

# WNBA Draft

Monday, April 13, 2026

New York City

## Commissioner Cathy Engelbert



CATHY ENGELBERT: All right. It's great to be here. Good evening, I guess, it is now. Welcome to the 2026 WNBA Draft. I say this every season, I know. But draft night is one of the truly most special nights of the year and one of the special moments on the WNBA calendar. We officially welcome tonight the next class of stars into this league who will help take the league to greater heights.

This is really one of my highlights as commissioner, having the opportunity over the last two weeks or so to call each prospect we invited here to New York City and invite them to the draft. Truly one of the best parts of the job. And tonight when you see the joy on their faces and their family's faces when they start walking across the stage, and them telling me they are realizing a lifelong dream to play professionally, it's something I certainly never take for granted. It's a privilege to be part of it every year.

We're thrilled to be back here at The Shed in New York City for a night that marks the official tip-off of our 30th season. As you are all well aware -- because I've read plenty of your coverage, so thank you -- this has been busiest offseason in WNBA history. From the CBA, that little thing, to the work we did throughout negotiations, including conducting an expansion draft, launching the State of the Game Council, bringing in new corporate and media partners, building our most ambitious schedule yet, preparing for All-Star in Chicago in July and now arriving here tonight, it's been quite a six months. We've been working really hard. I have the best team in sports, I think, and that's not even mentioning that little thing going on right now, free agency, which I know you're all working hard to cover and we're working hard to get all these contracts signed, et cetera.

I want to start by expressing my gratitude to everyone who helped bring together what is the most historic CBA in women's sports history. The road to this transformational deal, I call it historic, was not easy, as you know. I'm incredibly thankful to the players, especially the Executive Committee, who put in so much time. The Board of Governors, our Board of Governors, our outstanding team at the league office. This was a lot of time, a lot of care, a

lot of attention and detail, which some of you sat through, and really it was a commitment to get it right.

Everyone is like, why can't you get a deal done? We need to get it right, because it led to a deal that delivered the single-largest pay increase in the history of sport.

From day one, we were aligned around a few key principles. You've all heard me talk about this and others: substantially increase player compensation, enhance the overall player experience, but position the WNBA for long-term success.

And I am proud to say we accomplished those goals. We introduced the first comprehensive revenue share model in the history of women's professional sports. It increases pay at every level, as you're seeing, from rookies to superstars.

For the first time, players will share in league and team revenues and directly benefit from the continued growth of the WNBA. Fans can see more WNBA basketball because eventually we can play, have the potential to grow up to 52 games by 2029.

We added two developmental roster spots, immediately creating 30 new opportunities in our league and giving teams greater flexibility to develop talent and build deeper rosters. So many elements of this deal. A lot of people think it's only about one thing, and yeah, the one thing is the big thing. But there's so many elements, and you'll see it when we get the long form done.

I've been saying this -- I don't know who actually said this quote -- but history wasn't made in moments of comfort. It was carved out of resistance, persistence and time. That was definitely this, for those that followed more closely.

While that took a tremendous amount of time, our teams across the league were working really hard on every other aspect of the business.

As I mentioned, we launched our State of the Game council, bringing together voices from across the basketball



ecosystem to evaluate how the game continues to develop.

We held many conversations during the offseason, primarily focused on the physicality of our game, ensuring our officiating standards evolve alongside the speed, talent and competitiveness that we're seeing on the court.

That work led to the creation of an officiating task force. That was a dedicated group that spent hours reviewing film, evaluating calls, identifying areas for improvement.

Those insights are already shaping enhanced training and development for our referees heading into this season. We've had productive discussions around technology and innovation, and we'll continue engaging with the whole stakeholder group to ensure, as the game evolves, our basketball operations evolve with it.

