U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell

Senate Commerce, Science, and Transportation Committee

Markup of the Protect College Sports Act

June 18, 2026

Sen. Cantwell Opening Remarks

[VIDEO]

Sen. Cantwell: Thank you, Mr. Chairman, and thank you for this bipartisan accomplishment.

A lot of people in Washington -- my Washington -- and around the country think that bipartisanship is dead. But on behalf of 500,000 athletes who are seeing their future opportunities dimmed, we decided to work together to try to address this problem.

I want to thank our colleague, Senator Coons, who is in the back of the audience here, for his participation in helping us get this over the goal line. And before I go on, I want to thank our staffs for both the majority and the minority committee, including Shannon Smith, who had to retire a week ago. This staff has worked on this issue tirelessly for a long period of time and we just could not be here today without them.

As you said, this is landmark legislation. It is landmark legislation, because it is the first time we will be creating a federal right for student athletes in name, image, and likeness that does preempt state laws that are much weaker and basically negate many of the opportunities of athletes if you are in conflict with your university. This bill stands tall on behalf of athletes.

It's landmark legislation because it codifies ten years of scholarship opportunities for athletes, so that you can complete your college education. We're not saying it takes you ten years. We're simply saying that you have your five years of scholarship, and if somehow you do go make it to a pro league and want to come back, we also give you additional time to complete that college education.

Ten years of making sure that your health and your healthcare is covered. I think that this is landmark because not only are you covering the time that you're playing as an athlete, but in case that you're injured, we are also helping you after you graduate from college to take care of any of those issues.

I want to thank the Chairman again for including—a major piece of the legislation, historic legislation—a….medical trust fund to help institutions like HBCUs, who can't afford to meet those obligations or the obligations of CTE, to include that as a first-time part of federal legislation. Historic.

I want to thank the McNair family, who first brought these issues to us when their son died playing football in Maryland in the heat of the day, and basically did not receive enough proper [treatment]. He educated us on the standards that needed to be in our legislation on health and safety. This is the most landmark piece of legislation protecting student athletes for the type of preparation they need to compete in college sports.

I want to thank the Chairman for including an improvement to that medical trust fund offered by Senator Kim to make sure that that money is enhanced in the future if somehow it's not meeting the needs of what is required.

The legislation is also landmark in that it definitely makes sure that predatory contracting done by agents or universities or conferences or shill organizations don't get students stuck in binding arbitration—no way out—because you signed a document that you didn't even understand and basically took away your legal rights.

This is landmark in the protections that it gives student athletes. It is also landmark in cutting down on agents' [bad] activities, because we've seen the worst of activities taking advantage of high school students asking them to sign—somebody comes up to you in a high school gym after you've had a miraculous night and they promise you an NBA career if you'll just allow them to represent you.

The next thing you know you've signed a piece of paper that probably signed away property, signed away earnings, signed away things that—even if you never make it into college or the pros—all of a sudden now you are financially obligated to this person who took advantage of you.

So, making agents register, making them liable for deceitful information, making them accountable to a federal law with fines, is [the] first-time federal law will help us in cracking down on these bad actors.

I want to emphasize a couple of points.

First, I want to thank Senator Hickenlooper for his unbelievable leadership in thinking about women's and Olympic sports. I know he comes from a state where they care so much about women's and Olympic sports.

The majority helped work with Senator Hickenlooper and the USOPC to not only protect our bill as it does for the Sports Broadcasting Act and future revenue going to women's and Olympic sports—landmark provisions authored by Senator Hickenlooper and negotiated with the majority basically say that those women's and Olympic sports should be protected for the next nine years [in] the wealthiest divisions and, [in] those who are more struggling, for the next four years.

Why is that so important? It's important because we are already seeing cuts to [hundreds] of women's and Olympic sports and we need them to be protected throughout this. I will note that there was recent public polling that said that 87 percent of the public thinks the number one priority here is not football, believe it or not. A lot of this discussion is about football. Believe it or not, the number one thing the public cares about – 87 percent of the public—please protect women's and Olympic sports, and that is exactly what this bill does. And so I want to thank Senator Hickenlooper for that.

There's been much made and discussion about whether student athletes support this bill. Mr. Chairman, I want to enter into the record a letter from a student athlete advocacy group that basically represents 500,000 students in Division I, Division II and Division III committees who say the bill's protections for student athletes at all divisions, including transfer rights, changes in

college sports, graduation and sexual assault and harassment – that this is great transparency on registration and fees and important antitrust protections.

So I want to enter that into the record.

And there has been much made of late that somehow maybe the Congressional Black Caucus doesn't support us moving forward on this bill. They have not said that. That somehow, maybe some other organizations want to slow this issue down. I get that they definitely want to slow down the SCORE Act. I join them in that effort. But I'd also like to enter into the record a letter from Craig Robinson, who is the brother of Michelle Obama, brother-in-law to the President of the United States, who asks us to support this legislation because, as he says, he was a coach and a student athlete himself, and he supports this legislation.

So I doubt the president's brother-in-law would be joining us in this effort if he thought anything in this act was untoward [to] athletes or not a victory in moving forward the debate on how important it is to represent athletes' rights.

