

**Kristi Dosh**

Hi, welcome to the Business of College Sports podcast. I'm your host Kristi Dosh, the SportsBizMiss, and I am happy to be back again with you here this week, whether you're a returning listener or a new listener, I just want you to know how very grateful I am for you and that you are spending this time with me.

Today I have a guest from the Intercollegiate Tennis Association, the ITA. They are the governing body of college tennis. They oversee both men's and women's varsity tennis at all levels, NCAA Division I, II and III, NAIA and Junior/Community College. I was lucky enough to be able to snag their CEO Tim Russell to come on and talk about the strength and the health of college tennis, but particularly the number of college tennis programs that have been cut during the pandemic.

Based on my database and what I've been tracking, it looks like 45 men's and women's programs have been cut across the three divisions of the NCAA and then also in AI and the junior community college level and actually I had to read record this intro because Tim and I recorded about 11 days ago, and when we recorded there were 28, men's and women's programs that had been cut now that's 45. So obviously tennis is being really impacted by the cuts happening around the country.

So, I wanted to talk to Tim about why perhaps we are seeing tennis be impacted more than other sports and what some of the factors might be that are going into this decision schools are making to cut tennis in particular, and we talked about all sorts of other things around college tennis, things before the pandemic, after the pandemic, just sort of everything you could ever want to know about the state of college tennis. We even veered off a little bit into NIL and how he thinks NIL rights might impact Olympic sports programs. And I just thought I learned so much during this episode. So I hope that you all feel the same way when you listen to it.

So without further ado, I give you my interview with ITA's CEO, Tim Russell.

Hi, Tim, thanks so much for joining us. We're excited to have you today and to talk a little college tennis.

**Tim Russell**

Well, I'm delighted to be here.

**Kristi Dosh**

So I wanted to start out in case some of our listeners aren't familiar with your organization. Tell us a little bit about the ITA and what your mission is.

**Tim Russell**

Great. So the ITA is the Intercollegiate Tennis Association and we're the governing body of college tennis. So there are 1,200 schools that are members. We have 1,700 programs in all five divisions. So that's Division I, II and III in the NCAA. NAIA and then Junior/College. We have about 1,700 head coaches, 3,000 total coaches if we're counting associate coaches, assistant coaches. We're in charge of everything from the rules and rankings for college tennis, to coach education, community

engagement. We put on a coaches' convention. We are governed by a board of directors and a series of five operating committee. So founded in 1956, and a long history of serving and growing college tennis.

**Kristi Dosh**

It sounds like you all definitely have a close relationship with all the coaches around college tennis. What is your relationship like with the NCAA or NAIA? How does that work?

**Tim Russell**

So if you think of a triangle, all the sports basically have a national governing body. So in the world of tennis, that would be the United States Tennis Association. So you think of the USTA as the group that actually runs the US Open. Most sports have a coaches association, which would be the ITA. And then the NCAA is the governing body of college sports. So when all the sports are functioning at their best, that triangle, I think, is all well connected. So we have a great relationship with the USDA and with the NCAA. So for example, the ITA runs a lot of championships in the fall, but the college NCAA championship is run by the NCAA and then obviously the NAIA would run their own championship as well.

**Kristi Dosh**

Right.

**Tim Russell**

So we're one of three legs in a three-legged stool if you will.

**Kristi Dosh**

I'll call it tennis-all-the-time. I told you before we started recording, but haven't told the rest of the audience, I spent a summer in law school working at the WTA and can play tennis well enough to like go hit around a ball with a friend. And so, I have a special place in my heart for tennis and was excited to talk to you because for our returning listeners, I recently spoke to someone from College Hockey Inc. and we were talking about what his organization does to grow hockey at the collegiate level. Obviously, there aren't nearly as many men's ice hockey programs around the country as there are men's and women's tennis programs. And so, we were talking a lot about the growth model and those sort of efforts. What is that like for you all, because obviously, there are a lot more college tennis programs, how involved are you on the growth side and adding programs?

**Tim Russell**

So, we're always interested in adding programs and up until COVID-19 struck, in the five years that I've been the CEO of the ITA, we've actually had a net gain in tennis programs. Tennis obviously has a very long tradition, a rich and deep history, always happy when schools add programs The ITA is obviously supportive of that. But those kind of decisions, whether it's adding programs or dropping programs are made at the individual institutional level. So we're happy to work with schools that are considering adding tennis. One of the best recent examples, for example, was Arizona state university that had had a long history of men's tennis and then back during the recession of 2008 it actually dropped tennis and four years ago, Ray Anderson, the athletic director at ASU who's a very forward-thinking visionary

athletic director decided to add men's tennis back. Not only did he add it, but he and his wife Buffie actually contributed \$1 million to bring back men's tennis. So the decisions are made institutionally, but we're always happy to help any way we can.

