

NBA Finals: Celtics vs. Mavericks

Thursday, June 6, 2024

Commissioner Adam Silver



ADAM SILVER: Thank you all for being here. I want to begin with someone who is a familiar face at the Finals, and that's Bill Walton, who we lost last week. Of course, Bill won two championships but also covered multiple NBA Finals for NBC and then ABC. He and his wife, Lori, often sat, as many of you remember, at these press conferences, usually somewhere over there. I'm thrilled that Lori Walton is going to actually be at the game tonight, and Bill's four sons are going to be here, as well.

The (Celtics) team was looking for a way to honor him tonight, and in addition to a pregame moment, the (Celtics) players are going to be wearing a special Bill Walton shooting shirt. So you're going to be seeing these shortly. The guys are going to be coming out and warming up in this jersey. We're happy about that.

In addition, Bill was someone who became a very close friend in the over the 30 years that I've been with the league. Many of you in this room have been covering the league for a long time, as well, and he traveled with us everywhere we went. I remember the first time we played in China, in 2004, being on the Great Wall with him. He was quite an adventurer. I can't think of a better ambassador for the NBA than Bill. He enjoyed talking to every single person.

Increasingly, internationally who understood he must have played basketball, wasn't quite sure who he was, and he would explain to them.

But even some of you know, right up until this past season, he was working. He was doing an alternate telecast with us called Throw It Down, and even Bill sort of continued to cover the game, couldn't stop complimenting the current players. I think he saw the staggering ability of these young guys and was constantly complimenting them. Every generation of young player came to know him. And just lastly say he'll be (missed), and my condolences to Lori and his four boys. It's a sad moment in the league.

Speaking of NBA's international presence, I know there are 26 different countries represented here today with media members, so I want to thank you for traveling so far to be here. In addition, these Finals will be carried in 214

countries and territories. This group of players will represent the largest contingent of international players ever we've had in the Finals; 13 players of the combined two teams were born outside of the United States. So the global growth of the NBA continues unabated.

Basketball as a sport continues to grow enormously on a global basis. Wonderful to see how much is happening in the women's game, as well, in the WNBA here in the United States, and we're looking forward to the Paris Olympics, where basketball will be a mainstay, men's and women's. Another exciting time.

It was interesting, I was watching Luka Doncic yesterday, just an example of how international this league is. Of course, someone who grew up in Slovenia and trained in Madrid and Spain and was doing interviews in three different languages. Again, many of you spend time with him, but he's an exemplar of the modern NBA.

And with that, I'm happy to answer questions. I only speak one language, unfortunately, so please in English. Thank you again for being here.

Q. The TV deal obviously has been talked about now for months. It has been obviously ramped up in the last few weeks. I know you're not prepared to announce a deal-deal. How accurate is what's out there? And a second part to that, how difficult is it to negotiate a media rights deal when none of us know what it's going to look like in five minutes, much like seven or nine or 11 years from now?

ADAM SILVER: Well, just begin by saying I don't want to cover specifically on what's been written in the media other than to say, yes, absolutely. I would just say plural, where you say TV deal, it's TV deals. Of course, there's discussions with our incumbents and other interested parties.

It is incredibly complex. I look at my colleague Bill Koenig sitting in the front row, president of our media division, who has been literally working around the clock on this, along with a team of others at the league office. And it's complicated for several reasons. One is the advent of new platforms, particularly streaming, and the interest of



streaming companies, and then the traditional media companies also carrying our games on streaming platforms.

It's complicated with multiple partners all seeking similar assets. In many cases, just figuring out the right way to balance those games as they go to different partners.

Then lastly, as you've said, we tend to do long-term deals. We think that's good for the stability of the league, but it means to a certain extent you're trying to predict the future, which is of course impossible.

So part of it is a bet on the partners that we will ultimately align with and their ability also to adjust with the times and their willingness to continue to invest in media and also become global, which to my earlier point is very important to the league, as well.

Q. In terms of the G League Ignite, I want to see if you could just talk about what it was able to accomplish during its four years of existence, players that were produced and more, and what ultimately led to you deciding to pull the plug on it.

