Thursday, March 21, 2024 / Can Caitlin Clark fix college sports?

**[HALF SECOND OF SILENCE]**

**[BILLBOARD]**

SEAN RAMESWARAM (host): What are you doing Saturday?

SCORING IN – IOWA FIGHT SONG

SEAN: A lot of Americans will be watching March Madness.

And – sorry, boys – all eyes will be on the undisputed star of this year’s tournament: Caitlin Clark.

*<CLIP> FOX SPORTS: Caitlin Clark becomes the all-time leading scorer in major college basketball history!!*

SEAN: She makes a logo three look easy!

*<CLIP> BLEACHER REPORT: The most Caitlin Clark way to get a bucket, I mean we are talking well inside the middle of the Mediacom logo*

SEAN: A no-look behind-the-back pass in transition? No problem.

*<CLIP> WOMEN HOOPING: Just your run of the mill behind the back pass, yet it somehow led Sydney Affolter to the basket*

SEAN: She’s making Iowa feel less corny! Is there anything she can’t do?

Maybe make women’s athletics equal to men’s in the eyes of the NCAA?

That’s not on her, but we’re gonna talk about how college sports still has some work to do on Today, Explained.

**[THEME]**

RICKY: My name is Ricky O'Donnell and I'm the basketball editor at SBnation.com.

SEAN: This is an exciting time for you. This is a high season, I imagine.

RICKY: March Madness to me is the best event on the American sports calendar. There's no better star-making event on the sports calendar, than March Madness. Certainly this year it feels like the women's tournament is getting as much or more attention than the men's tournament, which is really the first time I can remember that. I think you can draw a straight line from the Iowa LSU women's National championship game last year.

*<CLIP> MARCH MADNESS:*

*Announcer: Both of these teams in a national championship game for the very first time in program history….. LSU HAS CAPTURED ITS VERY FIRST NATIONAL CHAMPIONSHIP!*

RICKY: To, you know, the explosion of women's college sports that sort of happened, from that moment. Certainly if you're trying to identify who's the biggest star in the sport right now, it's Caitlin Clark.

SCORING IN — Bounce and Beat, APM

*<CLIP> FOX SPORTS: Looking.. It’s Clark…She fires and GOES! SHE HIT IT…*

RICKY: Caitlin Clark is a six foot senior guard for the Iowa Hawkeyes women's basketball team. She is the best player in the country in college basketball and essentially has been from the day she walked on campus at Iowa.

*<CLIP> UNIVERSITY OF IOWA:*

*Caitlin Clark: The main things about Iowa that I liked is one doing something special that's never been done before. I think that's super important to me. And two, I'm really close with my family, so I wanted to be close. I wanted to have them at all my games, not just my immediate family, but my aunts, uncles, cousins.*

RICKY: As a freshman at Iowa, she led the country in scoring and was third in assists. She is the best scorer college basketball has ever seen in either men's or women's.

*<CLIP> CBS NEWS: ….This shot put Caitlin Clark into the history books. Now she stands alone as the all time scorer in NCAA Division one college basketball. She needed 18 points to break the Division one scoring record set by the late Pistol Pete Maravich.*

RICKY: Maravich’s record was, to me, one of the most unbreakable records in sports. It stood for 54 years. It seemed like something no one was ever going to approach, but Clark broke it this year with a style of play that's really all her own. She's a player who is very much a byproduct of the modern game.

SCORING OUT

RICKY: Ten years ago, no one would have believed a player like Caitlin Clark could exist, because no one had ever really played like Caitlin Clark before. Caitlin Clark this year is taking more than 13 three point attempts per game. To put that in comparison, Steph Curry leads the NBA in three point attempts per game at 12.1 per game, and Clark's games are eight minutes shorter.

SEAN: You mentioned Steph Curry. Did he have a influence on her style of play, or did she just kind of make it all up on her own?

RICKY: I'd say there's been an enormous stylistic shift in the way basketball is being played over the last 15 years. It took basketball teams a while to sort of figure out that three is worth quite a bit more than two when it comes to field goal attempts.

SEAN: <laughs>

RICKY: And especially when that's multiplied by a significant level in terms of the volume of shot attempts from three point range. So Steph Curry was really the first player to not only shoot threes so accurately, but to shoot them so often. So I think Clark is certainly influenced by Curry, and I don't think someone like Caitlin Clark could have existed without Steph Curry. And that's the great thing about basketball. Michael Jordan couldn't couldn't have existed without Magic Johnson. And LeBron couldn't have existed without MJ. And the game continually pushes itself forward from generation to generation. So while Clark is the defining player of today's era of college basketball, you do wonder what will the game look like ten, 15 years from now when the young girls growing up today watching Caitlin Clark start to work on their own skill set and change the game in their own image.

SEAN: Hm. Where was she working on her skill set before she got to the NCAA?