At the same time, we continue to work really hard and elevate through new expanded partnerships, both on the marketing side and the media/broadcast side. We've reported on our tranche one deals in a prior year, our media rights agreements. We've now finalized post-CBA, our additional tranche two partnerships with CBS, Scripps, ION and Versant, USA Network, expanding our reach even further. We also, you might have seen over the last couple weeks, a flurry of signed and renewed impactful marketing partnerships that literally, I think, are going to grow the cultural relevance of our league and the players to create new opportunities to connect with fans.

Procter & Gamble and Mars are two of those. Mars, we just announced this morning. Procter & Gamble last week.

Those are huge brands joining the WNBA family. Across all of those partnerships the focus is the same: elevating the players of our league, growing our fanbase and continuing to build a sustainable business in the future. Without those partners, we could not have delivered what we achieved in the Collective Bargaining Agreement. There is a huge link there, and we're incredibly thankful for the partnerships of our media partners and our corporate partners.

Last week, we unveiled our full Season 30 campaign, announcing that this year will be both a celebration and a launchpad, honoring the players, moments and communities that built the WNBA, while introducing our most ambitious slate of fan activations and storytelling platforms to date. This includes activations like our Court Origin Nights and the Legacy Trail merch program. We were over at the Empire State Building today and the players all had the Legacy Trail Nike merch on, hoodies on. And the Top 30 Plays series. Our goal is to create a season-long experience that brings fans closer to the WNBA than ever before, because we know the demand for our content is there.

That commitment also extends to how we show up in the communities across the country, like through initiatives like Line 'Em Up, where we are painting the WNBA 3-point line on park courts nationwide, bringing the game directly to neighborhoods. I was out in Chicago a little bit ago and talked about the Line 'Em Up, and all of a sudden they were painting WNBA orange 3-point lines so that young girls and boys can come to the courts and see where our players are shooting their 3s from.

And so the past 30 years have been about building the foundation. The next 30 are about scaling the game. Unlocking what's possible for the entirety of women's basketball and women's sports.

I want to share that we're actively exploring the next phase of our global strategy. You've heard me talk about kind of what's next, globalization. That will likely begin with some international preseason games, with the long-term goal of bringing regular-season games to fans around the world.

We have a lot of fans around the world. We need to bring our game to them. We're currently exploring options outside of America. Toronto Tempo, tipping off this year, started with a preseason game in Toronto a few years ago.

We know there's strong and growing demand for our game internationally, and expanding our global footprint is a major priority. So look forward to sharing more on that in the near future.

But all of this to say, I'll take a breath here and answer some questions, Season 30 arrives at what I think is the perfect moment.

A historic CBA, new broadcast partnerships, two new expansion teams, with three on the way, continued global expansion, enhancements to the on-court product and exciting new rookie class who you're all going to see tonight. That's all coming off a record 2025 season.

Again, this starts a new chapter. Can't wait for what's ahead. And with that, I'm happy to answer any questions.

**Q. The long form, when do you expect that to be finished for the CBA? And what would you say to the fans in Connecticut and New England area that obviously are losing their team after this year and may get a team down the road but you said nothing before probably 2032 at the earliest? So what would you say to those fans who have obviously loyal and passionate for their team for the last 20 years?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: Okay, long form, CBA agreement.



As you all know, we spent a lot of time negotiating all of the changes from the prior CBA and a very significant term sheet. 80 pages or something like that. 70 pages. So now the long form will be 400 or 500 pages. We're making a lot of progress on that, and I expect that to be done in the near term.

Let me address the Connecticut situation. As you know, coming off a significant expansion process for WNBA, we had 13 cities bidding on, remember, what we thought was one team that we would grant. Maybe it was 18 months ago now.

Obviously, we've now announced Cleveland, Detroit and Philadelphia in '28, '29, and '30. We did not receive a bid from the Boston market or the New England market, obviously with the Connecticut team there.

The Mohegan Tribe then hired a banker to represent them in the potential sale. I think it started with a variety of options, a partial sale, a minority sale. Ultimately, they did reach agreement that you've read. We've not got anything final at the WNBA yet.