### **Kristi Dosh**

And I think ASU was actually one of the schools we talked about with College Hockey Inc. because I think they also added men's ice hockey and we were talking about how receptive they had been to adding a program and how successful it had been so far. So, obviously out at ASU, they're doing some things right when it comes to adding programs it sounds like.

### **Tim Russell**

For sure, but that actually gets to kind of a philosophy of an athletic department. You know, that's been one of the things that's been great interest in recent months, how many programs does it take to actually constitute a sponsored D-I athletic program and Ray Anderson believed in adding sports. I believe he has 28 sports at ASU. A guy like Bubba Cunningham, I think, has 29 at University of North Carolina in Chapel Hill, but there are schools in the Pac-12 that might have 18 or 19. So Ray is on the forefront of trying to add sports. And when you talked about hockey, for example, within three years of moving from a club sport to a varsity hockey team, they were in the round of 16 of the NCAA's national hockey tournament.

### **Kristi Dosh**

Yeah. And, unfortunately, the reason that I looked you up and asked you, "Would you please come on the show today?" was because I've been tracking who's cutting programs during the pandemic. And it occurred to me that I felt like as I was filling out my little Excel spreadsheet that I was typing tennis more times than I was other sports. And so, I'm curious if you have any insight into why tennis has maybe been a sport that has been cut more than other sports during this time.

### **Tim Russell**

Happy to take a shot at it and give my best insight. The ITA has had a protocol since I've been the CEO of my trying to always connect at the highest level of an institution that cuts tennis. Sometimes I can get all the way up to the president, often a vice president, usually the athletic director, and there's a series of decisions that are made. Some of them actually don't make a lot of sense to me. For example, there was a D-II program where they cut the men's and women's team was part of five programs cut at St. Edward's University. And that's in Austin, Texas. Their Mets team was ranked sixth in the ITA rankings. So it was just getting ready to be invited to our team indoors. The women's team last year made the NCAA. They had very small budgets and quite honestly, using a model where a number of the team members pay tuition, I actually thought it was a poor decision. They cut six sports. They've got a president who's near retirement. Everybody has to make their own decisions when there's an economic crisis. So tennis was one of six sports cut.

We worked with both the men's and women's coach as they were trying to raise money to save the program. We were not successful. But these are individual decisions. So some people have told me that they've cut tennis, because it's one of the smaller sports where they have fewer student athletes

impacted. We've been arguing for years that with things like the Directors' Cup, tennis is a way to actually do very well. You need about eight players.

I'll give a good example at Ohio State men's tennis, they had a coach who'd been there for many, many years. It was a good program but not particularly distinguished. They hired a truly fantastic coach in Ty Tucker. And for the last 18 years, they've been in the NCAA championship and they've been to the semi-finals, the finals. So I would argue that a small team actually is a plus.

Some people have said well impacts fewer student athletes. Another answer has been that tennis for some schools in some locations needs an indoor facility. So sometimes the cost for the indoor facility have gone up. Sometimes the indoor facility has gotten rid of their tennis courts, for example, and turned it more into a gym. Sometimes the programs just haven't been very good.

On the positive side, I will tell you that the ITA has published our Health Index, which actually helps our coaches know if their programs are healthy. So there's about 30 items. They include things like how well is your team done on the court, so what has your record been. Have you won your conference? Have you gotten to the NCAA tournament? Have you had All-Americans? We asked people how well connected are you in the community? Do you serve underserved youth? Do you serve senior citizens? How well are your matches attended? Do you have an alumni association? So there's different reasons.

Sometimes the programs haven't done very well on the court. Sometimes their programs haven't been embedded in the community. We have found historically that tennis players are good students. They're usually model citizens. So tennis usually is a good story to tell, but Ads have occasionally said their teams aren't very good. Occasionally, sadly, an entire conference has fallen under the minimums for getting a guaranteed automatic bid to the NCAA so once a couple of schools cancel on a conference, the rest of them cancel. So there's not one answer, Kristi, but it's ultimately a decision made by an athletic director in consultation with the leadership at a school.