RICKY: So Caitlin Clark has been a phenomenon essentially since she was a freshman in high school.

SORING IN – All Ye Who Love Music, performed by the Dowling Catholic Concert Choir

She attended Dowling Catholic High School in West Des Moines, Iowa. Her grandfather was the head football coach there. Her brother was the starting quarterback on the state championship winning football team. And she was a big deal. She was expected to always be a very good player. Her commitment was a big deal. But what's interesting about Clark is that for as good as everyone always knew she was going to be, I don't think anyone really saw this coming when she committed to Iowa, she was the number four player in her own recruiting class, behind Paige Becker's Angel Reese and Cameron Brink, who have all gone on to have outstanding college basketball careers for UConn, for LSU and for Stanford. But Clark has just surpassed all of them, with her production and her style of play. And her legend has only grown more and more in the ensuing years of her four year college career.

SCORING OUT

*<CLIP> FOX SPORTS: Now Caitlin at the line…. For the record…. She ties it with that one….THIS for college basketball HISTORY…. <<cheers>>*

RICKY: When Clark broke Maravich's record in a win over Ohio State last month, that game drew more viewers than the season opening NBA doubleheader on TNT. The TV ratings have been through the roof for Iowa. and she's helped drive record revenue for Iowa. She's seen multimillion dollar NIL deals. She's really just come of age in a unique time when college athletes were able to profit off their name, image and likeness. That started in 2021, which is when Clark was really making her name in college basketball. And now she is sort of someone who, in a sense, is bigger than the sport. With the amount of money she's making in nil deals, the amount of attention she's bringing to the sport.

SEAN: Who she's signing deals with?

RICKY: She has endorsement deals with Nike:

*<CLIP> WE ARE IOWA LOCAL 5: Well Nike is celebrating the superstar with a special shirt that says “You break it you own it” seen worn by Caitlin’s team mates…*

RICKY: With Gatorade. She has local deals with a grocery store chain in Iowa called Hy-Vee.

*<CLIP> KCCI: Caitlin’s Crunch Time cereal hits select Hy-Vee stores today for a limited time…*

RICKY: She has a deal with Goldman Sachs. And of course, she is hanging out with Jake from State Farm more often than Patrick Mahomes is these days.

SEAN: <laughs>

*<CLIP> STATE FARM COMMERCIAL:*

*Man: SHOOT*

*Caitlin Clark: Ok I’ll shoot..*

*Man: What’s happening…*

*Clark: But I don’t see any hoops…*

*Woman: No, I said that because of um.. Sorry… shoot*

*Jimmy Butler: I’ll shoot. Where’s the hoop?*

*Clark: They don’t have one.*

RICKY: So I'm sure that those commercials will be all over TV during March Madness.

SEAN: How much money is that pulling in for her, and how does that compare to, like, the boys across the hall?

RICKY: Nobody really has put out a true number of how much money Caitlin Clark is making. Offer NIL deals. One estimate from on3.com has her making $3.1 million off nil deals right now. Other estimates put it around a million. So Caitlin Clark is, certainly making a lot of money in college basketball right now. That would not have been possible if she was playing college basketball five years ago. And I think the fact that she's, you know, on TV all the time in State Farm commercials, in that she is just getting so much attention, you know, through Nike advertisements and through all these other brand sponsorships she has. As has really only raised her profile, while she's been putting up these record setting numbers at Iowa.

SCORING IN — USC Trojan Fight Song

SEAN: Is it obvious, looking at the field of players entering March Madness, who the next Caitlin Clark is, or do you think it's going to be a while before we see a player put up the kind of numbers that cheated.

RICKY: It's an interesting question. Certainly there are a lot of great women's college basketball stories around the country that don't involve Caitlin Clark, but there's no doubt she's a generational talent. And that's really, to put it lightly. We've never seen someone like her before, but I think her influence will inspire younger players, to, you know, maybe one day take shots at breaking her records. The player that immediately comes to mind is USC freshman Juju Watkins, who as a freshman scored more points this season than Clark did when she was a freshman.

*<CLIP> MARCH MADNESS:*

*Announcer: JuJu Watkins AT THE RIMMMM… adds on to the stellar performance and debut for the number 1 overall recruit coming in!*

And she plays sort of her own power based version of the game. So there's a chance that Juju Watkins could break some of these Caitlin Clark records. And I think when Clark moves to the WNBA next year, Juju Watkins, now at USC, will end up being the biggest player in women's college basketball.

SCORING POSTS

SEAN: Juju Watkins. USC Trojans. Caitlin Clark. Iowa Hawkeyes. Ricky O’Donnell. SB Nation dot com. Sean Rameswaram. Today, Explained.

Back in a minute.

**[BREAK]**

**[BUMPER]**

SEAN: Today, Explained is back!

