U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell
Protect College Sports Act Floor Speech
September 22, 2026
[VIDEO]

Sen. Cantwell: Thank you, Mr. President.

I come to the floor because we're going to be voting shortly on two things this afternoon. One, on a judicial nominee, and second, on cloture on the underlying substitute of the Protect College Sports Act.

And I just wanted to make sure that we were talking to colleagues about changes that were in that underlying substitute that we've been able to make.

I think today -- earlier today at 3:00 or 3:30 -- was a deadline for filing amendments and so we obviously have been working all weekend and processing amendments that were filed last week and now we will work on amendments that are filed this week and hopefully make progress with our colleagues in a bipartisan basis.

But as we continue to move through the legislative process on the Protect College Sports Act, we have sought to clarify and improve the bill in ways that make clear to our colleagues the intent of what the Senate Commerce Committee and now those here in the Senate floor have tried to achieve in this legislation.

The substitute makes clear that medical coverage and healthcare and safety standards in the bill are a floor and not a ceiling. So, it amends sections 106 and 107 to clarify that it cannot be construed to preclude provision of additional medical coverage or establishment of additional health and wellness and safety standards [above what is] in the bill.

It requires that the NCAA take more responsibility in school compliance with health and safety, [and] wellness standards. I appreciate this very much because I think these actions do need to have someone who can continue to improve the accountability of our academic institutions and how they are performing – or not performing.

It requires that the commission that we put into the legislation also study further health, safety, [and] wellness standards and consider ways to improve them.

It is making progress in a couple of other areas – [like] the academic progress requirement, which I think is really important. This bill is to make sure that we still have student athletes and they meet and achieve academic performance.

This requires an institution to comply with the uniform benchmarks established by the Intercollegiate Athletic[s] Association or conference[s] related to graduation rates and the academic process of student athletes in order to be eligible for this retention fund. So, we are putting in more safeguards and accountability.

If these institutions want to continue to have additional resources, they're going to have to prove that they are meeting academic performance [metrics].

It prevents the NCAA from weakening its standards for qualifying as a full-time student by cross-referencing terms and definitions.

So again, lots of eyeballs on this legislation, and it's good because we are making and perfecting, ensuring that the language does what we think it does and if not -- we're improving it by making changes.

The substitute also includes a role for the House and Senate Education and Labor Committees in the selection of commission members.

It does this by requiring the House and Senate leadership and the Senate Commerce and House and Energy Commerce leadership to work with Senate HELP and House Ed and Workforce leadership in appointing the members of the commission.

Now, this legislation does try to stabilize the college environment today as it relates to sports, but it also says we need to have a big discussion about how this continues to play out in the future, and this commission needs to be well represented by a variety of interests, so we're very happy to add both HELP and House Education and Workforce Leadership to be part of that.

And it requires the Commission to study how and whether students should get a financial stake in their own teams. Now, this is a novel idea, but something I think the commission should consider.

One of the things I'm very proud of in the underlying bill is the fact that we say to broadcast entities who bid on college sports, most of the time just to show football or just to show basketball, that if you are not using your rights for those same institutions to help support other programs like, say, women's volleyball or track and field, that you have to allow that institution to come up with other ways that they might enhance their revenue by doing streaming media.

Now we think this is really important because we think there are a lot of great -- I'm very proud right now that I think our UW women's pole vaulter is number one in the world right now. I think I just saw that headline, but why can't the University of Washington promote their track and field if, in fact, their football Husky contract – which I would just say, you know, I saw a lot of Big 10 football this weekend trying to gauge and understand.

But you didn't see anything about the Huskies other than if you tried to watch that game. Why? Because nobody on the East Coast even reports about what happens to West Coast football after a certain time. They just don't report about it.

This bill is about trying to empower these other sports, particularly that drive women and Olympic sports, to make their own revenue streams. So, one of our colleagues here wanted an improvement to the bill that said that students should even think about how to get a bigger financial stake. I welcome it. I welcome that as part of a commission requirement.

We also did a few things to make sure that we are covering pending cases – that the underlying bill does not wipe out pending cases, and so we took language recommended by a variety of our athletes working on this prior to us even moving the bill out of committee [and] since the bill moved out of committee.

And this I think helped us perfect this language to make sure that existing pending cases are not wiped out by out by our legislation, and it obviously also narrows the broad field of preemption provisions for eligibility to just [some of] those covered in this legislative section.

So, this legislation before us today continues to make improvements. As I said, I think there's about 15 or 20 amendments that were filed last week, and maybe another 20 plus amendments filed today. So we're going to continue to work through our colleagues on that.

But [we will] continue to push forward on the very challenging environment that college education is facing and the huge amounts of add-on fees that they're adding to non-student athletes to pay for athletics, taking money out of the general fund to pay for athletics, basically taking out of endowments to pay for athletics.

The majority of these [athletic programs] are not even making money anymore for themselves, so we have to bring some order to the system, and I urge my colleagues to continue to improve this situation, so that we are not balancing the books on behalf of larger education just for sports, but [so] they have a system that will work for all of us.

So I encourage my colleagues to continue to dialog with us, and I hope that we can move forward on this important legislation. I thank the president, and I yield the floor.