ADAM SILVER: Sure. The advent of Team Ignite, for those of you who don't know, a team of younger players playing within the G League, in essence a select team, was in response to both President Obama, then at the time in office, who was pushing us hard and the basketball community to create a professional track for players who were not interested in playing college basketball, and at a time when they were not being compensated for playing college basketball.

In addition, it was the result of conversations with Condoleezza Rice, former Secretary of State, who was overseeing a committee on behalf of the NCAA, who made similar recommendations and said that I think our view was that these young men should not be forced somehow to go to college, if the only reason they were going to college was in preparation for the NBA as opposed to preparation for life. Our response was, we hear you, and we created this Team Ignite program. We were paying these players directly.

I think Team Ignite served its purpose. I don't necessarily think that the changes in NIL, legislation and these ongoing changes in college sports were a direct result of it. I think it helped, though, demonstrate the value for these young players, but we got to the point now with Team Ignite where frankly we felt it didn't make sense to compete against these top college programs, where in many cases have better facilities, top-notch coaching, charter aircraft, et cetera.

We thought this was a good time to step back and reassess what our role should be in junior basketball. Not just with the G League, but I'll add I've had some discussions with Charlie Baker, the head of the NCAA, about the joint role we potentially can play in helping even at a younger age helping develop top-flight youth basketball, boys, girls, young men, young women, in the United States in particular. I think that is something that we should focus on.

It's interesting, as you look at the growing body of international players in the NBA, Luka Doncic as an example before, who in essence went on a professional track beginning at 13 with Real Madrid, there's clearly some improvement we could use in the U.S. system for the training of these elite players. There's no doubt they come into the league as some of the most skilled players in the world, but in many cases they haven't -- it's not that they haven't learned team basketball, but because of the way the system works, they're constantly changing teammates, they're jumping from program to program. You can tell that the international players in many cases are just learning a different style, and in some cases a more efficient and winning style of basketball, team play basketball than we're seeing in some of the U.S. programs.

So I would add USA Basketball to the NCAA and the NBA and I'm sure that shoe companies have an interest in doing this, too.

Pulling back on Team Ignite was just the beginning, but I think as we complete our media deals, for me this will be, and Mark Tatum, Deputy Commissioner, is sitting here, will be one of our next major projects. So we're really focused on what our role should be in youth basketball in the United States and globally, for that matter.

Q. You mentioned the WNBA in your initial comments. I was curious for your reaction to the hard foul Caitlin Clark took last week, and then more broadly if you have any concerns about her first couple weeks in the league.

ADAM SILVER: I'll leave the specific question about the foul to my colleague, Commissioner (Cathy) Engelbert. Other than as a fan, obviously it's nothing new in basketball that there's sort of "welcome to the league" moments, especially for heralded rookies, but of course I want to see Caitlin treated fairly and appropriately in the league.

I would say it seems like she can take care of herself. She's a tough player. I think it may be lost on some people that are new to basketball, in terms of a little bit of controversy in the WNBA, what an incredible talent she is:

two Final Fours, leading scorer in the history of college basketball. I look forward to watching her ongoing development in the league.

I think ultimately this is very healthy for women's basketball and the WNBA. It's generating tremendous additional interest. In fairness to the other players and in fairness to Commissioner Engelbert, this didn't just start this year. Certainly we're seeing an acceleration of it with Caitlin, but many individual stars who came in this league in the last several years.

And then, again, I've been with the league for a long time. So I was there in the early days with Val Ackerman, and of course David Stern, when we developed the WNBA. In some ways, to me, this was a long time coming. If you went back and looked at our original business plan from 28 years ago, we didn't think it would be such a long timeline to break into the popularity we're seeing now.

Ultimately, I don't want to make too big of an issue about one particular player, one particular call. But I think the burgeoning rivalries within professional basketball, you see rivalries obviously among clubs but also among individual players, too, and I think that can be ultimately good for the sport.