Laine Higgins reports on sports for the Wall Street Journal but in another life she was a bona fide Division One college athlete.

LAINE: Yes, I swam at UPenn back in the day, although I can't say I'm in a pool much these days.

SEAN: And when we got in touch we were all like, “Wow, great time to be a woman athlete in the NCAA, yeah?” And she was all like “Yeah…

LAINE: In the sense that she, Caitlin Clark, is driving up interest and investment via brands and also the NCAA? Yes,

SEAN: BUT!

LAINE: … but there's still a long ways to go before women athletes are on equal footing as men. It's not quite there yet.

SEAN: Can you remind us, Laine, how far back this fight for equality in women's and men's college athletics goes?

LAINE: It kind of starts in the 70s, and that's when Title IX passes. But at that point, there were women's teams at several universities in a handful of sports. You know, it wasn't nearly as big as the men, but they did exist. And a lot of women, to have sports opportunities just played with the boys on whatever teams were available. And in the early 70s, there's this organization that forms called the Association for Intercollegiate Athletics for Women, the AIAW.

SCORING IN – Cutaway, APM

LAINE: It is this that starts sort of bringing women's sports into a more organized form. And the AIAW was, by all accounts, a mom and pop shop with a bit of a shoestring budget. But, you know, they made it work. They had a television contract and they put on the first postseason tournament for women's basketball.

*<CLIP> 1980 Drake Women’s Basketball AIAW Regional: With less than half a minute left on the clock, the corn huskers wanted to talk it over a bit. Then Drake took a time out to let Nebraska think on it a little more.*

Part of the reason why they were doing this is that when title nine first passed, the NCAA didn't want it to apply to it. But Title 9 applies to any federally funded institution. And obviously, a lot of the NCAA members are public universities that would potentially lose their federal funding if they didn't comply with Title 9. So the NCAA fought this in court and ultimately lost.

*<CLIP> AMERICAN ARCHIVE OF PUBLIC BROADCASTING:*

*The NCAA tried to leave the impression that it was outside the perimeter of an educational program. <chortles> That’s a distinction I didn’t really know existed.*

So in 1978, the Supreme Court forced them into actually having to integrate women's sports a little bit more. And at this point, the NCAA feels threatened by this other organization that's, you know, operating and doing its own thing. So in order to kind of take control, what they do is they start offering a lot of financial incentives because they have a much bigger budget to teams that want to switch from the IAW to the NCAA, and they start scheduling their championships at the same time so teams have to choose.

SEAN: Hm.

LAINE: So ultimately what happens is women's sports get folded in. But because there was this previous infrastructure where there were women administrators and women coaches for the women's teams, when the NCAA takes over, they sort of just combine things, and a lot of those women leaders lose their jobs and men get put in place. And by the way, such was the contentious relationship between the NCAA and the AIAW, that they don't consider any record before 1982 when they took over women's sports, to exist. And, you know, the NCAA record was set by Kelsey Plum.

*<CLIP> PAC-12 NETWORKS:*

*Kelsey Plum: I just felt like… go out on a bang.. And you know, luckily shots fell early and I was able to feel comfortable.*

And that was a hair fewer points than the AIAW college scoring record set by Lynette Woodard.

*<CLIP> AIAW Championship: Lynette Woodard, a 2-time all American, leading Kansas with 38 points.*

Caitlyn ultimately broke both. But almost all of the women's basketball coaches, especially those that coached in both eras, like Tara VanDerveer, who is the winningest coach in college basketball and or woman, period. They all say that Lynnette Woodard's record is the real record.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: So you make it sound like the NCAA was sort of dragged kicking and screaming into following the letter of the equality law. Is that the case?

LAINE: 100%.

SEAN: And. Are they still kicking and screaming now? In 2024, when the most famous athlete in either women's or men's college athletics is a woman.

LAINE: To a degree, yes, they've been doing a better job of supporting women, but they're still it's still not on the same level as the men. And part of the reason why they're doing a better job now is that they were embarrassed on a national scale. And if you remember the 2021 NCAA tournaments where it was in the bubble. So the men were in Indianapolis, they had these swanky weight rooms they're all staying at, you know, Marriott's just swag bags, just, you know, for what it was, it was great. And they had, you know, this top of the line Covid testing. The women were in San Antonio and they had what looks like these like sad hotel ballrooms where you might have a wedding reception with like a rack of dumbbells.

*<CLIP> TIK TOK, SEDONA PRINCE: Now when pictures of our weight room got released vs the mens, the NCAA came out with a statement saying it wasn’t money… it was space that was the problem…. let me show y’all something else.. Here’s our practice court right, and here’s our weight room, and here’s all… this…. extra… space… if you aren’t upset about this problem then you’re a part of it.*

LAINE: So it was pretty sad by comparison. And, you know, it also pretty clearly illustrated the NCAA’s priorities and that they were willing to invest all of this money in the men's tournament and not so much in the women's. And the NCAA was embarrassed on a national level where people were kicking and screaming and saying, oh my gosh, this is ridiculous. Are you kidding? And this was in 2021. At this point, my colleagues and I reported that the NCAA was only letting the men's tournament use the brand March Madness. The women couldn't even put that on any of their tournament. And if you look on the courts from the years of the tournament before that, it just says NCAA women's basketball.

