

U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell
Protect College Sports Act Floor Speech
September 28, 2026
[\[VIDEO\]](#)

Sen. Cantwell: Madam [President], I know the floor has been busy this afternoon with people discussing the Protect College Sports Act, and I want to thank all my colleagues for participating in a debate.

That is what this institution is supposed to be about. It is supposed to be about an amendment process, and it's supposed to be about a product that comes out of committee, and it is supposed to be about our colleagues showing up. So, I want to thank my colleagues, particularly Senator Booker and Senator Murphy, who came to the floor to express their views on this bill.

I want to thank both of them. You know, I certainly agree with Senator Murphy on his [long-standing] effort to think about collective bargaining in college sports. He's been very outspoken on that for many years.

And I want to thank Senator Booker for working with me for many, many years on this issue, and that doesn't mean that he still doesn't have reservations, but it means that he is committed to this issue writ large.

But, we do see a different conclusion here tonight. And I want to thank my colleagues for passing a bill out of committee and now getting it to this threshold, because unlike my colleagues' comments before, there are several things in this bill that are really important to enshrine into federal law at this time.

First and foremost, the federal right to NIL and making sure that [it's not] state laws that have been quite onerous on athletes – that is, laws that say if you conflict with your university, your university wins [and] if you conflict with other issues, you don't get NIL. So, creating a federal standard is very important.

But compensation on revenue sharing is probably the most important thing we could possibly... enshrine in federal law today. This is saying, for the first time, that an athlete gets a percentage of the media rights, the ticket sales, and the sponsorship.

That's not been said before in a court case decision. It was agreed to in a settlement agreement – in a settlement agreement called Grant House versus the NCAA. Now that settlement agreement has had its ups and downs, and I hope it prevails, but I know this: we can put into federal law that enshrinement so that the Senate is clear.

My colleagues have said, "Why do this now?" Well, because there was a difference of opinion, and even [Justice] Brett Kavanaugh, in the decision of [NCAA v.] Alston by the Supreme Court, said, "Yes, I think athletes deserve a recognition of revenue, but Congress could step in and change that."

And my colleagues may know that the House of Representatives did try to change that. The House of Representatives did try to pass a bill that said, "No, they don't deserve revenue sharing. They don't deserve revenue sharing." That is the bill the House came very close to passing.

And so tonight, we're taking a monumental step that I agree that maybe not all 100 people agree on, but I think the majority of our colleagues agree on these two principles that the Supreme Court also has spoken to, but that we are now putting in a federal law because, as Brett Kavanaugh said, Congress could change its mind. Congress could do something differently. But tonight we're speaking. We believe in these two things.

We also believe in a health and safety standard in federal law, one that protects the athletes beyond the way the law works today and gives them the right to sue and hold these people accountable for any kind of health and safety violations.

This is something that my colleagues, Senator Blumenthal and Senator Booker, and I and others worked on diligently, and we want to continue to make sure it is enshrined in this statute. And then medical coverage for five years post eligibility, and capping agents' [fees] at 5%.

So my colleagues have said, "Why do this? Why do this now?" Well, that is because 94% of the D1 – that is the biggest division of athletes; there's three divisions, and then other [associations] – 94% of those D1 programs are in the red. So that's a pretty big issue.

And the reason why it's so frustrating is there's four schools just in the state of Virginia that are putting exorbitant tuition fees on their students just to pay for college education.

There are people that are cutting science programs, cutting professors, cutting other programs just to pay for college sports, when in reality, we need all those to beat China and compete – and not have an arms race in sports.

So right now, [the] median debt for schools in the Big Four conferences – their median debt is \$120 million. What are they doing? Now, I know everybody would like to blame it on coaches, and I guarantee you there are a few coaches that need to get called out.

But the main reason for this is not because we are paying athletes. It is not because we've all agreed that they deserve to have part of this revenue. This number exists because there are no sound rules that prohibit an arms race from taking place, and people who are billionaires and millionaires putting any amount of money into their school program.

And our bill fixes that and creates rules across the board for everyone to follow, so that we don't have this exorbitant arms race.

Now, I'll be the first to admit there's more to do on stadiums. There's more to do on other aspects of spending college sports. But we need to pass a bill tonight because we need to stop stealing money out of college [and] university institutions for education, for tuition, for professors, and putting it into an arms race on sports.

