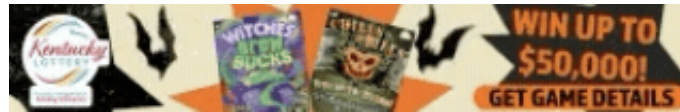
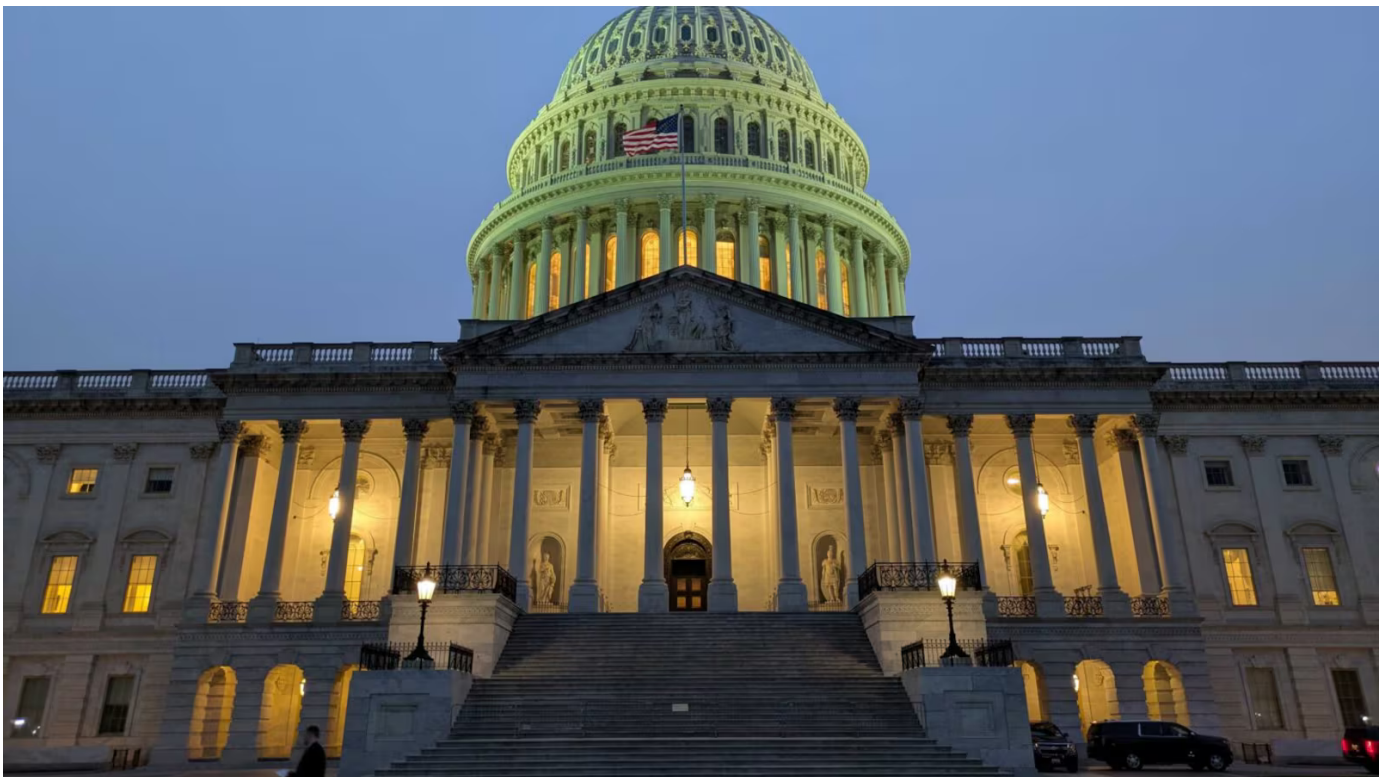


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The Senate just advanced a bill that could reshape college sports. Here are 10 things to know

The 171-page Protect College Sports Act goes far beyond NIL, reaching into player pay, television, transfers, eligibility, conference realignment and the NCAA's authority.



The U.S. Capitol on the evening of Sept. 30, 2025. (Photo by Ashley Murray/States Newsroom | )

Photo by Ashley Murray/States Newsroom)

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Published: Sep. 15, 2026 at 8:39 PM EDT | Updated: 10 hours ago



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LOUISVILLE, Ky. (WDRB+WAVE) — The U.S. Senate gave the Protect College Sports Act its most significant vote yet Tuesday, voting 74-24 to move forward with legislation that would rewrite many of the basic rules of college sports.

The vote does not pass the bill. It invokes cloture on the motion to proceed, clearing a major procedural hurdle and allowing the Senate to begin formal consideration. Amendments and a separate final passage vote still could follow.

But the margin matters. A bill that entered the week facing questions about whether it could find the 60 votes needed to advance got 74.

The legislation, sponsored by Sens. Ted Cruz, R-Texas, and Maria Cantwell, D-Wash., already had cleared the Senate Commerce Committee 19-9 in June. It still faces opposition from several directions, including disputes over transgender participation in women's sports and concerns from some lawmakers, civil rights groups and athlete advocates about the antitrust protection and additional authority it would give the NCAA.