But at the same time, there's also some larger societal issues at work. There's no doubt. I don't want to hide from that. Some having to do with race, and they're very apparent. I think sports historically has been a platform for people to talk directly about these issues. I don't think we should hide from them, and I think the players are happy to engage on these issues. They're sophisticated people. But ultimately let the public join part of those conversations, as well, and of course the media will weigh in.

Q. You mentioned streaming platforms being sort of a complicating factor with this media deal. The streaming landscape in the entertainment world has been a little volatile at times. How do you think about that, and what makes you confident that those are good homes for the NBA?

ADAM SILVER: Well, part of it, I don't want to sound overly confident, it has much to do with watching where media is moving, where top-notch content now that we're seeing on the various streaming platforms, the fact that maybe Netflix being the latest in terms of their Christmas Day deal for NFL games, that many of these platforms that only six months or a year ago that were reluctant to come to premium live sports are now jumping in.

If you watch where the eyeballs are going, and I'm sure it's

true for people in this room, as well, we're all moving into watching premium programming on streaming services.

Also, part of where my confidence goes in moving sports over to streaming platforms and something I've talked about before, it allows for tremendous additional functionality when it comes to watching games, personalization, customization of games, multiple feeds, multiple dialects, multiple languages, different camera angles. It really gives the fan enormous additional choice that you don't have through traditional television.

Trying to predict how fast this will move is I think what's so difficult. I think there's been a faster decline in cable viewership, cable usage and viewership than people were predicting even only two years ago, and the move is happening fast to streaming services. So what we're trying to do as part of these television deals is middle sort of the use still of the broadcast platform. Of course, the Finals are on ABC in the United States. Still matters tremendously to us.

Traditional cable, it's not going away, but it's continuing to decrease. And then streaming platforms are seeing accelerated growth, particularly around premium live sports. We're sort of trying to put foot, hand, finger in sort of every one of those buckets.

Q. Late last season the league fined Dallas \$750,000 for appearing to tank its final games to preserve a lottery-protected draft pick. Given the importance of that sequence of events in helping Dallas get to this point now, I'm wondering what your feelings are on that sequence, A, and then B, more generally if the league has considered eliminating draft pick protections in that range to take away that incentive in the future?

ADAM SILVER: The last part of your question, on changing those incentives in terms of draft picks, that's something we continue to look at. I think just more generally, incentives for teams are something that we continue to examine, modify, calibrate and look for ways to better align incentives. All of that goes to whether it's the Play-In Tournament, changes in the Draft Lottery, changes in the collective bargaining agreement. I think that's an ongoing effort.

In terms of what Dallas did last year, we sanctioned them. We did what we thought was appropriate at the time. I would only say that the success they saw this season, that they're now seeing in the Playoffs and here they are at the Finals, I don't attribute it to one draft pick, as important as that draft pick has been to their team.



Q. When you talk about the WNBA, there is some growth that's happening right now, but some of the discourse surrounding it, and I know you mentioned societal issues, but some of the discourse can get rather ugly, including a popular host on with one of your network partners referring to a player in a derogatory term. I just wanted to know what you are thinking and your discomfort or uncomfortableness with the discourse that's happening?

ADAM SILVER: Look, I'd say Pat McAfee, that's what you're referring to, he apologized, and I accept that. I think that the way media works these days, when people are online for hours, they're going to occasionally misstep. I think what's important is the context, their intention and sort of what they're willing to say about having done that. I leave it to ESPN to make their own personnel decisions about what the consequences of things like that. But I accept sort of in a free society, where there's a lot of conversation, a lot of dialogue, and I think it's for the WNBA, of course, it's going to be a two-edged sword.

Many of us in this room go back to David Stern, where we sat in meetings and he was pleading with some of the very reporters sitting her to cover the WNBA and women's basketball. Now we're being covered, and once you get covered in an extensive way, it's a little bit of a product of how media works these days, that you're going to see occasional statements that people aren't happy with.

But I think that my sense is at least what I read, the player accepted the apology. I think in the context of how he said it, I think matters a lot these days.

