

U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell

Senate Commerce Committee Hearing on Protecting College Sports

June 3, 2026

Sen. Cantwell Opening Remarks

[\[VIDEO\]](#)

Sen. Cantwell: Well, thank you, Mr. Chairman. And yes, thank you for that coffee. I am from Seattle, so that is a way to get us going. And I want to thank the witnesses especially for being here. Each of you represents a special expertise on this subject, and your thoughts and wisdom today will be much appreciated.

My colleagues probably know that there are probably 25 things that Senator Cruz and I don't agree on, and that's just in this committee. So, saying that it is an accomplishment for him and I to agree on this is saying something.

We agree today that college athletics are in crisis, and we agree that the system is broken and unsustainable. Universities, athletes, and fans are pleading with us to do something about this issue.

Schools are cutting women's and Olympic programs, and they are dropping scholarships – I think we have a poster out here that shows that – erasing roster slots to try to keep pace with out-of-control spending in football and basketball. I think, as Coach Saban says in his statement, this has turned into pay-for-play. We cannot have a pay-for-play system and then continue to cut this many women and Olympic athletes in various programs.

Just since 2023, over 100 programs and more than 1,000 athletic scholarships and roster [spots] in women and Olympic sports have been eliminated, and it's going to get worse. In April, the University of Arkansas and St. Louis University both announced within days of each other they were going to cut the women's—actually and men's—tennis teams.

Kansas, Colorado, Rutgers, and Washington State –my home state – beloved institutions with strong alumni bases and storied histories – are getting hollowed out. And even if the universities are not cutting sports programs, they are taxing students who are not athletes and taking money out of their general funds to cover ballooning athletic program deficit.

James Madison University now charges every student an extra \$2,400 a year for athletics, whether or not they ever step on a field. What once felt like a shared national pastime has become a free-for-all, a money flowing with few guardrails, players and coaches constantly moving, and schools struggling to keep pace.

As Coach Saban notes in his testimony – and I thank you for emphasizing the effect on women and Olympic athletes. I appreciate that coming from a football coach. The whole ecosystem is important. Coach Saban says, “We will lose scholarships. We will lose Olympic pipelines. We will lose chances for young people who may never play professionally, but whose lives are changed by college sports.”

The pay-per-play antics and this failed system are putting our future Olympic athletes and future women[‘s] sports participants at risk. When you ask the American public in a poll about this, it's not football that rises to the top.

Only 54% of the respondents say they really care about football. 87% of the respondents say the most important thing they worry about is women[‘s] and Olympic sports. And why not? Because they understand how unique they are and how threatened they are by a system that cuts even \$1 from where we are investing today.

Clearly, both of these things – women[‘s] and Olympic sports – need larger investments than we are doing today. Other countries, like China and Russia, recruit their athletes and do it through dedicated programs and dedicated facilities. We rely on our college system instead to help train the best.

Three out of four members of the 2024 Olympic team in Paris were current or former college athletes, and it was the women Olympians in Paris who took home the majority of the gold. As Notre Dame Athletic Director Pete Bevacqua, who is here with us today, said, “If we continue to go down this path of no legislative action, Olympic and women's sports around the United States will be at risk both this year and years to come.”

I believe the failure of us to act here will make us responsible for the outcome of future Olympic teams if we don't come up with a solution. But as my colleague Senator Cruz said, none of this is inevitable. We can and we should write better rules that put athletes first and keep our institution strong, and that is exactly what the [Protect] College Sports Act does.

It protects college athletes' hard-won rights to be paid [for their] name, image, and likeness and recognizes revenue sharing, as in the (House v. NCAA) settlement agreement. It replaces a patchwork of weak state laws with strong federal laws.

And our bill makes sure that an athlete cannot lose a scholarship because of an injury or a bad [game], and it requires Division 1 schools to guarantee those scholarships even after they've graduated to make sure they can complete their college education.