### **Kristi Dosh**

Yeah, and I know there are so many factors that get considered and in my consulting work I've been in on some of those conversations for adding or for cutting sports, and I remember years ago, I did an interview with a former wrestling coach and we were talking about the health of college wrestling and how many programs had been cut over the years. And he was talking about how low the costs are for wrestling, like you just got to invest in some mats. And I remember having this conversation about it's a relatively cheap sport to sponsor. And so, as I look at sports that are getting cut, I sort of ask myself, "Okay, what kind of facilities do they have to have? How big is the roster?" When you're having to travel people, how do all those different expenses layout, and I think you did a really nice job of talking about all of the different factors that might come into play for tennis and why it might be a burden, but why it might also be a great sport to have so it probably just depends on the individual institution and their history with the program and how it's doing. But because I don't know college tennis as well as I would like to I kept racking my brain and thinking what am I missing about tennis. Why is tennis getting cut more than everybody else? Like, there's got to be this like secret that I'm missing, but it sounds like that's not necessarily the case. There's a lot of factors.

**Tim Russell**

Yeah, I mean, you talked about hockey. You talked about wrestling. There's a group that's called the ICAC, which is the Intercollegiate Coaches Association Coalition, and we've been having a lot of discussions. So there's obviously been a lot of conversations. And one of the things I'd like to say is, over the five years that I've been the CEO up until COVID-19 hit, we've actually had a net gain in tennis programs. And it's just been over the last six to eight weeks where we have lost programs.

To your point about even things like budget, I had reference, for example, that St. Edward's had relatively low budget cost, but just so people know, at the big Power Five schools, we actually do have online lot of the programs in the Pac-12, Big 12, ACC, SEC, and Big Ten that have million dollar men's and women's tennis programs. I think we even have a couple that are a million and a half. So the interesting thing is that where the budgets have been the biggest in the Power Five conferences, those schools have not been the ones actually canceling their tennis programs, which is why some of the cancellations have been so curious.

**Kristi Dosh**

When it became apparent to you that school is just in general were going to start cutting sports as we got into the pandemic and we realized the cuts departments were going to take from the NCAA distributions and not knowing what football season is going to look like and that sort of thing, were you concerned right away that tennis was going to be a sport that was going to be on the chopping block as often as it had been? Or, was that a little bit of a surprise for you?

**Tim Russell**

Well, we've worked very hard actually to strengthen college tennis as I said, up until COVID-19, I think college tennis had never been stronger, incredible parity. Lots of great teams, men's and women's teams both being strong. But early on, when the pandemic was hitting actually a guy named Steve Ditmore wrote a piece for Athletic Director U where he postulated that Olympic sports might be on the chopping block. And I quickly wrote a fairly extended response to that which actually your listeners could find on the ITA tennis.com website, and maybe you can post the link there.

**Kristi Dosh**

Yes. Sure.

**Tim Russell**

So the short answer is that very early on, I think all of us were concerned. The next big thing that happened was the group of five commissioners, not the Power Five, but the group of five commissioners actually put forward some possible waiver legislation to the NCAA, where they actually considered the idea of lowering the number of sponsored sports that would be required to be a Division I athletic program, and very quickly was not only tennis, but this entire group, the ICAC got together, and we lobbied against that. And actually, the NCAA actually rejected that notion. So all of the executive directors and CEOs like myself have been worried whether it's been volleyball, whether it's been hockey, wrestling, etc. And it's one of the reasons that I was proactive in writing the piece.

The other kind of thing back to your question about the USDA and NCAA, our partners at the USDA and the ITA put together a one-page PDF that we sent to all of our coaches and all the ADs talking about the benefits of a college tennis program. So we got very quickly proactive in trying to make sure to tell the story so that as best as we were able, we were discouraging people from cutting tennis. And while we're discouraged that some have been cut, we still have a very large number as you referenced if we compare ourselves to swimming or gymnastics. To have 1,700 programs we're still strong. So while we have taken a good hit, a number of other sports have taken hits as well.

**Kristi Dosh**

Yeah, absolutely. What kind of role do you play? You know, I followed University of Alabama, Huntsville, because I had just had the gentleman on from College Hockey Inc, and within hours of us recording they cut the hockey program in Huntsville. And so then he and I were chatting again about what they were going to do in that situation. And now, that hockey program has raised enough money to save itself. And so, they also gave the opportunity for the men's and women's tennis programs that were cut there to save themselves. What kind of role do you play when there's a situation like that, where appropriate has been cut or is on the chopping block but has the opportunity to fundraise to save itself?