I don't want to get into sort of the cliched cancel culture debate. But I worry about that, that sort of this notion that if somebody seems to be a person of goodwill is saying things that in the context seem actually supportive of the player but says a word like that, that we all say shouldn't have been said, and he's the first to acknowledge he shouldn't, I don't want to overblow it. I think that we can move on from it.

Q. You said repeatedly the league will begin expansion process shortly after the media deals are done and there are some very deep-pocketed billionaires ready to buy in. I'm wondering where the timeline is on that and how the league is evaluating it?

ADAM SILVER: Bill Koenig, can you tell me when the media deals will be over so I can begin the expansion process? (Laughter.)

In all seriously, I meant what I said. We do need to finish up -- I think I said a few years ago, collective bargaining

agreement, new media deals, then we would turn to expansion. So we got part one done clearly, and thank you to the Players Association. We are very happy, I think both sides are, with our collective bargaining agreement.

Media deals, it's been a long process. It's ongoing, and we hope to wrap it up in the relative near term, and then we will turn to expansion. But by turning to expansion it doesn't mean we're going to announce that now we're ready to add teams. It means that there will be a committee of NBA governors that will focus on it. There are clearly markets out there that are very interested and will run through a process.

But I actually am looking forward to that. I think that the league, it's not preordained that we will expand this time, but I know there's an enormous amount of interest out there. And to me, yes, there are wealthy individuals, institutions that would like to invest and buy NBA teams, but I think it's on the league to look holistically because there is the dilution, of course.

Let's say we expand by two teams. What does that mean for talent? I feel great about where the talent is right now in the league, but those players have to come from somewhere. If you add two teams, how does it work geographically? What will it mean for growing the game?

At some point, we'd like to look outside the United States, in addition to Canada. This may not be the right moment to do that, but I'm thinking long term, as well.

I'm actually very excited about turning to that process, but first we've just got to be finished with the media deals.

Q. When the LeBrons and the Steps of this league retire, a lot of the guys who are pegged to be next are international players, and you kind of alluded to this in your opening statements, but how does the league feel about having an international player potentially be its face?

ADAM SILVER: I'm absolutely fine with that. It's interesting, times change. There used to be concerns even geographically of players from a certain part of the country and how will they feel about that player in that market, because the player played for a top college somewhere else or from somewhere else.

I think it's increasingly a global league in that wherever that player is from, and Luka Doncic is a great example, Giannis Antetokounmpo in Milwaukee, I think if that player becomes part of that community, lives in that community, gives of himself or herself in the WNBA to that community, I think they become part and parcel. I don't think it's any

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different that I went to Duke University and when a player is playing for Duke and Duke fans are all in, they're not so focused on where that player is from, whether in the United States or Luol Deng or other players from outside the United States.

It's a global market. At the same time, I will say to my earlier point, it is important that we focus on proper development of American players. I just think for the sport, still we're a U.S.-based business, the majority of our revenue still comes from the United States. I feel an obligation to the game, as well, and I know I speak for the head of the NCAA, who played college basketball.

Over time, like for example, we're up to about 30 percent of our players are international. When you think about the amount of basketball being played globally and the U.S. is a little less than 5 percent of the global population, that number of international players will only rise. Statistically, you're going to see more top-notch international players in the league. It doesn't mean, though, that there won't still be great U.S. players, many of whom we're going to see on the court tonight.

Q. I wonder how difficult has it been to kind of decouple the normal kind of push and pull of a TV rights deal with all of its complexities and different networks with the specific show Inside the NBA that's sitting over here that is kind of iconic and has been part of the firmament in the league for three decades and has its own uniqueness that really is a calling card for the league?

ADAM SILVER: It has been difficult. That show in particular is special. I have a close relationship with everyone who's on that show, from the time they played in the league, as well, and Ernie and I have been friends forever.

At the same time, it's not just the talent, of course. You've been in production yourself. There's hundreds of longtime people who have been involved with what I still refer to as Turner Sports, who have been longtime friends and colleagues, and no different at the other networks.

