

Pac-12 Women's Basketball Media Day

Monday, October 7, 2019

Larry Scott Pac-12 Commissioner

THE MODERATOR (Anne Marie Anderson): Larry, I want to ask the first one. As we approach tip, conceivably there's four teams in this conference who could be ranked in the top ten preseason. To what do you ascribe that kind of growth?

LARRY SCOTT: Well, the trajectory of this conference has been a lot of fun to witness in women's basketball in the 10 years I've been here. And I think this is the strongest we've certainly been in our modern history. As you say, certainly at the top. We're going to have teams that are expected to be competing for Final Fours this year, but the depth of the conference has been tremendous to see, as well.

I think of Arizona coming through and winning the WNIT at the end of last season, and I see the legacy of coaches now that we've had. We've had one coaching change with Charmin Smith joining at Cal. She's about as experienced of a newcomer as you can imagine, having played at Stanford and coached at Stanford and Cal. I really feel like the Conference has developed nicely over time, and I really ascribe it to the commitment of our schools, first and foremost. They prioritize women's sports and women's basketball in particular in our league. They've made some great coaching hires.

Our schools have a tradition of excellence. I think, as the video said, 10 of the last 12 years, we've had teams in the Final Four. The last few years we've had at least half the league make the NCAA Tournament, so there's a nice momentum that's built. And I do think that the exposure that women's basketball has gotten in our league, the collective commitment of our schools and the league in putting 125 games this year, for example, on the Pac-12 Networks in addition to ESPN's commitment. There's no other conference that provides that exposure for women's basketball, women's sports generally. I think there's a bunch of different factors, but this is certainly a golden age for women's basketball in the Pac-12.

THE MODERATOR: We're all here to learn about the conference and the teams. This year there's a lot of exciting things, including Stanford's freshman class. What story lines are you following? Are you a



"Beliber?" Fran Belibi, really exciting. What interests you as you look across the landscape?

LARRY SCOTT: Definitely count me as a "Beliber." I'm on that band wagon. What's going to be really fun to watch is we've got very elite teams, and we've made Final Fours 10 of the last 12 years. What I'm looking forward to this year is seeing if we have a team that's going to make that next step, which is holding the trophy up at the end of the NCAA Tournament. I'm also going to be watching to see with the increased depth that we have, can we go beyond six teams, seven teams in the NCAA Tournament. A lot of that will come down to how we do non-conference.

So what's really fun for me is just to see the development, top to bottom. There's a lot of enthusiasm, high expectations really, amongst all of our schools, and I don't think there's another conference in the country that's going to have the kind of depth we have and have teams capable of competing for the National Championship.

THE MODERATOR: There's stars in this league, genuine stars. There have been going back to the Ogwumike sisters and Kelsey Plum and certainly some big stars now. Sabrina Ionescu projected at No. 1 pick potentially in the WNBA. What can the Pac-12 do to kind of leverage that star power to support and elevate the entire league?

LARRY SCOTT: Well, as you point out, I think momentum is a powerful thing, and it's showing up in recruiting. I don't know that we've had stronger recruiting classes than we've witnessed in the last year or two as well, and that's really fun to see as well. I think these things build upon each other. Momentum is a very powerful thing, and I sense that in the league at the moment. Yeah, no reason why I see that not continuing.

THE MODERATOR: Along the same lines, the coaches in this conference have really delivered consistently. There's some stars there, Oregon State has sustained excellence through many classes, Tara VanDerveer, a coaching star, 31 wins away from all-time coaching leader. In terms of the strength of the coaches in the league, what impresses you the most?

LARRY SCOTT: Well, I had a chance to meet with our coaches this morning as well as the student-athletes, something I like to do on this day, and I look around that table, and I see some iconic coaches and legends. Look at Tara, look at Cori Close as examples. And I also notice a lot of former Pac-12 student-athletes, former players themselves. So we've got a really cool group with a lot of great experience, but also some of the most exciting, most talented, young, up-and-coming coaches that have deep roots in the league.

Look, that's obviously an essential ingredient. But we are also now getting a lot of star talent coming to the league, as well, as you mentioned. Obviously the returning national Player of the Year -- well, it was at another school, Destiny Slocum was the freshman of the year. So we've got a lot of -- as you mentioned, the No. 2 recruiting class in the country in the league. I think that's kind of an X factor that now we're adding on top of the strong base, some momentum that's built. Now some of the best talent in the country is coming here.

Look, a lot of these student-athletes that come to Pac-12 schools to play women's basketball have their sights set on the WNBA, and you look at some of the stars that have gone from our league, to be, well drafted and have great success in the WNBA. And I think that's the kind of thing with young people that reinforces Pac-12 is a great pathway to the WNBA and to fill your athletic dreams. Of course, we've got some of the best academic schools in the country, too.

I think that's what student-athletes recognize is the opportunity at the Pac-12.

THE MODERATOR: Last year, first year for the tournament to be in Vegas. What kind of feedback did you get?

LARRY SCOTT: It was great feedback. I think our women's basketball community didn't know exactly what to expect, but it's seen the success that we've had with men's basketball there. And we're kind of game, and I think everyone left really, really pleased with how the teams were treated, the environment, the crowd reaction that we had. Sort of the overall vibe.