**Tim Russell**

Yeah, great, great question. And so we try to play as active a role as the coaches would like us to. We obviously aren't going to butt in where we're not asked, but usually we are asked. And one of the first things I actually do is write to the president, to the vice president, to the AD. And then our coaches are not full-time fundraisers. Part of their job in this day and age is to be a fundraiser. One of the things that we did at our ITA Coaches Convention last year, obviously pre-coronavirus, we actually had an entire session where we had about 150 of our coaches there and we talked about fundraising. One of the best pieces of advice we can give to a school is to actually have your program endowed. So if you look at Stanford athletics, for example, I think most of their 32 or 36 sports are actually endowed. That can't always happen at a smaller school or with a less experienced coach. But we actually have a lot of coaches who've raised a lot of money, whether it's Vince Westbrook at Tulsa who's probably raised \$30 million or \$40 million, or a guy like Peter Wright at Cal Berkeley or Billy Pate at Princeton, but we have a lot of less experienced coaches.

And the challenge in these situations that you referenced Kristi is that they're usually very short term. So for example, the president might say, you have 30 days to raise \$1 million.

**Kristi Dosh**

Right.

**Tim Russell**

And so it can be tricky for a young coach who might only be there for the first or second year who hasn't even raised their first \$20,000. But I've raised a lot of money in my earlier life as an orchestra conductor and I've raised money for the ITA. So we clearly try to share our expertise and we try to work with the coaches and the alumnus to identify their potential biggest givers. But this is usually an uphill

battle. And there have actually been situations where the coaches have raised the money and then they still cancelled the program. So it can be a sticky wicket, if you will.

**Kristi Dosh**

Yeah.

**Tim Russell**

But we try to be involved. But ultimately, it's going to be the responsibility of the coach and the alums, which is why we get back to this Health Index that we've created because we would prefer to be an architect upstream instead of a plumber downstream. We'd prefer our coaches to be working on this to where they would never actually be cut. But once they're cut, some of the situations, you don't really understand why they were cut. And even when they've come up with the money, they just haven't changed their mind. So it's not always successful.

**Kristi Dosh**

I am curious a little more about this Health Index because I think that's a great idea. If you've got coaches who are looking at that and they realize, "Wait a second, my program may be in more trouble than I realized it is," what does that look like in terms of them coming to you all for support to improve on the areas where they've identified major problems?

**Tim Russell**

Another awesome question. Clearly, you've done this quite regularly. So you make you make this interview fun, but great, great questions.

So in addition to just putting the Health Index up for them to do self-reflection, we actually do have protocols. We encourage them if they fall below a level to not only contact us and to get our membership division working with them, but we've tried to do things such as assign them a mentor, for example. We've tried to actually then ask some follow up questions. We've tried to recommend, oh, okay, under the stuff, having to do with community engagement, you haven't been doing any. Have you thought of this or this or that? So we have a series of best practices.

So one, we do want them to contact the ITA. Two, we usually talk through the various best practices. But then what's been highly successful has been a protocol of connecting them to a highly successful long-standing coach as a mentor. Some of the very logical stuff that they're not doing enough is usually even staying in touch with their athletic director, with their sports specific administrator. Have they ensured that the president of the university has attended a match? So quite honestly, Kristi, if anybody were to see our Health Index, the way we've asked the questions, the answers should be self-evident. Has your president attended a match? If you answered no, well, you should understand, well, maybe we should do that.

**Kristi Dosh**

Right.

**Tim Russell**

Does your AD regularly attend your matches? Oh, no; better do that. Do you have an alumni association? Oops, no; better do that. Do you send out right fundraising emails? So a lot of our Health Index is written so the answers are pretty self-evident as to what the prescription is. But if they can't figure it out, we work with them best we can.

