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NCAA's Baker talks student-athlete NIL rights, gambling and 'leveling the playing field'

Baker calls NIL revenue-sharing 'third biggest change in college sports history'

By Stephen MacLeod – Reporter, Boston Business Journal



NCAA President Charlie Baker, left, and Boston Red Sox President and CEO Sam Kennedy, right, talk during a fireside chat at the Boston College Chief Executive Club at the Boston Harbor Hotel. (Stephen MacLeod | BBJ)

Charlie Baker, the former Massachusetts governor and current NCAA president, spoke to a group of Boston business leaders on Thursday about the future of the collegiate athletic association, student sports compensation and revenue-sharing, among other topics.

During the hour that Baker spoke at the **Boston College Chief Executives Club** luncheon, he called the $2.8 billion law that ended restrictions on student-athlete name, image and likeness (NIL) rights and allowed schools to directly share revenue with players.

The changes went into effect last July. Now, as the NCAA wraps year one of this new era, Baker described it as the third biggest change in the history of college sports, trailing only the formation of the NCAA itself and Title IX, the federal civil rights law that passed in 1972, prohibiting sex-based discrimination in education programs, including athletics, recruiting and federal financial assistance.

“It's never been done before, it's brand new, and it's incredibly disruptive,” Baker said. “Why should we be surprised that it makes people uncomfortable? But the number of disasters that were avoided by doing this — and the number of opportunities it creates for those who are smart and think really carefully about what they're doing going forward — is enormous. There are more kids in scholarships, more kids playing college sports, and more kids participating in revenue sharing now than at any time in history. My point of view, directionally, that's all really good.”

Baker also spoke about gambling on college sports. He said the NCAA has been working with state regulators to ban gambling on college sports. He said that when going on a tour to meet with players, he was surprised how many had to deal with gambling in their day-to-day lives.

“The kids talked about the pressure they were getting from people to not lose a game, but to just underperform,” he said. “Don't score so many points in the first half, don't take the first shot, miss your first free throw, don't catch the first pass, throw a ball on your first pitch. I mean, coming from classmates and friends and, in some cases, family members, these are kids. They shouldn't even have to say no to this. This should just not be allowed.”

Baker said he hoped in the future a solution on college sports gambling would “be better done with legislation” but that right now, the best the NCAA is able to do is work with state-level gaming commissions where gambling is legal. He added that prediction markets are making that more complicated.

“The big problem with the prediction markets is they're not regulated by the state gaming authorities, and there's a whole bunch of state-based legislation in federal court that's probably going to end up, based on some of the decisions that are being made, to the Supreme Court at some point around that problem,” he said.

He also acknowledged that the challenges of the NIL era will probably require a federal solution, and said that President Donald Trump’s executive order helped start a conversation around how to help regulate college sports in its new era. Baker said the NCAA is in a "wait and see” mode between now and when Congress ends its session.

“You won't find a lot of people in D.C. who think 45 different state laws around how NIL should work — all of which are designed to give schools in their particular state an edge — is a good idea if you're trying to create a level playing field nationally around how competition should work,” he said.