleagues across the country.

You looked like you were bored by that answer.

Q. What do you tell your coaches about any potential impacts of not NIL but NLI? Also, how much do coaches worry about mid-season transfers that can really impact a team?

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: So the first one, the question was about the change announced in the National Letter of Intent moving away. I was concerned about it. I had to be educated. I spent 10 years here where the SEC managed on behalf of the entire nation the National Letter of Intent program. It really is an administrative change, where substantively it's going to be managed the same way.

We're still going to have signing dates, there still are going to be documents to sign, there's going to be institutional aid agreements, there's specificity around only signing only one of those.

There was a furor about what are they doing, and then as our staff has educated our campuses, our campuses have educated their coaches the ability to communicate, it's not nearly the significant change that it might seem. We're still going to go on with signing dates. The documents will be a bit different.

The midyear transfer issue. There was an international player who was at the University of Florida back in the 2000s who in February said, I'm out. We've had young people walk away from teams for different reasons for decades: I'm mad at my coach. I'm not getting enough playing time. I want to go back home. That happens.

We publicize it differently now. In fact, you could argue in football, the four-game redshirt rule creates another moment for this transfer behavior to occur.

I don't have so much of it in basketball. A couple years ago when the transfer portal was 365 days a year, I did have conversations at our basketball tournaments about young people getting on a bus, telling a coach, I'm going to leave after this. I think that behavior's been reduced.

Have there been conversations? Sure. Has the behavior taken place? It has. Is it only right now? No, it's gone on for a long time for different reasons.

It's magnified now because of the frequency and the nature of the why. I have more conversations about the information that indicates the transfer portal activity happens once the window opens really for a relatively short period of time.

You've seen an NCAA adjustment go from 45 days down to 30. My view is that could be shortened. That's a declaration date -- set of declaration dates within that window. It's not an ultimate decision day.

Everybody involved needs to move on. I would argue, from having talked to student-athletes, the longer the window is open, the more pressure, the more they talk about the mental strain of people coming to them saying, Hey, you need to do this, you need to do that.

I'm one who thinks we need to open it, open for a reasonable amount of time, we should close that window and everybody should move on and make their decisions.

Q. You mentioned the ways you're looking to grow

revenue. The settlement looming on the horizon, revenue sharing appearing to be close to becoming to fruition, how do you see that major change trickling down to some of the Olympic sports, specifically basketball?

COMMISSIONER SANKEY: Well, just for purposes of my sake in answering, so we don't misinterpret each other, Olympic sports is a broad category. If you dig into the statements, there are two, maybe three, of our sports that generate net revenue. Football obviously leading, men's basketball, some of our campuses baseball. Generally, other than that, there's a deficit between revenue and expenses. I'll let our campuses speak to their opportunity.

Some of that is facility adjustments. You create new club spaces, new ways to use your facilities. You've seen different events that are conducted around our athletics departments.

For us, we have limited space where we're allocated the revenue authority, if you will. We run championships. We have broadcast rights. We have some other rights. We have the ability on a limited basis to involve corporate partners or sponsors with us. Our campuses do that. We're not selling that for them like some of the professional leagues do to centralize.

We don't centralize merchandise rights like some of the professional leagues. We don't have centralized licensing in the same way. Our schools have wanted it that way. They're going to focus on growing their revenue, we'll focus where we can on growing our revenue.

Part of reality is it's an enormous adjustment, enormous adjustment. You don't have a 22% increase in expenses and not have impacts. The clear themes, we just left a couple days with our presidents and chancellors at the beginning of this week, we want to continue to support broad-based programs. We want to be the center of the Olympic development effort, certainly in track and field and in swimming and diving.

I talked about Joni Taylor's involvement in our Olympic basketball effort. That happens over and over from our campuses early on as they go into the NBA.

In fact, long-term implications on other sports are real. Our motivation is to keep intact what we have, but there will be adjustments. I expect that nationally. You don't have a shift of 22% of revenues and not have impacts associated with that shift.

THE MODERATOR: Thank you, commissioner.



COMMISSIONER SANKEY: Thank you.

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