### **Kristi Dosh**

And I like that idea. You can almost use it as a checklist. And I know that you're sort of new to my podcast, but for those who have listened, after we record our interview, I sit down and record a business tip for people because in addition to my sports reporting, I run my own company and I've written books, and so I'll do tips either based on kind of growing your side hustle and owning your own business or around writing books. And so I always try to listen for like a nugget during the interview that I can use to tie into my business tip. And I made myself a big note here on the sticky pad on my desk that says Health Index, because I think that they're – all of us can look at our businesses and start to break down. And I was even thinking just off the top of my head while you were talking, are you sending – have you built up an email list? And are you sending regularly to them? What is your social media presence like? And are you getting good engagement there? Are you getting enough leads in the door? What's your conversion percentage for turning those leads into clients? I'm already thinking in my head of what a Health Index would look like just for like a solo entrepreneur who doesn't have a lot of knowledge about running their own business. So you may have inspired me to create my own little Business Health Index for people. So thank you for that idea. I might borrow it.

One other thing I wanted to ask you, because you obviously have a sort of your finger on the pulse of the coaches, as we've seen programs get cut, what kind of conversations are they coming and having with you all? What are their concerns or what are some of the more immediate things they are trying to do to ensure that they don't become one of those programs that gets cut?

### **Tim Russell**

Yeah, so great, great question again. So first I can tell you that all of our coaches, even the ones that I don't think are worried about losing their jobs have used this time to be very reflective. Before I wrote the piece for Athletic Director U, I actually wrote a piece to our 3,000 coaches that kind of, from my chair, recommended some ways that they might spend their time. And one of it was in self-reflection. So for example, one of my favorite little articles is called solitary leadership. And it was an address given at the army at West Point. And the premise was that when we think of leaders, we always think of people who are active and doing things. And one of the things that you have to do to be a very successful leader is to spend a lot of time and reflection on what are you going to do as a leader, where are you leading your group.

So I first encouraged our coaches to be reflective. And I can tell you that many of them have and they've not only been self-reflective, a bunch of them have started groups where they're talking together. And in the past when everything was just going great they thought, "Okay, this was going on forever". So even our top coaches are having a bunch of regular Zoom calls, what is the future of our sport going to look like. Almost every one of them has been involved at their athletic department asking what will a 15% cut look like. That's kind of the baseline. And I can tell you that things like travel have been cut. In the world of tennis, it's not probably going to be practical for the Wake Forest men to fly to

Tempe, Arizona for a one-off match. We're talking about what more regional play would look like, what would more cross divisional play look like from D-II to D-I if we're both sitting in Florida. We've been talking about even a kind of a federated model. What will more local play look like?

So they've been involved with immediate discussions about their budget at their schools. But I've been very impressed with the fact that at all divisions, they've been having conversations and the ITA has actually been trying to facilitate those. So part of how our organization, Kristi, is organized in addition to our board of directors, which is set up like a corporate board or a top not-for-profit board, we also have five division operating councils where tennis-specific decisions are made. So NCAA I, II and III, NAIA and Junior/College, have those operating committees. And so those have been very active over the last couple months as well.

The ITA, for example, is trying to launch our summer circuit. We're trying to be one of the first sports showing how tennis can be a safe social distancing sport. We're also trying to make sure that things are ready to go in the fall. Obviously, everybody is waiting to see about college football, but we're trying to use this time to not only do scenario planning, but to be proactive about the future.

### **Kristi Dosh**

That's great. I love the collaboration there. And I even made myself a note to learn more about the ICAC and sort of – it sounds like the collaboration you have across sports with those coaches from other sports, too, who obviously are keeping a close eye on what's happening.

### **Tim Russell**

Yeah, for sure. I mean, I have the greatest admiration, I mean, people like Kathy DeBoer has been running the volleyball association, the American Volleyball Coaches for almost 20 years. She was one of the first people I sought out when I took this job; guys like Rod Keogh and soccer. Everybody is dealing with this and everybody has got their own set of challenges. But we're also much like our individual coaches, we're trying to function as a support best practice group across the 20 Olympic sports.

### **Kristi Dosh**

I'll leave you with one question that I know is a little bit of a look-into-the-crystal-ball kind of question, but you have your pulse on this as much as probably even more than I do. Where do you think we're at right now in terms of sports getting cut? Do you think we've seen the worst of it? You think there is more still to come? What are you sort of hearing or what are you planning for?

### **Tim Russell**

Yeah, happy to take a shot at that. If I could be a futurist, we'd probably make more money in the stock market. But I've actually tried to think like a futurist. One of the people I like to read for years, I don't know if people follow Faith Popcorn, who calls herself a futurist. So I try to think like a futurist, and it's a wonderful question.