When we get that agreement, we will put that through our governance process. It will be subject to our Board of Governors vote.

Obviously, Connecticut has the opportunity under the sunset season. So I would say to the fans, support the Connecticut Sun this season. And it's a great basketball state, obviously, for women's basketball. Some would call it the center of women's basketball with how successful UConn's been over so many years.

I would say stick with us. Stick with the WNBA. We know that fandom won't go away.

**Q. You spoke about during an interview on ESPN how there was a lot of listening on your end involved in getting the CBA done. I guess just what's a moment where you learn something that you didn't really think about when it came to some of what the players were asking for?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: I would say probably the main moment was housing, quite frankly. I didn't know how important and emotional that was for them, because I just assume, having two children in their 20s, who pay for their own housing, that once they were making these much increased salaries, that that wasn't something they would need or want. But they made it very clear, it was very important to them. It was an emotional issue.

I would say that was the major issue. Everything else, we

wanted for the players. Obviously, again, we're representing the owners. We wanted to pay them more. We wanted to give them more benefits, up the 401(k) match, all the stuff we did in this contract. So probably the housing was one where they were very, very clear. We listened very, very hard, and we got to a really good place together on that.

**Q. We've had these conversations here about things like expansion and the CBA and a lot of questions on media rights that have now been sort of boxes checked. I guess as you sort of think about 2026, I know you referred to globalization, which I know we've talked about before, but is there sort of a box you would most like to check in 2026?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: Yeah, I think as we think about our finite capital, how you allocate that capital, that's the job of every CEO is culture, strategy, capital allocation. So that's my job as commissioner, is to think about what else could we invest in. Basketball technology is a big area where you see all sports using technology now, whether it's in officiating, whether it's in the fan engagement, digital, whatever it is.

So I would say in addition to global, technology, basketball technology, and how we can use that most effectively and efficiently to make the fan experience better, make the game better for everybody, players and fans.

**Q. Related to that, knowing that you have these things in place, the media rights deal, the CBA, how does it change the way in which you're able to have these conversations with potential partners and sponsors in the coming months?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: It's a great question. One of the reasons, obviously we wanted to get a successful CBA done, is to build the confidence and balance it with the ability for these companies to continue to invest in a league that's still in hyper-growth mode and a league that is drawing a ton of confidence, because again, if you think about why you would sponsor the WNBA, I mean, again, our fanbase, they're avid. They're rabid. They're loyal.

I think I saw a stat today that WNBA fans are 45 percent more apt to buy a product or service when a brand advertises in an arena or on our broadcasts than any other sports league. That's a huge advantage for the WNBA.

Again, whenever I talk with corporate partners, I just don't talk about the WNBA. I talk about, what are you trying to achieve in your business? They're trying to grow their diverse consumer. They're trying to grow the women consumer. They know that 80 percent of every household

consumer purchasing decision in the U.S. is made or influenced by a woman. So we can help meet them and help them grow their business.

But the confidence now, having long-term labor peace and having long-term media rights deals, the confidence in the league and its growth prospects are very high. Every business you're trying to say to your investors or to your ultimate supporters, invest in us because we're going to be in growth mode. And I think both those things that we've gotten done over the past couple years.

And expansion. I mean, scale is important. 12 teams was nice, but 18 teams is a lot better. To have 18 cities with huge fanbases, and then globally going into Canada and then moving globally, that all helps as well.

**Q. Adam Silver was asked last month about just your future as the commissioner of the WNBA. He said he didn't know what you wanted to do. I guess I'm just curious, like, how much do you want to stay the commissioner of the WNBA? How much longer do you anticipate being in this role?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: Thank you. I do crack up how everybody is focused on me. You should be focused on the hundreds of amazing women and thousands of women who run this league outside of myself. Our women owners, our women Board of Governors and our women GMs and women head coaches and my whole team of diverse women and men who are working hard every day to get the 30th season tipped off by May 8th.