This year we are moving to the Mandalay Bay, which is where the Aces play, and working with MGM that owns that team. We think it'll take the event to another level in terms of really an embedded fan base that follows and appreciates and is educated on women's basketball. And we've certainly seen that fans have enjoyed making the trip and being there.

You know, I think we're so pleased with how it went and the feedback that we got from our schools that we've

thought ahead and actually have some news I'll announce this morning. We've finalized arrangements to extend another couple of years our men's basketball and women's basketball tournaments in Las Vegas. So 2020 -- March 2020 was going to be the last year of our current arrangements and we're going to be playing the men's and women's basketball tournament in Las Vegas in '21 and '22 as well. And I think we're joined by some of our friends back here.

Okay. We've got Pat Christenson from Las Vegas Events here with us today and George Kliavkoff from MGM, our partners here. Delighted to have you all here. And anyone who's interested in hearing a little bit more about our plans in Las Vegas and our partnership, feel free to talk to Pat and George, but we're really excited about this.

Having a platform of a fabulous end-of-season tournament, well-supported with a lot of enthusiasm and buzz amongst fans, twinned with great media exposure, we're in a good place in terms of exposure for the foundations of our women's basketball program.

THE MODERATOR: George Kliavkoff, my other boss, will tell you that the Mandalay Bay Events Center is called the House, so it's good to know that Pac-12 basketball has a home in Vegas for the next couple of years. We can open it up to some questions from the media now.

Q. This is sort of our first opportunity to talk to you since Governor Newsom signed the Fair Pay to Play Act. What are your thoughts on that? You have -- some of your conference teams in California and some aren't, and what's the reaction you've gotten from coaches and just around the conference so far regarding this?

LARRY SCOTT: Yeah, well, it's early days, as you say, but we've been very active in communication with our campuses at different levels, including this morning. Had a chance to talk to our coaches about it, and I think it's going to take some time for it to digest and people to kind of think it through and think through the implications. And there's strong feelings all over the place on this issue, as we've witnessed in the media, and just talking to people.

I think what we've wanted to point out, we think -- we have some real concerns about the bill, some of which I referred to in a statement last week. But even since the statement we put out, I think there are at least 10, maybe 12 states that since then have had senators or other representatives raise their hand and say, we plan on a similar bill, and in some cases maybe with our own tweaks to it.

I think I can say as a conference, we've got real concerns about a state-by-state approach to managing college sports. Schools recruit nationally, compete for National Championships. There have to be common rules that apply. I don't think state-by-state legislators deciding how college sports should run is the way to go, and we're going to be very active in trying to seek a national response and solution, whether it's through the NCAA or otherwise.

I think the other concern we've got -- while I'm sure the legislators and Governor Newsom are very well-intended -- those of us that work in college sports understand a lot of flaws with this bill and the way it's written. I've seen plenty of people comment on this because people that understand college sports would immediately understand there's recruiting in college sports, and there's very aggressive recruiting and a lot of competition for student-athletes. And I think the concern is that while it may be well-intentioned to try to provide name, image, and likeness opportunities for that very, very small handful -- maybe half a percent, 1 percent of our student-athletes go on to have successful professional careers and maybe have a name, image and likeness value -- it's pretty clear that there's a market for recruiting student-athletes.

So the idea that agents would be involved, helping negotiate deals for student-athletes, our concern is that winds up being payment for recruiting and trying to get student-athletes to go to a certain school.

The way the bill is written, it wouldn't be very hard to dress it up, and I don't think that's what's intended. So when I talk about unintended consequences, that's probably the most obvious, easy to understand example for people. If it becomes a market for recruiting.

And if that's what happens, which we expect it would, then it wouldn't be limited. And there's no way to really put guardrails to make sure it would be for arm's length. And if that happens, there's no doubt money that supports athletics departments would go to student-athletes to try to recruit them, and that's resources that would be drained from our athletics departments. And I signaled a concern that we've got for women's sports and Olympic sports that are the beneficiaries of athletics departments having resources.

We've got -- most of our schools have 18 or 19 sports or more, some as high as high 20s and 30s. And if money gets drained, money that's supporting the athletics department currently starts going directly to student-athletes to try to get them to go to school at X or Y, our concern is there would be less resources and sports might get cut as part of that.

Having said that, we've been at the forefront of supporting student-athlete reform and welfare. We've been proponents for full cost of attendance, nutrition, healthcare coverage, liberalizing transfer rules, and we'll be very actively engaged in this discussion with our campuses and nationally to try to work on a national solution, and something that's much more artfully written or done that doesn't have all these unintended consequences.

And the other thing I should point out, completely supportive of young people having the opportunity to -- professional opportunities. So we've been supporting the NBA and other leagues, allowing student-athletes to go pro earlier, not have to go to college. We are for choice. And if young people want to earn money from their name, image, and likeness and get paid to play, they should have that opportunity. That's called pro sports.

College sports is different. You go to get an education. It's amateur, they're students. Those are the defining characteristics, and we'd like to see those lines not get blurred and the interest in college sports become diminished.