I would say a couple of things. One, I think the worst day of a college athletic administrator's life is the day that they have to cut sports, and to tell these student athletes who love to compete, they're not only

just there for their education, which they do get, but they love to compete. I think it's a terrible day. So I don't think anybody relishes the idea of cutting sports. Part of the thesis of my response to Athletic Director U was I encouraged presidents and ADs not to use this as an opportunity to make snap decisions that they might regret. And as much as we've been disappointed with the number of programs that have been cut, I have been very pleased with the number of athletic directors and presidents who've affirmed that they're not planning to cut programs, and it's actually a last possible option. So I actually believe that we saw this opportunity that some people took. Some people might have been thinking of it already.

Usually, Kristi, when a program is cut, there's a lot of harangue around that. And I think a lot of people realize that while there was so much noise going on, during this pandemic, that might actually not get to be quite as big a deal. So my crystal ball says that we might have actually seen the worst of it unless the economy continues to turn south, unless the NCAA's meteorites don't come back for next year's basketball. Some of the things that I have trouble sleeping with one eye open are things like stock market crash recession loss of media rights. So as we kind of figure out the new normal, we're not out of the woods yet. But if we actually have a pandemic recovery and an economic recovery in sports come back strongly, I really think that athletic directors don't want to have to cut programs. So assuming health comes back to normal and the economy does, we might have seen the worst of it.

### **Kristi Dosh**

Yeah, I agree. I've been in on those conversations in years past, not during the pandemic, but I've listened to athletic directors and other folks in athletics discuss cutting a sport or cutting multiple sports and I very much agree with you that no one relishes that and that it's a gut wrenching decision. And I think sometimes the media portrayals of it make it sound more malicious than it really is because the folks I know in college athletics who've made those decisions have really tossed and turned over it and have looked for ways to keep from having to do it. And I think you're right that some people have probably already been having these discussions before the pandemic. And then once it happened, it was a good opportunity to go ahead and do it because some of them came so fast. I mean, I had kind of thought in my head, I bet some sports are going to get cut and all of a sudden they start getting cut and I thought, "Wait, you haven't even had time to have a discussion about it. There's no way you decided this out of nowhere".

### **Tim Russell**

Oh, yeah.

### **Kristi Dosh**

So I do think some of those discussions were already being had and this kind of sealed the fate for those programs. But I've also been really encouraged by how many of the programs were given the opportunity to fundraise to save themselves and that we have seen get the thumbs up that they are going to get at least another year lease on life to try and make themselves more stable. And I think you're right. They've got to figure out how, no matter what sport it is, how to get the coach's position endowed, get the scholarships endowed, the more that you can get endowed, the less likely you are to have to have this conversation again the next time the economy turns like you were talking about with ASU having cut tennis and then brought it back. I mean, this isn't like it's the first time we've seen a

wave of cuts happen. And so, if you want to ensure that your sport isn't on the chopping block the next time tough decisions have to be made, I do think working towards that endowment is the way to go.

**Tim Russell**

Now, the one PS I would add, and I think you're spot on, if you'll indulge me just one moment.

**Kristi Dosh**

Yeah, absolutely.

**Tim Russell**

And so I think, to the same question, but another postscript could be, I think we all have to follow what's going on with this whole name, image and likeness and quite honestly, personally, I think that the NCAA's current proposal—it hasn't been finally adopted—but the current proposal could actually be calamitous. And the reality is it could especially impact Olympic sports if it were done incorrectly. I think that Bubba Cunningham at the University of North Carolina is spot on with kind of calling the Emperor's New Clothes on this as having not wearing any because people I think are going down a very dangerous path. And I think there's some very smart people looking at different alternatives. But as a guy who sits in the chair at tennis and talking to people who are dealing with other Olympic sports, I think money could end up being diverted from Olympic sports to have to fulfill some of the sponsorship changes that would happen if name, image and likeness is done incorrectly.

**Kristi Dosh**

And I have heard that as well. I have actually had coaches reach out to me and DM me on Twitter and say they are concerned that they're – and this is before the pandemic that they were concerned their sport might be on the chopping block if local sponsorship money started getting diverted from the athletic department to those companies working directly with student athletes. And I know you're new to the podcast, but NIL has been my most frequent topic on the podcast since it started in January. It's something I have reported on quite a bit and done a lot of speaking on the law school circuit about and we've had quite a few episodes from different angles. I had a former Clemson quarterback, Tajh Boyd who came on and talked about it from a student athlete perspective and actually surprised me with some of the unintended consequences he brought up. He wasn't a hundred percent on board and ready to say it was a great idea and I wrongly assumed that he would think that. And then he came on and brought up some really good points.

