

State of College Sports  
January 12, 2021

MARK EMMERT: What a tumultuous year this has been since we were last together in Anaheim. We have all collectively -- college sports, the nation, the world -- have been through a lot, to say the least.

We've wrestled with daunting challenges. We've seen enormous suffering. We've seen stark injustices. But we've also had some enormous accomplishments. And to me the biggest lesson in thinking about all of this is that while we're dealing with crises, we need to stay true to our values.

And when I look out on campuses, when I saw what you all were doing, I saw much more than just insurmountable problems. I've seen campus communities working to do the right thing, to stay to their values and to help and protect student-athletes and their communities.

We've seen innovation and flexibility and creativity, including right here in the governance of the NCAA.

And along with that we have some corollary lessons that we need to learn, and the biggest one of those is when we cooperate, remarkable things can happen. And sadly, we've also learned that when we're divided, we simply fail. And sometimes catastrophically.

Now, people have been showing their values and focusing on students and student success in extraordinary ways. All of you, but especially the student-athletes, have demonstrated unparalleled resiliency over the past 12 months.

And these circumstances, this extraordinary, awful year has presented a great opportunity to truly showcase those values and to reinforce our mission of what we are and what we stand for.

So as we edge into 2021, as odd and difficult as that transition has already begun, it's an opportunity for us to make our case in our words and in our deeds to our critics and to the world about what we stand for and what counts.

Now, we all know that many of our critics, indeed some of the critics even within college sports, say that college sports is nothing more than an entertainment industry. There are those that think in fact that we should even take that part that's most entertaining and most lucrative and carve it off the Association, set it over here and turn that into a pure entertainment industry with paid professionals.

I couldn't disagree more. We are not just the entertainment industry. The single most important outcome for all but a tiny fraction of our athletes is to graduate from college with a meaningful degree.

Now, that doesn't mean we're supposed to be naive. That doesn't mean we're supposed to pretend that parts of college sports aren't extremely entertaining, that they attract enormous crowds. Of course they do. And a very small part of college sports does indeed generate an enormous amount of revenue.

One of the big issues for me, and I know for you, isn't whether or not sports produced big revenue; it's what do we do with the revenue. Do we line it up with what we care about? Do we spend those dollars on the things that matter the most for the young men and women who play these games?

We have to continue to act as we go into '21 consistent with our values and in the best interests of our student-athletes. And I have to say that's one of the reasons I'm especially frustrated and even disappointed today. We were all, all three divisions, ready to take and are ready to take a big step in the transition to support our students in our actions around name, image and likeness, and to demonstrate our values in support of our young people in doing things that the rest of the student bodies get to do.

But because of an enormous amount of issues surrounding all of this, issues that, frankly, are beyond our control, it is now a very ill-advised thing for us to do at this stage.

So we have to pause on this progress. And I'm very disappointed in that. More importantly, all of our college athletes are profoundly disappointed and I suspect even angry.

But we need to make clear, we're still committed, we're still determined to move forward with name, image and likeness modernizations and certainly with changing Division I transfer rules. We promised this to our students. We're going to get it done. We're going to -- it's going to take a little bit longer than we anticipated; there's no question of that. But we're going to do it in a way that's consistent with all the laws that are applicable to the NCAA.

We think we've done that already. We think we have it right. But it's been called into question. And so now we need to pause to answer those questions. But, again, let me be clear, our commitment to the modernization of our rules and doing what's best for our student-athletes remains resolute.

And in that context, 2021 is a seminal year for college sports. We have a lot of unfinished business. First and foremost, we've got to finish NIL. Once we receive clarification on where the law stands, we've got to accomplish this goal. We have to do it in a way that supports, doesn't diminish amateurism. We have to make clear that this is not about pay for play, no matter what a headline might say. This is not about converting student-athletes into employees. It's not about student-athletes having a business relationship with their school.

But we can't equivocate on this. We're committed to taking action on NIL and into the fairness issues around DI transfers. I'm disappointed that the transfer rules can't take place at this time. But we're going to get there.

And in the interim we need to continue to exercise compassion and flexibility toward students in all of our waiver transfers and in all the ways we've been doing it all throughout 2021. We have to get right after those things and we have to do what's right and what's fair.

And while we're talking about fairness and focus on our athletes, there's more to be done in 2021 than just finishing NIL. And if we're going to be fair, it means taking action where we know it matters. For example, we need to make certain that college sports is inclusive and fair to all. In particular, we've got to continue to make better progress with coaching and administrative ranks that better reflect our society and our athletes. We know full well that the numbers are not good today.

We also need to make sure that we're doing all we can in our systems of keeping people accountable and holding them accountable for misbehavior and have real consequences to those who violate our rules, but do it in a way that doesn't harm the innocent. We have a wonderful system with many people working very, very hard on it, but we know that we can do better than we do right now.

In health and safety, promoting fairness and staying focused on our student-athletes means three more things for us. First, foremost and always, it means we've got to deal with COVID-19, and we've got to make sure that in 2021 we're persistent, we're disciplined, and we follow the science. We've got to stay the course until society is safe and our students and coaches can re-engage in athletics in the way that we all want to.

Secondly, we need to continue to drive evidence-based health and wellness protocols in all of the areas related to health and wellness. We've made wonderful strides around concussion protocols, mental health and independent medical care. We've got to keep that up. We're not done there. We've got a lot of work to do there.

But we need to add another key step there. We need to add some teeth to our health and safety protocols. We need to create a system -- and we can do it in 2021 -- that holds each other accountable for the commitments we make to promote and advocate and conduct those protocols. We need to do that.

And then we need to do, yet again, one important thing. We need to put our money where our mouth is on academic success.

Let's be clear. We have reason to be incredibly proud of the success we've made - and what our students have made - in terms of graduation in all three divisions. It's been remarkable to see the progress. We need to stay to that goal. We need to provide academic support while student-athletes are playing, but we also need to continue that support after eligibility is over.

Post-eligibility support should be the norm, not the exception. Many of you are doing it now. Many schools are providing student-athletes an opportunity to come back and finish their degree. That needs to be an expectation for student-athletes, rather than something that occurs occasionally.

That's what we need to do in 2021. And let's be clear: This is going to be a genuinely pivotal historic year for college sports.

All of this is about the young men and women that play the games and we want to make sure that this is always about college students playing other college students.

We want to get back to college sports in full form in 2021 in a better way than before -- not just returning to what we were, but being better than we were before 2020.

I want to thank you all, in closing, for everything you did in 2020 and what you're going to do together in 2021.