

New NCAA Chief Emmert Keeps Focus on Students as Athletes

By Matt L. Ottinger

When Mark Emmert gave up the leadership post at his alma mater, the University of Washington, to take over as NCAA president in the spring of 2010, he brought a vision of helping student-athletes across the country get the most out of their college experiences.

Emmert admits that while he came to Indianapolis with a passion for college sports, he knew little of the Hoosier state. He sat down with *BizVoice*® to discuss his hopes for the NCAA, as well as his impressions of Indiana and the business community.

BizVoice®: Why did you take the job as NCAA president? What are some of your specific goals?

Mark Emmert: “It was a natural extension of what I’d been doing for 30 years. I’d been a professor and an academic administrator since I was right out of college. In fact, I love to joke that I went to college at 18 and I never left, which is literally true. Throughout all of that 30-year career, I had an opportunity to work with student-athletes, see firsthand the impact that intercollegiate athletics has on the lives of young men and women and see the role that it plays in academic communities. This job allows me to stay involved in those activities, but do it across a national playing field – pardon the pun – and work with 400,000 student-athletes at more than 1,000 universities and colleges.”

BV: What are some experiences you’ve had in higher education that have helped you prepare for this position?

ME: “Being a university president is a wonderful position to have to move into this job. If you’ve been in higher education, you have the right values; that’s what being a university president is about. University presidents also have to balance a variety of pressures and interests to try and keep that focus on students. The head of the NCAA has a similar challenge – to balance all of the different competing interests while maintaining a focus on student-athletes and their success.”

BV: When thinking about college athletics, what tradition or event brings the biggest smile to your face?

ME: “I don’t know that I can say any one; there are 100 small moments. I love the passion and pageantry of collegiate sport. This past Saturday (in early December), I was down in Louisville for the Division II Sports Festival and saw (hundreds of) young men and women start off on a cross country race in two inches of snow. Here they are in sneakers and shorts and tee shirts and running

their hearts out in the snow with all of their family and friends and colleagues cheering for them. It was a spectacular moment.

“There are also a lot of great moments around victories. I’ve been associated with around a dozen national championship teams, but my best moment in basketball was watching a coach in a locker room when a team missed a chance at a Final Four in the closing seconds of a game because of a couple stupid mistakes. The kids are broken-hearted and here’s a coach teaching them more than they could ever learn anywhere else about failure – and how to handle it. ... It was one of the most poignant educational experiences that I’ve ever witnessed.”

BV: What’s surprised you most about the job – or the NCAA – thus far?

ME: “I knew here in Indianapolis we had bright, capable and engaged staff. But I didn’t know how bright, how capable, how enthusiastic they were, and that’s been a delight to see. ... I knew the passion people out there in the world have for NCAA athletics, but to experience it firsthand has been fascinating and exciting to see.”

BV: Did you have any ties to Indiana before moving here? What are your impressions thus far?

ME: “None whatsoever. I’d been here just a few times. Thus far, my impressions are of Indianapolis as I haven’t been able to get out in the state much at all. But in Indianapolis, I’ve been impressed by the civic-mindedness of the leaders I’ve met, the support the city has for the NCAA and all sports activities. I’ve been delighted by how nice and embracing everybody is and how welcoming it’s been for me and my wife.”

BV: Expansion is currently taking place at the NCAA headquarters, with one of the byproducts being more of the many organizational meetings taking place here. From a business perspective, explain the value of having the NCAA headquarters here in Central Indiana.

While college sports offer student-athletes a chance to experience the highs and lows of victories and losses, Emmert believes the teachable moments are what students will take with them into their professional careers.



Mark Emmert left his job as president of the University of Washington, his alma mater, so he could work with student-athletes on a national level.

ME: “I think it’s incredibly valuable to Central Indiana. First of all, it builds the brand enormously. Anybody engaged in intercollegiate sports these days, which is tens of thousands of people, all know Indianapolis. It’s where the NCAA is, there are conference offices and governing bodies here; it’s been a huge identifier for this region of the country.”

“Second, because we rotate so many people through for our meetings, it gives great exposure to this area and I’ve had folks all around the country say how much they enjoy being here because the city’s nice, they feel comfortable here and it’s a pleasant experience. Then there’s the obvious direct economic benefit of lots of people flying in, lots of people staying in hotels for meetings and conferences, and having athletic events here is a nice economic driver for the region.”

“The success we have in offering championship activities here in Indiana is because of the collaborations we have with business and industry and the political community and the leaders of Indianapolis and the other places where these activities take place.”

BV: There are many challenges facing the NCAA – recruiting issues; undue influence of agents on college athletes; academic performance; etc. – with controversy surrounding Auburn University quarterback Cam Newton being the latest topic. What do you perceive as your biggest challenges?

ME: “All of those are issues, but they’re not new issues. If you look at the history of the NCAA, those issues have been on the front burner for pretty much 100 years. Indeed today, they are much smaller and better contained, but that doesn’t mean we don’t have to stay attentive to them and keep working on them. We have to keep the organization and all of our members focused on our student-athletes.”

“This is about providing them with experiences that allow them to become better educated, better developed, more successful citizens. The problems, especially agent issues and undue influence of business and industry, are things that we will wrestle to the ground. They impact a very small number of student-athletes, but they are very high profile and they tend to shape people’s perceptions, so we’re going to deal with them very aggressively.”

BV: Publicly, there’s criticism of businesses’ influence on

college sports. But talk about the value corporate partners bring. What does their involvement allow the NCAA to do? And where is the line that shouldn't be crossed between business and college sports?

ME: "The line that shouldn't be crossed has got to be driven by the participants themselves. What makes the NCAA and the

collegiate model an amateur activity is the intention and motivation of the student-athletes. They are not employees; they're students. They are provided with significant support while they're at their colleges and universities and get to participate in remarkable experiences. For the very small portion of them who want to go on and become professional athletes and have the ability to do it, it's also a spectacular training and development ground.

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"What our relationships with business and industry provide is a revenue source that allows us to give students all of those experiences. There are only 14 universities in America that break even on their sports, so they need revenue from a variety of sources to be able to provide the academic support, the athletic facilities, the best coaches and trainers they can possibly have – that's why the whole world wants to come to the United States to participate in sports.

"It's because it's the best; it's because they have the best opportunities here. The only way you can do that is with resources that universities can develop. We're really lucky the NCAA can produce the wonderful revenue stream off the men's basketball tournament. As you're probably aware, 96% of that money flows right back to the universities and colleges either directly or indirectly through support for students through scholarships, student support and the championships that we run."

BV: Should the NCAA take a more hands-on role in the Division I football postseason, as opposed to having it outsourced to the Bowl Championship Series (BCS)?

ME: "We run 88 national championships in all sports, including Division III, Division II, and FCS – the I-AA football. So we have a Division I football championship; it's the FCS championship and it's underway right now, in fact. So we know how to run championships and we're very good at it, but our job is to serve the interests of our association. We're a membership association; we serve their interests and their desires. If – and I'm underscoring if – the members wanted to move to a championship kind of model for Division I-A or BCS football, we'd be more than happy to help and we'd be an active partner in that process. But that decision's up to them, not us. My job is to continue to work with them and fulfill their desires, and I'll continue to do that."

INFORMATION LINK

Resource: Learn more about Mark Emmert at www.ncaa.org/president