It's time to make sports about playing sports again, and not about the money. So this bill stops the cuts to women's and Olympic sports. Why? Because who's paying the bill right now?

The number one person paying the bill is a hundred programs and a thousand women and Olympic athletes because they don't make money, so the easiest way to save money in an institution is to cut them right now. And so we are trying to stop that.

Our legislation says yes, we are willing to give the college teams an antitrust exemption to pool their media rights and make more money, but only if they protect women's and Olympic... sports.

And just to be clear, because there's a little misunderstanding about this: you don't get to have the antitrust exemption and then later cut these programs. You only get the antitrust exemption if you keep the women's and Olympic sports.

If you don't do a pooling of media rights, we also have a provision for the next several years that makes people keep their women's and Olympic roster slots. So, very important aspect of the bill.

[There is] this big complaint about the amount of money going to coaches, and I welcome any discussion about how to fix this issue. And I want to thank my colleague Senator Luján for the brilliant amendment that he offered in committee. Because basically it says you can only pay a coach – with fees from the education system – \$500,000 a year, and if you want to pay them any more than that, you have to go get... somebody in the private sector to go pay that.

So we are not going to be held hostage, as taxpayers, to these coaches' salaries. And in addition, we make it a requirement that you cannot transfer in the middle of the year.

Now, a lot of people have said, "Well, what are you going to do about the HBCU infrastructure because they are part of Division I football?" You know, the SEC and others came along and said, "Oh, just kick them out of Division I." We're like, "No, that's a really bad idea."

We're not going to push them out of Division I football. We're going to grow their capabilities in communication because just like other people, they want their games seen, they want their broadcast, they want their broadband, but they don't have it.

So this bill includes a \$900 million authorization to help upgrade the schools that have been most impacted without the... [communications] capabilities.

A lot of my colleagues would say, "Well, where is that student athlete support?" I'm very excited about a commission that we create in this bill to hear more from student athletes. But student athletes and their committees – and these are all the letters from student athletes from various conferences across the United States, Madam President, that I would like to enter into the record.

So, the American Conference Student Athletes [Advisory Committee], Rocky Mountain Athletic Association Student Athletes [Advisory Committee], American Rivers Conference Student Athlete Advisory [Committee], the New England Conference... Student Athletic Advisory [Committee]. I could keep going and going and going.

So, there is support by athletes for this bill, but it is also endorsed by the United Negro College Fund because they believe that this bill will help stabilize one aspect of D1 football that is really challenging, and that is the system.

It's also endorsed by the U.S. Olympic Committee, and the reason it's endorsed by the U.S. Olympic Committee is because they know we're going to help preserve Olympic sports. Now, what are we going to do when we have the next Olympics or the one after that, and you literally have not trained and skilled the athletes?

Some of our biggest institutions are the ones who provide 70% of these athletes, and so if we don't stabilize and say "stop cutting women's and Olympic sports," then we are going to be standing at an Olympics where we're not winning and going to ask why.

I didn't want to deal with this issue, but when a kid from my state – from a famous part of our state, White Pass, where the Mayer brothers won gold skiing in the Olympics because they grew up on that pass – basically this kid couldn't snowboard for us and went and snowboarded for Russia and won medals.

I was like, this is a problem. So, I'm not for us losing in [the] Olympics because we undermine college athletics in an arms race because we don't want to put rules in place. So, the Thurgood Marshall Fund also supports this. Team USA athletes all support this.

And Madam President, it is just time for us to get this issue over the top. That's really what we're talking about. It is not the final solution. It is putting a pin in the problems to stabilize the loss of women's and Olympic [sports] and to create the opportunity to discuss the larger structure moving forward. That is why I think we have so much support.

It doesn't mean that we have solved every problem, but it means that we are on our way to... solving the problems that exist and preserving the opportunities for the future.

So, let's get it over the top. Very proud of this athlete, and she's a perfect example. Okay, she's number one in the world right now, and she's the pole vaulter at University of Washington.

But what if we continue to undermine the efforts of women's and Olympic sports? What if she doesn't have that roster slot because we're too busy letting billionaires run the race and basically leave people behind?

That is not what sports is about. It is about any given day, the competition. So, let's get back to playing sports again, and let's pass this legislation.

Madam President, I suggest the absence of a quorum.