And even if it ultimately passes the Senate, the House presents another set of questions.

But Tuesday's vote moves the debate forward. So what exactly is in those 171 pages?

A lot.

The latest version reaches into almost every corner of major college athletics: how much schools can pay players, how often athletes can transfer, how long they can play, how fans can watch games, how large conferences can become, what protections athletes receive and which NCAA rules would receive protection from antitrust lawsuits.

Several provisions go well beyond setting guardrails. In places, Congress would write new rules for how college sports operate.

Here are 10 provisions that could matter most to fans — and to the future operation of college athletics.

1. Football and basketball games would have to be available free in local markets

Let's start with your television.

The bill would require football and basketball games involving schools that participate in a proposed collective media-rights arrangement to have a free viewing option in each school's local market.

That doesn't necessarily mean Louisville, Kentucky and Indiana basketball suddenly return to local over-the-air television.

The bill would require the rights to be offered to at least one local TV outlet, but that outlet wouldn't have exclusive rights to the game. Also, ESPN, Fox or another national rights holder could satisfy the requirement itself by making the game available free to viewers in the local market.

The details could get complicated. The basic idea is straightforward: fans should have a way to watch their local team's football and basketball games without buying a subscription.

2. Schools could pay up to \$22.5 million more just to keep players

College athletes already can receive millions of dollars directly from their schools under

the House settlement. This bill would allow schools to spend considerably more.

Schools would be allowed to exceed the existing revenue-sharing limit by as much as \$22.5 million per year to retain athletes who have already spent at least one full competitive season there.

There's another incentive involving women's and Olympic sports. Depending on how much NIL compensation a school provides athletes in non-revenue sports, it could exceed the cap by as much as another \$5 million.

The \$22.5 million retention provision would last nine years unless affected earlier by the end of the House settlement and subsequent congressional action.

College sports already operates like free agency for players. This provision essentially allows schools to create their own retention budget — and find the money to fund it — with authority to spend up to \$22.5 million beyond the existing cap specifically to keep their own players, similar to how a pro team budgets to re-sign key free agents.

3. The transfer portal would get considerably tougher

Athletes would still be allowed to transfer, just not over and over without consequences.

The bill would allow one transfer from one four-year school to another without losing or delaying eligibility. Transfer a second time, and an athlete generally would have to sit out the first academic year at the new school.

There are exceptions, including when a sport is discontinued, a head coach leaves, an athlete has been subjected to sexual assault or harassment, or an athlete transfers to pursue a graduate degree.

The basic rule: one free transfer, but a second one usually costs a season. That would be a major change from the transfer environment college sports has come to know.

4. Congress agrees on a five-year window to play five seasons

If you've spent the past several months trying to figure out who is eligible to play college sports, you may have needed a lawyer.

This bill largely aligns with new NCAA policy to establish a maximum five-calendar-year eligibility period for Division I and II athletes. The clock generally would begin with whichever comes first: the academic year following an athlete's 19th birthday or the athlete's initial full-time college enrollment.

There would be exceptions for pregnancy, religious missions, military service and certain other approved absences, including serious injuries or medical conditions.

5. Congress would put limits on how big the richest conferences can become

Conference realignment has spent years operating on a fairly straightforward principle: if the money makes sense, somebody will probably move.

Congress wants some boundaries.

Among its provisions: a conference reporting more than \$700 million in annual revenue generally couldn't acquire another school's assets or media rights if doing so would push its own membership beyond 19 schools.

The provision has definitions and financial thresholds that matter more than a simple

headcount. But the larger point is clear: after years of schools jumping conferences and conferences growing from coast to coast, Congress would put some federal limits on future expansion.

At the same time, the bill would give conferences another way to gain strength without getting bigger. Multiple conferences could choose to combine some of their television rights and negotiate with networks together, with antitrust protection for doing so. The ACC and Big 12, for instance, might have more bargaining power selling some of their television inventory together than either would have on its own. But schools and conferences could not be forced to participate.

6. Former pros can't come back to play college sports

There's an important catch in the new eligibility rule.

To play college sports under the bill, an athlete could not be a "professional athlete." That sounds straightforward until you look at some of the cases being fought in court right now.

What about an athlete who declared for a professional draft but wasn't selected? Or went to an NFL rookie minicamp? Or hired an agent? Or tried professional sports without ever making a roster?

Those distinctions already are creating eligibility disputes. The bill contains some specific exceptions involving youth basketball and prize money in sports other than football and basketball. But it doesn't make every possible professional-status question disappear.

And it could leave college sports with one major question: when exactly does an athlete become a professional?

7. Women's and Olympic sports would get some protection from cuts

One concern about the new era of college sports: If athletic departments have to find tens of millions of dollars to pay football and basketball players, where does that money come from? Aren't women's and Olympic sports in jeopardy?

The bill attempts to give them some protection.

Athletic departments with at least \$80 million in annual revenue generally would have to maintain at least the same total number of roster spots and scholarship opportunities in non-revenue sports that they offered in 2024-25.

