

U.S. Senator Maria Cantwell
Protect College Sports Act Floor Speech

September 17, 2026

[VIDEO]

Sen. Cantwell: Mr. President, I rise today to urge my colleagues to proceed in continuing an important discussion on the Protect College Sports Act.

This historic, sweeping legislation formed in a bipartisan fashion by my colleagues, Senator Schmitt, the presiding officer, Senator Coons, Senator Welch, Senator Capito, Senator Hickenlooper, Senator Ricketts, Senator Luján, Senator Hoeven, and Senator Cruz and myself is a bipartisan effort to try to bring some reason to the craziness that has basically been plaguing the most important aspects of college sports.

This legislation is historic in the fact that it puts into law 12 – more than a dozen I should say – important provisions that help athletes and protect them for the future.

First and foremost, Mr. President, it recognizes in a federal law that athletes deserve not only NIL, which is name, image, and likeness rights, and to protect those rights. Athletes deserve to have revenue sharing. This is so critical, and I will expound on it in a while.

It also gives athletes five years of eligibility for the first time, which is historic in us giving that at the federal level.

It requires women to have the same comprehensive standards as men do when you're talking about championships and playoffs. It preserves women and Olympic roster spots that are the large percentage of athletes that we are trying to protect in this bill.

While we're very happy that there is a first federal law recognizing revenue sharing and recognizing NIL rights, we also have to understand that there are lots of athletes – 500,000 athletes – that are part of this ecosystem, and we care a lot about the women[‘s] and Olympic sports, and we don't want to see those slots cut, which is exactly what's been happening.

It requires college sports to make content available – not behind a paywall. If there's nothing else in this bill that you should vote for, you should show your anger at the fact that your favorite college sports content keeps getting put behind a paywall and somebody's making you pay for it.

This says that that content needs to be available to you regionally in your local area. It has a [\$]900 million authorization for [historically] Black colleges to help them in their broadcasting of sports be more competitive for the future.

It has whistleblower protections, including first time ever whistleblower protections for Title IX. It grants athletes scholarship [protections for ten years] and health protections for the five years [...] after [leaving the institution].

It protects the future of college sports by creating a commission made up of athletes to talk about how we move forward on issues like collective bargaining, revenue sharing and making sure that we

don't see more cuts. It basically puts transfer sensibility into law, so that it makes sure that we are keeping students focused on academics and education.

It does constrict coaches and where the money [for] coaches can come from – not from taxpayers – but instead making sure that they continue to only receive from endowments or other revenue.

It makes sure that there is transparency in the law because right now, the problem with the rising cost in college athletics is not the fact that we were willing to pay athletes, because we said, here we are enshrining in law for the first time NIL rights and athlete revenue rights. But what we're not going to put up with is booster backdoors that basically inflate with no rationale for why and where the money is coming from.

We are bringing transparency to the system. We're also saying you can't go back. You can't play in the pros and go back to college. We are not interested in having some 27-year-old pro college player beating up on a 19-year-old, who basically is just entering his college academic career.

And yes, Mr. President, we have regulations on agents. Agents who now like to call themselves athlete advocates. It's just a euphemism because what they really want is money. They are taking advantage of high school athletes, making them sign a contract and then repossessing their cars – this is what Coach Bohl has told us – when they can't get them an NIL deal.

We allow for the prosecution of misrepresentation by agents by the FTC and our attorneys general and we continue to put the language into the bill that makes sure that only legitimate deals recognized in the settlement agreement based on market value are recognized, so we can bring stability to this situation.

So let me go over this for a second, starting with women[']s and Olympic sports. You know, Mr. President, I became very moved by the story of college and Olympic sports. In fact, I'm glad to see Senator McConnell back on the Senate floor because he and I have been having this conversation now for about three or four years.

He kept saying to me, "Maria, what are you going to do to protect women and Olympic sports?" Why? Because when the United States doesn't shine at the Olympics, then guess what? The United States doesn't shine. And I am so proud to represent the State of Washington and to know this historic story of the boys in the boat, who basically fought everything that people threw at them. Threw at them basically rearranging lanes, threw at them all sorts of difficulties.