SEAN: Gross!

LAINE: Yeah! And which is ridiculous that in 2021 you had such a disparity. And eventually, you know, this whole brouhaha prompted the NCAA to commission a gender equity review where they're like, look, we messed up. This is not right. We're going to have someone help identify the problem areas. And this report by Kaplan Heckler Fink ends up being pretty exhaustive. And it doesn't just apply to, you know, the basketball championships. It's all sports. And it finds a lot of areas for growth for the NCAA.

*<CLIP>WRTV INDIANAPOLIS: The report includes a series of recommendations including holding the mens and womens final four tournaments at the same site and offering financial incentives for schools to improve their women’s basketball programs.*

LAINE: to the NCAA’s credit they are trying to address some of them. But some of the bigger ones still remain.

SCORING IN – MEIJI DE TOKASU

LAINE: So the way that the NCAA works is it provides rules, it puts on championships, and it gives stipends out to all of its members. There's a couple different ways that you earn money from the NCAA as a member. One is just every school gets the same amount from like an academic fund, there's other little ones that are roughly equal but are distributed to the conferences and then trickle down. And then the biggest one that's variable is called the Basketball Performance Fund. And that is something where you are rewarded for however many teams from your conference get into the tournament and then win and those payout over a rolling five year period. So there's a huge incentive for teams to invest in their men's basketball programs, especially at underdog schools, because, you know, if you are able to pull off an upset, that's incredibly lucrative, but there's no equivalent for the women. And think about those UConn teams for the women that were winning title after title in the, you know, the 2000 with Geno Auriemma, and they never saw an extra dime from that. Whereas the UConn men, you know, they won in 2011, 2014, 2023…and the school benefited hugely from all of those runs.

SCORING OUT

SEAN: To bring this back to Caitlin Clark for a second here. I mean, she's obviously great for women's athletics. She's great for sports in general. She's good for the country. I wonder, you know, does her success – not that we need to put any of this on her – but does her success suggest to the NCAA, to the entire machinery behind women's basketball and women's athletics, that it's high time to fix all these issues that you're alluding to?

LAINE: You would hope. <<chortles>> And, you know, I think behind Caitlin, there's a lot of other potential stars. And I think the first groups that are waking up to this are the networks where they understand how insane of TV ratings Caitlin is capable of drawing. So for the first time ever, CBS aired the Big Ten championship, women's game. That's not something that they usually do. And it was, you know, on an over-the-air channel. It wasn't on cable. And as a result, you have a lot more viewers. So they've been trying to put it on these bigger stages and promote it in that way for a little bit of time. And I think there's an increasing desire for that. I mean, heck, Holly Rowe is spending her entire month just doing Caitlin Clark coverage for ESPN. Like that is her one job, which is incredible.

*<CLIP> DAN PATRICK SHOW:*

*Holly Rowe: I have seen a lot! I have seen the height of UCONN’s greatness… and I just haven’t ever seen anything like this.*

And I think the fact that you have someone who's putting that much time and effort into the storytelling is huge, because it's not that there weren't ever compelling stories on the women's side. I think part of this dynamic also owes to the media. Our industry is not exactly thriving in a lot of ways. And if you think about, you know, limited resources, how are we going to cover both the men and the women when there's a built in audience for the men? If you're forced to make a choice, you're going to go to the men.

SEAN: Mm.

LAINE: And that comes at the expense of the women. And the one time you see that equal or if not more balanced, is the Olympics, where everything happens in the same place, and organizations that are covering it don't have to choose. So I think that shows, if you don't have the to make the financial decision logistically about, you know, I only have so many hours in the day, where am I going to spend them? You often can get greater equity for women. And you know, that's a problem that's probably not the NCAA’s making, but it's one that I think is contributing to this dynamic. And it's starting to change because people are realizing, if I have finite resources in 2024, I'm going to spend them on Caitlin Clark and not a no-name men's team.

SCORING IN That’s how I get down, RHZ, APM

SEAN: Laine Higgins reports on sports for the Wall Street Journal. W S J dot com.

Victoria Chamberlin produces at Today, Explained.

Matthew Collete edits.

David Herman mixes.

Haleema Shah and Hady Mawajdeh do all kinds of things, hosting, voice work, live shows. Today they both chipped in on the fact check.

Here’s a fact: tomorrow we’re gonna talk about Beyoncé.

[10 SECONDS OF SILENCE]