But I appreciate that you're focused on me as well. I wonder whether you would ask that of a man, by the way. But I realize as women we get asked different questions than men do.

**Q. I would.**

CATHY ENGELBERT: But look, I'm so proud of this league. I'm here working really hard to make the 30th season our best ever and to continue to build that sustainable economic model we know we need for the future.

Nothing else to report, which is probably why Adam didn't report anything. There's no story here. I'm thrilled with our trajectory. I'm thrilled with the growth, thrilled what we've done over the past couple of years and really looking forward to the next few years.

**Q. My question is about salary cap circumvention. We've seen this issue addressed over the last few years in the WNBA. What measures are in place right**

**now to ensure that this doesn't remain an issue in the WNBA under the new CBA?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: You'll see when the long form comes out. We did address and add some language around things like relationships and things that, again, never foolproof for salary cap circumvention or tampering in free agency, all the things that teams might try to do outside of the normal course of business. But we're certainly trying to address that, and obviously have tools in place to detect and obviously to discipline should fact patterns come to our attention.

**Q. In the event that it does become official and approved, how would you anticipate a transition of the Sun franchise playing out and taking place over the year? Would Houston people then have input in their personnel decisions, for instance? How would that work in your mind?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: Yeah, I think that question would be better asked of the Houston, soon to be Comets, I guess, organization, and Mohegan. I know they're working through transition agreements. I know this year they will play their games at Mohegan. I think they have a couple games in Hartford and up in Boston this year as well. That's probably better addressed.

But I'm sure whenever there's a transition like that, there's transition service agreements in place. I'm sure they're talking a lot about management and GMs and coaches and things like that, both in Houston and Connecticut.

Again, we don't have a ton of visibility as they finalize that agreement and it comes to us for a vote. But that will be something, I'm sure, this summer we can get an answer to.

**Q. The officiating task force that you mentioned was going to shape, enhance training and development for referees. What exactly did they find that they're putting into effect for this season?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: Yeah, I think as I mentioned in the Finals presser, you know, we were evaluating plays, physicality, calls, non-calls, kind of just trying to determine where the line should be. We had input from players, including players on the Executive Committee of the PA. We had inputs from college coaches. Because I don't know if you watched the Final Four, it was pretty physical games going on there. And pretty great. We had input obviously from hours and hours of review by the GMs, head coaches and the rest of our stakeholders.

More to come on exactly what that will mean, but I think you'll see some changes in the officiating around that

physicality this year. Obviously, it's going to take all sides to get used to it, the players and the officials.

I think that will play out over the year. But we certainly want to make sure that we're putting on the best product on the court. Obviously, it's going to be a physical game. But you know we've got to draw lines, and I think you'll see more lines being drawn around that physicality as a result of some of the insights we gleaned from the State of the Game committee, and what I'll call officiating subcommittee, where those were the people that were really watching the hundreds of hours of film.

**Q. I know the next CBA is long down the road in 2032. I'm sorry --**

CATHY ENGELBERT: What have you done for me lately? (Laughter)

**Q. But when it comes to that point, what do you think the league learned from these last negotiations that could be useful when it's time to negotiate again at that point?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: Yeah, I think again, as I've kind of done some debriefing on process and things like that, obviously, you know, the interesting thing is we all wanted the same thing for the players.

We all had our lists. They all matched. There were things, obviously, you used in negotiating and posturing and bargaining that we might have differed on. But ultimately, we wanted to kind of strike this great balance between significant increases in player salaries and benefits with the economic sustainability of the league, because women's sports is very fragile and can be very fragile.

We wanted to make sure we were setting this league up not just for the next six, seven years under the CBA, before the next CBA, which is why you saw some things, games going up over time, housing phasing out over time, things like that, to set up the professionalism of the league.