But guess what? Hard-scrabble working men, including a Jewish coxswain from Montesano, Washington, went there and stuck it to Adolf Hitler. And what a moment for the United States of America. What a moment. What a statement for our nation because we participated and we won.

But guess what's happening now? Thousands of those roster spots are being cut. Hundreds of those programs are being cut. I swore I wasn't going to focus on this issue if I ever got into a position on the [Commerce] Committee.

But when a kid from my state, written up by Eddie Pells from the AP, told the story of how at White Pass, Washington, where the Mahre brothers had skied and went on to win gold, all of a sudden a snowboarder from White Salmon, Washington, couldn't get covered by the Olympic team because there was no revenue, and he went and he snowboarded for Russia and he won medals. That is when I started paying attention to this issue.

I am not going to have women and Olympic sports undermined by this system. In fact, there is a poll that shows that 87% of the public, when polled, do they care about this issue? 87% agree: women and Olympic sports need to be preserved because they know that is what is unique by the system, so we are not going to let runaway boosters who basically want no rules and runaway agents who want to prey on high school kids decide what's going to happen here.

So, we basically are making sure, as I said, that agents have to register. They have to have documentation. They cannot misrepresent themselves. They have to comply with both the FTC and the AG and obviously the NCAA.

This alone is constricting the unsavory behavior of these people and they are the primary opposition to this bill. They are because they don't like that we're capping agent fees at 5%.

We have to continue, Mr. President, to make progress. Let me talk about what we are saying here about the wins in this bill as it relates to the rights of these athletes. As I said, it is a federal recognition of NIL rights and revenue sharing and it will be the first time that Congress on record endorsing both of those.

Now I know that people think the Supreme Court decided and helped on NIL, but a court decision and a settlement agreement actually moved this along in what is called the Grant House versus NCAA [case]. But that settlement agreement could disappear. That settlement agreement has had a very rough road over the last year. Many times the parties have said they are going to pull out of the agreement.

Well, it's very hard if you have that agreement blow up to continue to move forward. But if we pass this bill, we will – Congress – be recognizing revenue sharing for athletes.

Mr. President, I can't tell you how much athletes have suffered in the past. Starting with athletes who basically were prohibited by the NCAA from even going into the pros – oh, if they didn't have four years of college. Or a famous case where they said, "Okay, well, we'll let you have this food for athletes. You can have bagels, but you can't have the cream cheese."

So, I do not believe the NCAA is the proper institution to continue to regulate this sector. Because yes, I agree with my colleagues who have concerns. They haven't proven that they can have just recognition of these rights for athletes, but we can. We can put them into law.

We can recognize them, enshrine them today, and make sure that these athletes are protected forever, including the rights to not have their contracts screwed with, their rights to not have their school override them, the rights to have any amount of money that some business wants to pay them, as long as it is for a valid business purpose.

So, these protections, along with the fact that they get a record five years of eligibility, [ten] years of scholarship [protections], five years of health care [after leaving the institution], and [...] it is helping them for the future. And we are trying to help the poorest institutions meet these requirements. So, medical coverage for out-of-pocket costs, and helping with \$100 million fund for smaller schools to help the significant cost that can occur [...] in sports.

So, this is an important piece of legislation in protecting athletes, but we also have to protect the cost and the public besides [in] women['s] and Olympic sports. What we're seeing today is a record amount of taxpayer dollars and literally university professors being cut to pay for the unending

arms race. In fact, Rutgers leads the charge – may have had 38 faculty members cut, and people going to the institution, and they're part of the Big 10!

The reason the arms race exists is because there is no rules on billionaires throwing money into the system without adhering to the settlement agreement. So yes, our colleagues all work together to recognize the settlement agreements to help make sure that there are fair rules [through this bill].

Mr. President, I think it'd be like saying, "Okay, here in the United States Senate, let's just have each state say what members of your staff should be paid." Now, I might like that because in Washington there's a lot of wealthy people, and I'm pretty sure they could say we could make a lot of money here representing the state of Washington.

Okay, but some other state, Mississippi, doesn't have a chance, and so I am going to move to proceed to this bill because I want these rules put in place – because sports is about any given Saturday. It is not about whether you have a billionaire in your backyard. It is about whether you can coach and recruit and develop and maintain and have academic performance and have fairness across the page and have everybody compete and keep the ecosystem in place.