It requires Division 1 schools to have medical care while athletes play, and for five years after. And we create a \$60 million trust fund for athletes with long-term conditions like CTE. That is [a] landmark investment. It also makes sure that medical staff is independent, so that coaches can never overrule a doctor, and it ensures that whistleblowers can't be retaliated against.

The bill puts real rules on unscrupulous agents who have started to exploit our youngest athletes at the high school level, and it does this by making sure that we cap their fees and make sure that they are registered in their states.

It also ensures that the NCAA and conferences cannot provide women with unequal facilities. That means travel, meals, rest, championship tournaments, women get to be treated equally as

the men's team. And these rights have teeth. If they're violated, the athletes can have their day in court.

This bill also gives institutions a way to raise more money without having to raid endowments or levy new fees. I believe, and I hope that Mr. Gee will emphasize on this today, we cannot lose the innovation race with China because we are cutting university R&D and putting it into sports instead.

These institutions have very important roles for our nation right now, and [under the bill] any school that chooses can pool its media rights and negotiate with [broadcasters], similar to what the NFL and NBA do today.

It lets these schools build smarter schedules, so regional rivals can play closer to home. It requires that every football and basketball game be offered in local markets for free viewing in the home market. I think every one of my colleagues will want to go home and talk about this. We are not letting content be put behind a paywall, so that you can only access it – your favorite team – if you buy a subscription.

And it brings in real revenue. Experts believe that this could bring in an additional \$4 to 8 billion in media rights revenue, money that we would like to dedicate to women and Olympic sports. The solution here is to grow the pie, not shrink it, and give schools more resources.

Senator Capito and I wrote the Equal Pay for Team USA Act, now the law of the land, which requires women representing this country [to] receive the same pay, medical care, and travel and expenses as men, and this bill carries that same principle into law here for college.

We all remember the women's NCAA basketball players given a single rack of dumbbells while they were playing in a championship tournament, and the men had a full weight room. So, this cannot be the standard.

So, Mr. Chairman, I again want to thank you for the hard work that this legislation represents. Many athletes have been hurt by us not having this legislation: as I mentioned, athletes who basically failed to get a scholarship, or a team that did not stick up for them when they were hurt and shouldn't be playing, or someone whose program got canceled, and then tried to go play golf at another school, only to be told by the NCAA they couldn't play.

This bill puts real athletes' rights into federal law, and I hope we can make it the law of the land very soon. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

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Sen. Cantwell Q&A

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Sen. Cantwell: Thank you, Mr. Chairman. I wanted to start with you, Mr. Holtzclaw. I know you're no longer a Husky, but thank you for that championship game and season in 2024. I think you told my staff one of the reasons why you transferred is that you had three different coaches in three years, is that right?

Lance Holtzclaw: Yes, that's correct.

Sen. Cantwell: ...[P]eople don't realize that in this arms race of money and coaches transferring, that the students -- I mean, how can you learn any system, or coach or synchronicity if you have three different coaches in three years?

Holtzclaw: Well, like you say, it is definitely a difficult task. I would like to explain a little bit. My first year, I got recruited by one coaching staff and then when I had got there, that coaching staff was no longer there. New coaching staff comes in, played with that staff, and then a new staff comes in after that. I then transfer, have another staff there one year, then another staff leaves, so again it just kind of tags back into people staying and leaving and kind of the leadership portion that's really important when it comes to the team. That leadership portion is so important, it drives the team, it keeps the team together, it holds them tight together and creates that real family bond that comes in when you're playing college athletics. It's extremely important to how the careers of these young men and women go out and how they're developed in their time in college athletics. There's so much that goes on with life development, that goes on with your education, that goes on with your life experiences, and I feel like that leadership portion being strong in a system and in a program, is extremely important. So, when pieces move around a lot, it can alter that sometimes.

Sen. Cantwell: Well, it seems to me that this is one of the centerpieces that we're losing. I think all of us up here believe in competition and real competition, but I think we love the fact that college athletics has put so much focus on developing teams who are successful because they build a team, and not because they have a billionaire in their back pocket, and I think that's what we're facing here right now.