And then I had somebody come on and talk about potential Title IX issues they saw. I've had a couple of other folks come on and talk about how they think it's going to impact the industry. We've had social media marketers on to talk about what the market is like for student athletes. So it's one of my favorite topics. So I'm actually glad that you brought it up, because I do hear a lot of buzz from the folks I know that are coaches or involved with Olympic sports, that they're worried that it will divert money away from their programs. So it's interesting that you're hearing the same thing and have the same concern.

**Tim Russell**

Well, yeah, your analysis is spot on. And if you can indulge another podcast, broadcast, I mean...

**Kristi Dosh**

Yeah, I could talk about NIL all day, so go for it.

**Tim Russell**

Well, but, I mean, you should get Bubba Cunningham, but also have him invite **[Paul Pogue 0:37:38]**, who works for him who's a lawyer and who's actually trying to give a solution and not just complain. He's talking about things like the Uniform Law Group, and different legal strategies. But to your point, since we've just gotten off on this a little bit, I mean, currently, I think we – the potential of not only diverting sponsorship funds away from Olympic sports, but you've got agents getting involved, you've got the ability of having rich donors get involved and appending the recruiting process. So as opposed to just complaining, I'm very impressed with what Bubba and Paul are doing. And I'm actually trying to assist because in life you not only want to identify the problem but help offer the solution. So there are some very smart people out there working on alternative proposals if you want to add one more podcast.

**Kristi Dosh**

Bubba Cunningham is on my guests wish list. I met him the first time when he was still an AD at Tulsa. And my husband – my now husband was my boyfriend back then, and we were traveling around the country going on different campuses. I write a lot about facilities, and we were going and doing these facility tours at different schools and Tulsa, like somehow fell in this road trip map we had put together to get from Texas. I think we're going from Texas up to St. Louis for something, and we were making all these stops along the way and went by at Tulsa and met Bubba and have kept in touch with him ever since. And I haven't even asked him yet, because I'm pretty sure if I asked him he'll say yes, so he's on my guests wish list. I just had had so many NIL episodes right in a row. I was trying to give people a little bit of a break from them before I came back to it again, but he's on my wish list. And I also reached out to folks with Representative Gonzales who is expected to bring forth the proposed legislation at the national level. He's a former student athlete and I think has an interesting perspective on it as well. So those two are high on my on my wish list now that I'm kind of ready to get back to NIL.

**Tim Russell**

There you go. And let me just say that Tulsa is one of the great sports towns, not only with Bubba having been there but historically Rick Dixon and now Derrick Gragg, but Vince Westbrook and you look at some of their great patrons in the city of Tulsa. They've built incredible facilities. They've hosted the NCAA. So Tulsa and tennis are synonymous.

**Kristi Dosh**

They have an amazing campus. I thought that was such a beautiful campus. And I remember, I think I wrote a story this has been so long ago, obviously, because it was back when Bubba was the AD there. But I remember him telling us about a group of local philanthropists and all of the fundraising that they had done for athletics and for the university over the years. And now it's been so long, I don't remember all the details of it. But I remember being so impressed by how integrated that university is into the local community in a way that you don't always see. Even in small sort of college towns, you don't always see it. I just remember being really impressed. And I thought it was such a beautiful campus. So it's one my husband and I always remember fondly.

**Tim Russell**

Yeah, well, but it also, I think, integrates – it's interesting how this wonderful conversation has kind of morphed because it's a wonderful descriptor of everything we just talked about, about how a program in a sport, in a college and a community could be integrated. And Michael Case for example is one of the philanthropist you spoke about and he's not only endowed two tennis facilities but done so much for the university, but that is the essence about how all these sports should work. You get a passionate coach like Vince Westbrook. You get supportive ADs like Bubba. You embed yourself in the community. You get philanthropists like Mr. Case, and this how the world of Olympic sports remain successful, not only survive, but thrive.

**Kristi Dosh**

Yes, that's a great case study for people to sort of go check out and learn a little more about how that works there. I agree. I remember us just being so impressed when we visited there.

So I know we got a little off course with people but I still enjoyed it. So hopefully everybody else will enjoy listening. And I so appreciate you coming on the podcast today. I knew I wanted to have somebody come on and talk tennis and you and I had not connected previously. But I hope we're able to stay in touch because I feel like I learned a lot and I'm sure I still have a lot more left to learn.