On one hand, from the league standpoint, it's fantastic to be liked and to be wanted and to have multiple suitors. At the same time, it makes me uncomfortable that it's zero sum, that at the end of the day there's only going to be so many television packages, there's only so many Finals games and playoff games and regular-season games to distribute.

I will say directly from me, directly to your question and the people who seem to be most impacted right now, the folks

at Turner Sports, I apologize that this has been a prolonged process, because I know they're committed to their jobs. I know people who work in this industry. It's a large part of their identity and their family's identity, and no one likes this uncertainty. I think it's on the league office to bring these negotiations to a head and conclude them as quickly as we can.

Q. It's been a few years since the league has opened up to institutional capital investment, team valuations have been skyrocketing, but at the same time there's still ongoing kind of vetting issues about approving funds, investments, things like that. I wonder if you can update us on the league's perspective on that industry, its influence, what risks you see, and potentially will we ever see institutional capital be in a control ownership of an NBA team?

ADAM SILVER: In terms of the last part of your question, we're not considering right now opening up control of teams to institutional capital. We think it's still very important that there be individuals and ultimately a singular governor who has ultimate decision making for a team. We've seen examples historically where, putting aside institutions, there have been multiple individuals, and it's led to all kinds of contention and controversy. So I don't see that happening, at least in the foreseeable future.

In terms of institutional capital being invested in teams, in some ways it's a good problem to have, as you said, as the value of these teams continue to grow and grow at a fast pace. There are only so many individuals literally in the world who can cut those sort of checks to invest in the majority of capital required to purchase these teams.

So we think we've found ourselves in a pretty good spot where you have individuals with control pieces of team, other individuals who are investing alongside of them, but then to complete the cap chart, you have institutional investors. The institutional investors, of course because the values are going up right now, seem very pleased with those investments. I think historically we were concerned, before we allowed institutional investors, that they would be short-timers and that they would be looking to quickly flip their investments.

We haven't seen that. In fact, this is your area, not mine, from the Financial Times, that it's become more sort of permanent capital in a way as opposed to being short-term investments. The investment community is looking now at sports teams, particularly premium sports teams, not just the NBA, as an investment category in a diversified portfolio that in many cases moves in an alternative ways from the market as a whole. It rounds out a portfolio and it seemingly is working well for everyone right now.



Lastly, I'll just say that this policy is only a few years old. Institutional investors who don't comply with our current policy, some particular funds have been in to see us, and to say we would like to be an investor in your league or in teams, and would you consider adjusting some of your policies, not necessarily to allow us to be a control owner, maybe they would like that one day, but in other ways, to ease up some of the restrictions, and that's something that we'll continue to look at. By the way, I know the NFL is looking at some of these same issues right now, too.

Q. There's been a protracted battle for control of the Timberwolves now for an extended period of time between Glen Taylor and then Marc Lore and Alex Rodriguez. That process is going into arbitration. If Alex Rodriguez and Marc Lore win arbitration in that situation, will the governors vote them into having a controlling ownership of the team?

ADAM SILVER: First of all, as you said, that's an ongoing process in terms of the arbitration. That was a process they agreed to in the purchase agreement. The league office is completely independent of that. Yes, the next step, were they to win that arbitration, would be then to continue through the league vetting process, and then ultimately what would be required would be a vote of the Board of Governors to approve them as owners.

Q. Do you believe if they did win that arbitration process, would the Board of Governors then ratify that and make them the majority owners?

ADAM SILVER: The only reason I won't comment on that is because that would be obviating the entire vetting process that needs to continue, and then is ultimately for the owners to take that vote.

Q. Mike Bloomberg today was reported as becoming part of their group. Does that impact things at all from the league standpoint?

ADAM SILVER: It may impact things if we were now at the point where they had won the arbitration and the group was being vetted for ownership. But as far as I know, and I only -- I don't have personal knowledge of that deal, I read it, as well, that's independent of the issues that are now at issue in the arbitration.

Q. Your player participation policy that was instituted this year seemed to have worked in the regular season. In the Playoffs a lot of stars, particularly in the Eastern Conference, were missing whole games, whole series, and it seemed to affect the quality of it. Given that you've extended All-Star breaks, eliminated

three-in-fours and four-in-fives, are you concerned this is something that will be a process for the league forever? Is this an unintended consequence? How do you view this or do you view this as like a one-year anomaly?

