

# Chicago Daily Law Bulletin®

VOLUME 166, NO. 169

LAW BULLETIN MEDIA

## Elections brings sports world off the bench for GOTV efforts

In a year when a global pandemic brought sports to a halt, leagues, teams and athletes engaged in unprecedented non-partisan and partisan involvement in this year's elections.

From offering unused stadiums as polling locations to endorsing candidates, sports figures and organizations have worked to increase participation in the election process and influence the results. Nonpartisan and partisan activities have engaged sports fans and created a new sense of community in an isolating time. At the same time, this political involvement also raises questions about handling owners and players' clashing viewpoints.

Opening sports venues as polling places and ballot drop-off sites was the most visible sign of nonpartisan outreach in which sports organizations engaged. More than 40 professional stadiums and arenas across several leagues were used as polling locations, enabling more than 298,000 people to vote, either on Election Day or by dropping off mail-in ballots. Some of those arenas and stadiums also hosted voter registration drives and vote counting.

The facilities neatly filled all the requirements to serve as polling locations during the pandemic by providing enough space for social distancing, ADA-compliant accessibility, security, adequate parking and proximity to public transportation. The large footprint of the stadiums and arenas — enough to house hundreds of voting booths and machines — enabled them to accommodate the flood of voters expected to participate in a highly contentious presidential election. This was especially important, given drastically reduced numbers of polling places across the country, as traditional locations like senior centers and schools became unavailable due to COVID-19.

Twenty-three NBA teams offered their venues for voting, ballot-drop offs, voter registration and poll worker training. In fact, the NBA players union made hosting



### SPORTS MARKETING PLAYBOOK

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election-related activities part of an agreement reached with the league after the Milwaukee Bucks refused to play a first-round playoff game. The NBA's Atlanta Hawks saw the most polling action, with nearly 40,000 people voting at the team's State Farm Arena during the early voting period in the battleground state of Georgia.

Could the number of voters able to vote in venues like State Farm Arena make a difference in a tight election? The chairman of the U.S. Election Assistance Commission, Benjamin Hovland, thought so. He told USA Today that being able to use stadiums and arenas for voting helped solve logistical problems in an election that saw record-breaking voter turnout around the country.

Leagues, teams and individual athletes also sought to make a difference by conducting voter registration drives. At the college level, athletic departments at schools around the country held voter registration drives, with the goal of registering all

eligible student-athletes. The NCAA Division I Council underscored that movement by banning sports-related activities on Election Day.

College coaches, who tended to take an informal approach to encouraging civic-minded activities in the past, founded the organization Coaches 4 Change in July. Comprising more than 220 basketball and strength-and-conditioning coaches from schools around the country, the nonpartisan Coaches 4 Change helped 85 teams register their rosters to vote. The group's work is not finished with the conclusion of the 2020 general election; it has been actively working to focus attention on the runoff elections for U.S. Senate in Georgia, calling on coaches in Georgia or with athletes from the state on their rosters — including Georgia high schools — to get student-athletes registered.

At the pro sports level, the NBA and WNBA partnered with Rock the Vote to encourage fans to register, while the NFL and the NFL Players Association created the NFL Votes initiative to provide nonpartisan information and support to increase voter engagement.

Los Angeles Lakers superstar LeBron James launched an organization called More Than a Vote to encourage the Black community and young basketball fans to participate in the 2020 election. More Than a Vote is credited with, among other things, recruiting 40,000 people to serve as poll workers and helping register Florida voters who have felony records.

James focused on More Than a Vote activities in the run-up to the election, waiting until late in the campaign to officially endorse Democratic presidential candidate Joe Biden. Individual athletes endorsing political candidates is nothing new, of course, and numerous sports figures endorsed both Biden and Republican President Donald Trump.

Biden's supporters also included former NBA icon Magic Johnson, U.S. National

Women's Soccer Team captain Megan Rapinoe and WNBA star Elena Delle Donne. Trump's supporters include retired golf legend Jack Nicklaus, former NFL coach Mike Ditka, Ultimate Fighting Championship superstar Conor McGregor, former Major League Baseball star pitcher Curt Schilling and World Wrestling Entertainment CEO Vince McMahon.

Individual team owners routinely contribute money to political campaigns, as well. In 2020, owners of teams across the professional sports leagues gave more than \$14 million to federal election candidates, with nearly 86% of that money going to Republican candidates and causes, according to USA Today.

The 2020 cycle also saw a rare development at the intersection of sports and politics — the formal endorsement of a presidential candidate by a professional sports organization.

The WNBA's Seattle Storm officially

endorsed Joe Biden and Kamala Harris for president and vice president in October. The partisan views of the team's three co-owners lined up with social justice demonstrations by players, who won their fourth WNBA championship title this year and used their national platform to support the Black Lives Matter movement and protest racial violence.

The league itself has helped lead the way in taking progressive stand. Notably, the WNBA officially dedicated its season to Breonna Taylor, a Black woman killed earlier this year by police in Louisville, Ky.

Meanwhile, another WNBA team illustrates what can happen when the political beliefs of a team's owner and players are publicly at odds. Some team owners quietly contribute substantial sums to political candidates while players engage in activism supporting the opposition. The views of other owners, like Kelly Loeffler, a Republican senator in Georgia and co-owner of

the WNBA's Atlanta Dream, are spotlighted.

Loeffler, who was appointed to fill a vacated Senate seat, faces a run-off election in January. Loeffler is an outspoken supporter of President Trump, which has prompted progressive Dream players and the WNBA Players Association, to call for her to step down as owner. Dream players have even campaigned for Loeffler's Democratic opponent Raphael Warnock, with players pointedly wearing T-shirts urging Georgians to vote for Warnock.

While the current limitations posed on sports by COVID-19 will eventually ease, it remains to be seen how sports figures and organizations will engage with future elections and political issues. After a sports season roiled by a pandemic's unprecedented restrictions, a return to some semblance of normalcy may bring new clarity to navigating the impact of politics on sports, and vice versa.