So, of course, there's a lot of things we learned. Of course, we would maybe do a few things differently next time. But I think in the final analysis, it's almost like you had to have the process as it is.

If we had gotten done much earlier, I'm sure the players wouldn't have felt like they won, and the owners wouldn't have felt good about it. I think we got to a really good place at the end. There were eight long days and nights. Next time I don't recommend a lot of all-nighters like that. So that's the number one takeaway.

But I think in the final analysis, I think we really came together. The players were emotional. I mean, I'm pretty emotional seeing already 23 million-dollar contracts signed only two and a half days into free agency. That's pretty incredible. Now these players can build real generational wealth, including not just their salaries, their benefits and their 401(k) benefit, and build real retirement and things like that.

So I'm so proud of what we did together. I think it's a moment in time we'll remember for a decade or two.

**Q. Last year, there was some tension between you and the players in terms of the relationship that you had. How do you feel that's progressed now that you've gotten through CBA negotiations and into this next season, and do you feel like it's gotten better since those moments and into now?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: Yeah, obviously we were in the midst of collective bargaining. I feel really good about the relationship with the players. I just saw Nneka Ogwumike on the orange carpet. We exchanged some great words with each other. I'm really proud of her. She's headed back to L.A. She called it, headed back home. Even though we know she's from Houston.

Just really good about that. I understand that that makes great headlines in press and things like that. But this Executive Committee of the PA and my team just worked really hard to do something historic, and I think the players understand that we're on their side, too.

This wasn't a "you side," "our side," although it seemed like that at times. Like I said, I'm in business now 40 years, and some of my owners, some of our Board of Governors owners who are women have been fighting for gender equality their whole careers. I've been fighting for gender equality my whole career. And I think obviously there's a lot of posturing going on.

But I'm proud of what we accomplished together, and I think we're in a good spot.

**Q. With Portland and Toronto officially building their rosters this month, we're seeing the league expand at its fastest rate in decades. How are you balancing the aggressive push for new markets with the need to maintain the elite-level density of talent that makes the WNBA the most competitive league in the world?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: Excellent question. That is something we considered even when we were thinking of going from 16 to 18, to make sure we're not diluting the talent across the league or the quality of the game.

But think about, first- and second-round picks in the last six years since I've been here not making rosters. These players are elite players at the college level and they end up not making a roster.

I think the more opportunities we can give players and then adding the development players, too, so we didn't have that before, and adding 30 development players, two per team, two per 15, and longer term, 36 with the 18 teams, will be a great opportunity to give more players to develop into WNBA professional basketball players.

I understand the balance here, and we've been evaluating that. That's why again, two this year, none next year, and then one in '28 and one in '29 and one in '30. But you do also need scale, too, and I think the competition will be really good. I think we're going to look at a lot of teams this year that can compete, especially with the free agency period, with a lot of players switching teams. I think you'll see that next year into the '28, because '28 will be another, at least at that point, one-team expansion draft. But excellent question.

**Q. You talk about how the league is an ever-growing product. And there's so much globalization with a team in Canada now. How close are we to getting global games in other parts of the world, such as Asia and Europe, and just bringing the teams and the games over there to other audiences and other continents?**

CATHY ENGELBERT: Right. I tried to tip off by saying we're heavily looking at that. Obviously, this year we had the FIBA World Cup and we were just finishing CBA, et cetera. But next year, I think you should expect that we're hopefully going to do something outside of North America for the first time as a true global game. And then beyond that, we have the Olympics in '28.

Again, we're trying to schedule out where we can go, where we can be. Obviously, we think huge success having at least gone across the border north to Toronto. We know because we're broadcasting in over 200 countries. We're working on Spanish language on the WNBA App and things like that now, and hopefully we'll deploy that at some point in the future. And then just really get a good gauge of where we could really have the big impact, whether it's in Asia or Europe. But we're absolutely looking at it, and longer term Africa.

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