ADAM SILVER: When it comes to injury data, we're constantly studying it, trying to see if there's more than correlation and there's actually causation. Of course, this past season, even though we had the 65-game rule, largely designed to keep star players on the floor, we had a decrease in injury in star players.

I'm not standing here saying one followed from the other. It just may be happenstance for this season. I think we saw injuries, of course, in the Playoffs this year, but nothing that out of range with injuries we've seen in the past.

I think, look, there's nothing more important than keeping our players on the floor. One of the things I know Andre Iguodala and I, it's great having him now as the head of the Players Association, just based on his experience as a star player in this league, a championship-caliber player, that we're trying to step back and say, what is it that we need to do to incentivize guys to play and keep them healthy, and are there things we need to adjust in the schedule, are there other areas. You're talking about the Playoffs now that we look at.

I will say just based on one season of data, we're happy with the 65-game rule. There was sort of a parade of horrors that had rolled out, that had been rolled out, that everybody was saying, were threatening were going to happen. Those things didn't happen.

In terms of not just a reduction in star player injuries this year, but it worked to the extent we saw star players on the floor more. That was the goal.

Whether there's some connection in terms of additional injuries and Playoffs, we don't know. This is an area that confounds us in some ways. I will say that we worked with the players successfully in the collective bargaining agreement on this issue, and I think with Andre's leadership, sort of a commitment on both sides, let's keep looking at it. We have the same incentives, and that is to keep star players on the floor.

Q. Between scrutiny of the referees these Playoffs and confusion over certain calls, what changes can be done to the replay system to ensure that it's not doing more harm than good?

ADAM SILVER: Fair question. It's where we should be able to make the most progress. As I've said before,

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you're always going to have human error in the case of referees. It doesn't mean we can't continue to do a better job training officials.

But when it comes to technology, again, it's one of the things we've been talking to the Players Association a lot about and the Referees Association, too, and I'm thinking once the season ends this year, maybe we even put together a task force of the constituent groups. A guy named Evan Wasch in the League Office is leading this initiative. We're in discussions with Hawkeye, the technology they use in tennis. As I've said for a while, it's harder than I understood it to be, but if there's a category of objective calls that you can not only take off the floor but frankly out of the replay center. Buzz, Celtic ball, because it's automated, foot on the line, which one of the hundred fingers on the floor touched the ball last at that time. As I said they're working through that. But technology will solve that, and I think it's the same for replay.

It's frustrating at times for all of us. We're no different to me, looking at Byron Spruell sitting here in the front row, who oversees basketball operations I'm like a fan at home, too, where I'm thinking 30 seconds, 40 seconds, what's happening?

I would just recommend, if you've never done it and you're all invited, to come to the replay center in Secaucus and sit in that chair when the replays start coming, and sometimes there's 16, 18 different camera views, and while you think after 20 seconds you've seen six angles, you're ready to stop, then you're in the back of your head thinking it may be that 15th angle is going to show something more conclusively than the other ones. So you sit there and you sit there and you sit there. It's frustrating and it's frustrating for the players. I think it just makes the point that as much as we want to get every call right, it has to be balanced against a game of flow and stoppage. It's why we justify having more replay at the end of the game than in the middle of the game.

But I know we can do better, and a lot of it has to do with technology, and again, being out there in the community and the community of technologists, causing them to want to invest more resources in the game.

I'd just say lastly, one of the issues is that is a lot of the technology that we brought to bear for our game doesn't necessarily scale. So there's not necessarily a marketplace of large investments around this, which is why the league itself, there's nothing more important, we're making huge investments ourselves in improving technology around officiating.

Q. You made it pretty clear that streaming is important

to this league. But the matching rights, the way it works supposedly is that an incumbent like TNT or WBD can match. Can they match a streaming company? It sounds like it's up in the air.

ADAM SILVER: I'm not going to get into that only because it's a complex legal issue.

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