Are we going to create some rules here that puts people on some level of equity and parity. Now, I wanted to bring this up with you, Ms. Gould, because you've been very polite about this. I mean, the bottom line is WSU had a \$35 million hole blown in their \$85 million college budget. Basically, that is the revenue that was taken out of the Pac-12. And I think the reason why Senator Cruz and I have a letter from the ... Big 12 and the ACC is because they think that's what's going to happen to them next, that somebody is going to come in and rearrange the deck chairs of those conferences, steal the eyeball schools and then basically leave everybody with everything else.

Now, I believe in the rivalry of the Pac 12, I believe in the historic, you know, Rose Bowl competitions and the unbelievable rivalries between all of these West Coast schools, and it's been phenomenal. But now WSU, instead of having a \$35 million media budget, has a, I think, \$10 or \$12 million media budget, so

are we just going to let this continue to be this this arms race? What do you think that we should do to make sure that we are saving this?

And then for you, Mr. Gee, I have a question, because you were very clear about where you think the alignment is. The alignment is with the new media companies, even though we're losing \$5 billion there are people that don't want to look at an option to create more revenue... . So, I want to hear from you on that point.

Teresa Gould: Yeah. Well, I appreciate that the Act has some conversations in there about what the future model should look like relative to scheduling and relative to conference alignment, and relative to the future model. I think we are at a crossroads where this history that we have in our industry of everybody just poaching some other league based on media rights dollars or whatever the driver might be. I think we have to take a step back and really think broadly and creatively about what the future model should look like, and as I referenced earlier, because it has impacts on other institutions in these states and because it has practical impacts on student athletes. I really look forward to the work that the commission will do around this, and to be creative and innovative – maybe we look at regionalizing Olympic sports to try to keep student athletes at home, but I think now is the time for us to think about the role of conferences and what the structure looks like moving forward.

Sen. Cantwell: Mr. Gee. Has the current system failed?

Gordon Gee: Absolutely, that's the reason we're here today. I mean, we would not be having this hearing if we had a system that was working,

Sen. Cantwell: And so what do we -- what do you think that -- on this notion of why university presidents didn't understand that ADs and conferences were taking us down a different direction, that was going to be so painful.

Gee: ...I've always said that there are kind of three, third rails for university presence. One is university home, another is athletics, and hospitals, and I think that so many presidents want to stay somewhat distant from college athletics, because there are a lot of issues that surround that.

Sen. Cantwell: But hasn't that cost us a lot of money? Is costing us \$5 billion

Gee: It has cost us a lot.

Sen. Cantwell: Mr. Holtzclaw, he wants an experience that Coach Saban said—that's why he coaches—because he wants to build that, and he can't get that, because now he's getting a new coach every, every other year.

Gee: You're absolutely right, and that's the reason that I'm here today. You know, I should be playing Canasta on a beach, 82 years of age, but instead I'm a convert. As having been a university president for so long, I realize that what we really have to do is we really have to think about universities having an obligation to each other, rather than this kind of Darwinian approach that we're taking. And I'll be just very honest, I think that we have turned over too much power to commissioners, they have a very limited notion of what, it should be about. The word student is not in their lexicon – the word athlete is – and the word money, and this is this is an issue that we have to get at.

I don't mean to throw them under a bus, although I just did. But what I, what I do mean to say is the fact that I think that university presidents need to take charge of this issue, and I believe that they will. You know, I think about my friends in the Pac 12 -- or in not in the Pac 12, you're really good -- I was, I'm thinking about in the Big 10 -- and the SEC. I mean -- I know most of those presidents, they're really smart people, they're wonderful people, half of them have worked for me, but we need to have an opportunity to really have those presidential discussions, because this is so simple. We have a revenue problem, either we grow the pie or we destroy everything that we're about. It's pretty damn simple.

Sen. Cantwell: Well, I don't care anything about your height, because you just packed a punch. So, thank you very much.

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