There are some people who think that doing nothing can lead to collective bargaining, and while I think I'm supportive of a [the] concept, our witness before the committee thought that collective bargaining from the Pac 12 is something…but I get the Pac 12 is probably a state bottom-up approach that might work. But having a [top]-down approach here in the United States Senate, where somehow somebody thinks we're going to pass a mandate by the federal government to say that state employees could somehow be mandated by the federal government to collectively bargain is not something that's going to happen anytime soon.

Our legislation does, though, say, let's create a commission with students, with HBCUs, with the interested parties and discuss what is the best foot forward for collective bargaining or other options that can continue to solve some of our problems.

So, Mr. Chairman, there are some on our side who would have loved more time to deal with this bill. Clearly, it is complex. There are some that would hope that we would continue to make further changes. I commit to them that we are going to do that. But we need order and stability now.

The craziness that is happening in this marketplace, with cutting of thousands of roster slots, the taxing students fees for education to pay for football, the arms race that is basically taking money away from research and development.

Our task here is to win the race in innovation against the Chinese—a 1.4 billion population. We have [340] million in our country. How are we going to do that? Because we have a better education system, and it's all over the country. But not if we continue to let the demise of college sports not only take away athletes' rights, not only take away revenue, but also diminish our R&D capabilities, particularly at land grant institutions.

So, Mr. Chairman, I know we made big concessions last night to the Big 10 to make sure that they felt that this was a bill that helped protect their interests for the future. I'm sure we're going to have many more conversations with them down the road, but as my colleague Senator Wicker

knows, we've been working on this issue for a long time, since his time as chairman of the committee.

And I just ask my colleagues to support this legislation today, because it does have a few other little tools in here. One, it literally says you cannot block content in your region from being on over-the-air broadcasting.

I am sick and tired of these people putting broadcast content of us seeing our favorite football team, [and] all of a sudden you can't watch it because it's behind a paywall. That is not what the American consumer wants or deserves, and that protection in this legislation is landmark.

I also think that the tool in this legislation to increase streaming media rights for non-revenue sports – women's volleyball, women's basketball or rowing, that is historic at the University of Washington – allows those sports to go out and capitalize on revenue opportunities to grow their sport, their attention, and their future.

So, Mr. Chairman, this is landmark. I appreciate us working together. I appreciate our colleagues moving this bill out of committee. It's not the last that we're going to see of the changes to this. I encourage more dialogue with all our colleagues.

And I will certainly be communicating with the Congressional Black Caucus on these issues. I certainly will be communicating with the rest of our Senate colleagues as well.

But Mr. Chairman, I've said it many times: I think you know you and I disagree on about 25 things, and that's just in this committee. But we did not allow that disagreement to thwart progress on a critical subject.

And I think that anybody who thinks that there's another opportunity forward is going to be mistaken, because I think we have seen from the NCAA and the conferences that they cannot figure out how to get this structure right. They need our help, they've asked for it, and today we're giving it.

Thank you.

Sen. Cantwell Remarks Following Sens. Klobuchar, Baldwin

[VIDEO]

Sen. Cantwell: Thank you so much. I wanted to say, I want to continue to work on Baldwin 3. I do think there are some current university contracts that might be unwound if we had passed that language, but clearly support her larger efforts, and certainly want to work on the media issue with her. We've had success in this committee.

Senator Klobuchar has also brought up this issue that we do want less content behind the paywall and more content with broadcasting. The language in the bill clearly gives us the ability to do that by saying, if we are going to give an antitrust exemption, we're only giving that antitrust exemption if the public gets something in return.

What we [are] getting from the Sports Broadcasting Act of 1960, which gave this original exemption, is the right to basically say that the content has to be on broadcast, and so this is critically important to the bill. And so I look forward to continuing to work with my colleagues on all of that. Thank you Mr. Chairman.

Sen. Cantwell Remarks Following Sen. Moran

[VIDEO]

Sen. Cantwell: I just want to thank Senator Moran for his leadership. He has been consistent on this issue for many, many years, and I appreciate it. You know, 19 to 9 sounds like a Seahawks football score, but I think today we're proving that we are resilient in keeping this product moving.

I know that my colleagues have concerns both about the SEC and Big 10, but what we did today is say we are not going to let the most powerful, richest conferences dictate to the rest of America what's going to happen to 500,000 athletes.

We are going to make sure that the voices of people are heard everywhere, so I want to thank my colleagues who are trying to help us move this forward in the debate, and I want to certainly thank Senator Rosen for her contributions on this, because she's been – I know she's dealing with boxing issues too, but she's been really helpful, so we really appreciate her. Thank you, Mr. Chairman.

Sen. Cantwell Remarks Following Sen. Schmitt

[VIDEO]

Sen. Cantwell: I just want to thank my colleague from Missouri for his hard work on this, and I certainly do want to work with him in the future [to] clearly get this right so that schools and institutions across the country feel fairly represented in what is a distribution of revenue and a process where we could move forward on maximizing more revenue.

Why do we want to do that? Because the analysis is there that there is revenue that could be helpful to create stability. And personally, I like the marriage between college sports and local broadcasting. I want to see more local broadcast stations survive, and being able to get this right is critical. So, I look forward to working with my colleague.