There are exceptions for schools facing serious financial problems, and the protection would not last forever. Larger schools generally would be under the requirement for nine years. Schools with between \$50 million and \$80 million in athletics revenue would face a similar requirement for four years.

There's also a catch for some schools if they seek financial relief: before cutting non-revenue sports spending, they could be required to reduce pay for coaches in revenue-producing sports proportionally.

That will get a few coaches' attention.

8. The NCAA would become harder to sue over some of its biggest rules

This is one of the main things college sports leaders have wanted from Congress.

The NCAA has spent years losing or defending lawsuits challenging its rules under federal

antitrust law. The bill would give the NCAA, conferences and schools antitrust protection when enforcing certain rules authorized by Congress — among them compensation, revenue sharing, eligibility, transfers, recruiting and tampering, athlete agents and some coaching rules.

That protection has limits, though. Congress would shield specific rules it authorizes, not issue a blanket declaration that everything the NCAA does is exempt from antitrust law.

That's important because the courts have played an enormous role in dismantling NCAA rules over the past several years. This bill would give the NCAA firmer legal ground, with Congress deciding where that ground begins and ends.

The protection isn't unlimited. But where it applies, the NCAA comes away stronger, with federal authority behind rules it previously had to defend in court.

9. Athletes would get new protections, too

Athletes get quite a bit in return.

The legislation would establish federal NIL rights and rules for NIL contracts and agents. Agent fees generally would be capped at 5%.

It would protect scholarships from being taken away because of injury or athletic performance and give former athletes opportunities to return to school and complete their degrees.

Division I athletes would receive medical coverage while playing and coverage for certain sports-related injuries for five years after their eligibility ends. The legislation also would establish an NCAA-funded program to help cover long-term medical costs.

And athletes could enforce some of these rights in court. The bill specifically allows lawsuits over certain violations, including failures to follow its transfer and eligibility rules, and restricts the use of agreements requiring athletes to give up those claims in advance.

But those lawsuits would come with limits. Athletes generally would have to give a school 30 days' notice before suing, and if a violation can be "cured" during that period, a lawsuit over it would not be allowed. The bill does not define what constitutes a cure.

That has drawn objections from some athlete advocates, who argue the provision could make it more difficult to hold schools accountable in serious cases involving injury or abuse. Supporters of the legislation dispute that interpretation and point to other legal remedies that would remain available.

So there is a tradeoff running through the legislation, with the NCAA gaining greater protection for some of its rules and athletes gaining rights written into federal law — although how some of those rights would be enforced could wind up being another question for the courts.

10. After 171 pages, Congress still won't decide whether college athletes are employees

For all the questions this bill answers, it deliberately leaves one of the biggest alone.

The bill doesn't say whether college athletes are employees.

It states that it is "neutral on, and does nothing to alter, employee or non-employee status for student athletes." Instead, it creates a Commission on the Future of College Athletics that would study, among many other things, athlete compensation, collective bargaining and employment status.

Congress would regulate how much schools pay athletes, how often they can transfer, how long they can play, which NCAA rules are protected from lawsuits, and even how conferences can expand — yet it stops short of saying whether the athletes generating all that money are employees.

Perhaps even Congress has its limits.

And that's not all

The bill would give current or recent athletes at least one-third of the seats and voting power on certain NCAA governing boards and rulemaking committees. It would restrict when football coaches can leave one school during the season and begin working for another. It would create a Student Athlete Ombudsman.

It also would address a problem familiar to fans of sports such as volleyball, soccer and baseball: networks buying media rights and then not showing the games. If those rights go unused long enough, they could revert to the school, conference or collective rights holder and be sold somewhere else.

And the legislation would override significant portions of state law involving NIL, transfers and eligibility, replacing the state-by-state system with national standards.

One thing the bill would not do is create a new federal agency to police college sports. Instead, enforcement would be spread around. The NCAA or its designated enforcement operation would oversee some of the rules. Athletes and others could sue over certain violations, leaving courts to resolve those cases. Existing federal agencies would have limited roles, too. The FCC, for example, would have jurisdiction over complaints that parties failed to negotiate local television rights in good faith. Congress would write the rules, but there would be no single federal cop charged with enforcing all of them.

The Protect College Sports Act is being discussed largely as Congress' attempt to bring order to NIL and give the NCAA greater protection from the litigation that has reshaped college sports. But it does considerably more, reaching into television, conference

realignment, scholarships, medical care and governance while proposing national rules for paying, keeping, transferring and determining the eligibility of players.

None of those specifics are settled. The retention fund in Item 2 wasn't in the bill's original version — it was added in August only after the Big Ten and SEC withheld support until it was. With the bill now headed into formal Senate debate and potential amendments, followed by House consideration if it passes, similar pressure from conferences, coaches and advocacy groups could continue reshaping the details. The provisions above describe the bill the Senate just voted to debate — not necessarily the one Congress eventually will vote on.

It's a federal rulebook for college sports, written well past the point where anyone could still call it just an NIL bill.

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