**Tim Russell**

Well, congratulations on everything you're doing and it was just a great joy and pleasure and privilege to be with you.

**Kristi Dosh**

Thank you again to Tim Russell of the ITA for joining us here on the Business of College Sports podcast today. I know that I learned a lot more about college tennis and it gave me some more food for thought when it comes to programs being cut and things that programs can do to put themselves in a better position moving forward. So hopefully you all enjoyed that interview as much as I did.

Now, before I leave you, you know I love to give you a business tip so I have got a business tip for you that I already teased a little bit earlier in the episode so here it comes.

Okay, today's business Tip of the Day is about doing a health check for your business. I love this idea that Tim mentioned from how the ITA is helping coaches navigate these sort of uncertain times in the financial challenges that they are facing. And so it did make me think about how you could do a health check on your own business. And I mentioned some of these ideas in the interview. But I would ask yourself things like about your social media, for example. Are you steadily increasing in followers? And I see steadily because it doesn't have to be 100 followers a day. It could be one or two followers a day or maybe it's 10 followers a week or whatever sort of growth as long as you're seeing some consistent growth. I would also ask yourself, are you consistently posting on social media in order to see that consistent growth? And are you getting the engagement rate that you want to get on social media? I mentioned email newsletters, are you consistently adding people to your email newsletter? Maybe you don't even have one yet, and the health check is really a reminder that you need to set up an email

newsletter. Maybe you need to set up your lead magnet or your freebie that sort of juicy thing you offer people to get them to give you their email address. And then are you sending it out consistently? And if you are, what are your open rates? Like, what are your click through rates? Like, are you looking at that data and information that's likely available in your email service for provider? I use ActiveCampaign but I've previously used ConvertKit and MailChimp, they all give you some level of analytics. So are you really looking at those analytics and figuring out ways that you can improve them?

Other areas of health check would be things like lead generation. Are you getting the leads you need for your business? Of those that come in the door, whether it's filling out a form or they're getting on the phone with you, what is your close rate? And are you getting enough business in the door? I think those are important things to ask yourself.

If you're not seeing what you want, then what are your marketing channels? I think that part of the health check would be how are you marketing. How many different places are you marketing? Who are you marketing to and really asking yourself questions about whether or not you've got essentially enough bait in the water to catch those leads that you need.

So as much as it's difficult to give one-size-fits-all kind of advice to everyone, I would just encourage you to sit down and make your own health index; decide what things you need to be paying attention to and measuring in your business and make yourself a checklist and even grade yourself. What would you give yourself for your email marketing? What grade would you give yourself? What grade would you give yourself for your social media marketing? What grade would you give yourself for your lead generation? What grade for close rate? Sit down and ask yourself those questions. And in the areas where you feel weak, seek out help for those areas.

For me, the finances of my business are a weak spot for me. I'm very much a head in the sand as long as there is enough money in the bank account to cut payroll every month and pay all of our expenses, I'm happy. But I need to be paying more attention to my finances. Particularly, I've gotten the PPP loan and now the EIDL loan, and I'm having to track what that's being spent on because there's a lot of restrictions around using that money. And so, I've decided to hire a virtual CFO who's going to help me look through my numbers and figure out where I could be more efficient or where I'm spending too much money or not enough money and look at my business from this really holistic perspective in terms of finance and how well I'm leveraging the money that we do have.

So I encourage you to really start sit down and grade yourself on the areas you decide are relevant for your business and be really honest about it. And where you've got those weak spots, find somebody who can help you get better at those weak spots, even if it's painful. I can tell you I'm terrified at working with the CFO. I think it's going to be horrifically painful. But I know that it's necessary and that my business isn't going to grow if I don't do that.

So I encourage you to make your own Health Index. I'd love for you to share it with me and tell me what you came up with. Maybe you think of categories I didn't think of. You can direct message me on twitter at SportsBizMiss or you can email me [kristi@kristidosh.com](mailto:kristi@kristidosh.com). I would love to hear from you. And if you've got time to head on over to iTunes or wherever you get your podcast and rate and review and

subscribe, I would appreciate that. That will help us get in front of more listeners and really grow the Business of College Sports network.

So as always, I am grateful to you for spending some time with us. I appreciate it. Reach out, let me know what you want to hear more about and I will have some great guests coming up for you in the coming weeks.