But that fairness does not exist today without this bill, and people who don't want those rules in place, to me, are hurting us in our overall efforts.

Now let me say something about transparency in this bill. This bill creates a public database with anonymized information for all revenue sharing and NIL agreements over \$600. The additional database will contain information on the total number of agreements, payments, average value of agreements, payments on the total value of agreements, payments on each sports program at the school, and finally, a database will contain information about the revenues and expenditures of each sport at each school, as well as the average hours and academic outcomes for the student athletes.

So that means this bill will allow the public to see what is going on. This transparency will help us make athletic departments and their spending and this discussion much clearer. I want it to be clear because I'm not for cutting university professors and having an arms race. I want to win the innovation race against China and make sure that we're investing.

I want to thank my colleague Senator Luján for his important piece of this legislation. There's been a lot of concern about skyrocketing coaches' salaries, and I welcome any amendment that anybody wants to offer on this, but so far, no one has offered one that I know of.

But Senator Luján did in committee, and we did implement it. In 2025, nine football FBS coaches were paid \$10 million a year; more than 100 earned a million annually. And at the top of the market, [Georgia's] Kirby Smart was listed at roughly \$13 million in annual school pay, Ohio State's Ryan Day was at \$12.5 million, eight-figure salaries that would have been almost [un]imaginable a generation ago in college athletics.

Now, I get it. If you have a winning team, a lot more people might get notice about your school. You might want to go to that school. I get it, but we cannot have runaway costs on athletics and basically undermine the competitiveness for only the richest schools, which the richest donors are able to compete.

This bill, thanks to the leadership I said of Senator Luján, includes a provision that says schools with more than \$80 million in athletic revenue cannot pay coaches or managers more than \$500,000 unless it comes directly from donations or from the athletic department[‘s] revenue.

That means you can't take our taxpayer money, which is what people are doing, schools like Connecticut, schools in New Jersey, the Virginia schools, which basically have record number of tuition costs, literally put on tuition for non-athletes, and basically, you cannot do that to pay for exorbitant coaches' salaries.

This bill also addresses the frankly outrageous practice of providing a golden parachute for fired coaches, and even if they were fired, [...] even if they were fired [or] caused their teams' loss and [the] loss of games.

In 2025, the sports reporter Ross Dellinger [revealed] a total of 15 fired coaches in 2025 [cost] \$280 million dollars. That is why we called this the Kiffin Rule to protect college sports. What this provision does is stop a coach from abandoning one college football team in the middle of the season and start working for another one. This is unacceptable behavior.

So, Mr. President, this important legislation is making progress. This 322 percent increase in recruitment cost is not about paying athletes. These athletes deserve revenue. These athletes deserve to have their NIL deals, but we do not need to go blind to either outrageous agent contracts or outrageous boosters trying to distort the market.

If these institutions and the athletes being represented in a settlement agreement can come to terms and make sure that we have rules in place, then, Mr. President, we need to enshrine those rules in this legislation and move forward.

If we do, our college athletics will be stabilized. Is this the end of this discussion? No, Mr. President, it's the beginning of how we continue to stabilize it. This bill also includes the Future of Sports Commission. The Future of Sports Commission, made up mostly of athletes, will discuss once we get additional revenue into the system how we can best protect athletes for the future and think of issues like collective bargaining or other issues that might help us best preserve this important, important, monumental contribution to our nation.

Let us not destroy the 500,000 athletes in our effort to just make sure that the 1% or 2% also get their financial due. Let's put rules in place and pass this important law and make sure these protections.

I know my colleagues are here, Mr. President, and I do want to emphasize, but maybe I'll let them have their moment, how important the health and safety standards being met in this legislation are. They do allow you to take action. They do allow a state to basically help enforce these health and safety provisions.

So, I know there's been a lot of people who say something counter to that, but trust me, this legislation is about protecting the athletes. It is about making sure they are not undermined, and it is about making sure that we move forward on legislation instead of ignoring a problem that is sucking revenue right out of our institutions that should be going for cheaper tuition and should be going to keeping our most skilled academic leaders to help our nation be competitive.

I thank the president, and I yield the floor.