Moments before President Obama was introduced at a White House summit on concussions last week, several guests were escorted into the East Room, where some 200 people had gathered.

Among the honored guests was Mark Emmert, president of the National Collegiate Athletic Association, who took a seat near the front. A few minutes after Mr. Obama began speaking, he singled out the NCAA leader for a financial contribution the association plans to make toward research on head injuries.

For Mr. Emmert, whose organization faces a series of high-profile lawsuits over concussions and players’ rights—including a federal antitrust case set to go to trial next week in California—it was the perfect public-relations moment. The invitation offered an opportunity to be seen as a leader on an important issue, without having to respond to concerns over the treatment of players.

Mr. Emmert, who in his three and a half years on the job has struggled to win support, continues to be the public face of the association. But in recent months, he has played a far more subdued role than when he started. The change has led some people to question who is in charge in college sports as the NCAA faces as daunting a set of challenges as it has ever seen.
Many of the legal claims predate Mr. Emmert’s presidency, including an antitrust case, filed in 2009, involving Ed O’Bannon, a former basketball star at the University of California at Los Angeles. That lawsuit, focused on the commercial use of athletes’ images in television broadcasts, threatens to upend the NCAA’s amateur model.

Perception of Clout

The NCAA is also in the midst of a polarizing governance shake-up, over which Mr. Emmert has appeared to have little control. At the association’s annual convention, in January, he watched quietly as a group of college leaders steered a conversation with hundreds of Division I officials about the future structure of the organization.

Months later, at the Final Four men’s basketball tournament, he appeared at a news conference that, in previous years, had served as a kind of state-of-the-association address. At the 2013 Final Four, Mr. Emmert got testy with reporters, following an investigation into missteps in his past leadership and some commentators' questioning why he was still on the job. At this year’s session, he was flanked by several college leaders and a conference commissioner. When a reporter asked a question about the NCAA’s eroding power, Mr. Emmert directed the commissioner to answer.

Over the past couple of decades, as athletics conferences have negotiated ever-larger media deals, created their own television networks, and helped organize big payouts for postseason football, they have gained increasing clout.

The proposed governance changes in the NCAA would give the five biggest conferences even more power. Last week, as leaders of the five wealthiest leagues held their annual spring meetings, several of them issued strong statements about their desire to provide players with more benefits and for the conferences to create more of their own rules, without as much need for the NCAA and its bureaucracy.

One commissioner, Michael L. Slive, of the Southeastern Conference, suggested that if the rich leagues don’t get what they want, they will consider forming a separate NCAA division.
Those developments have led some college leaders to suggest that it is the conference commissioners—not Mr. Emmert or his senior staff—to whom they more regularly look for advice.

"There’s enough unease out there about the way things are going that it’s played into the hands of the commissioners," says a former member of the NCAA’s Division I Board of Directors. "The whole thing’s adrift, and everybody knows it."

**Relishing the Spotlight**

Mr. Emmert, a former president of the University of Washington who was never a prominent leader on athletics issues, came in like a tornado. Before his first official day in office, he fired several longtime senior executives at the NCAA, including Tom Jernstedt, who had worked there for nearly 40 years.

Mr. Jernstedt was a key liaison with colleges on championships, one of the NCAA’s signature responsibilities. His departure, as well as that of officials who worked in membership services and compliance, signaled to some critics that Mr. Emmert is not always sensitive to the needs of his constituents.

Nine months after starting, Mr. Emmert held a presidential summit with dozens of campus leaders, identifying a number of ideas to improve big-time sports. Before the meetings, he met with senior NCAA staff members to let them know his plans, which included fast-tracking a set of controversial changes.

Despite their concerns over the speed at which he was moving, and the lack of feedback he would solicit from people in the trenches, Mr. Emmert pushed ahead. Soon after the meetings, the Division I board approved his "emergency legislation," outside of the NCAA’s traditional rule-making process. The move backfired when some of the changes, including one that would have provided players with more money toward their full cost of attending college, were later rolled back.

Mr. Emmert tends toward self-promotion. Critics say that has worked against him in college sports, where many people are accustomed to putting the team ahead of the
individual. Around the NCAA’s offices, he is known as "king of the press conference."

He seems to relish the spotlight. At his first Final Four, one former staffer says, Mr. Emmert shuffled the seating arrangements, making sure that college presidents had better views and requesting a spot for himself at the official scorer’s table. (Previous presidents had sat a dozen or so rows back.)

This year, after the University of Connecticut won the NCAA men’s basketball tournament, Mr. Emmert stood before the cameras hugging the trophy as long as anyone on the team did.

The most vocal criticism of his presidency came in response to the child-sex-abuse scandal at Pennsylvania State University. Without opening his own investigation, he relied on an independent report to determine that senior officials at Penn State had tried to cover up the abuse.

In a nationally televised news conference, he handed down an unprecedented $60-million punishment, stirring fears among many colleges that such newfound powers could someday be used against them.

**Building Ties**

Articulate and savvy, Mr. Emmert has strong ties with college leaders, who praise him for his big ideas and easy repartee. But in the early part of his presidency, he did not take enough time to build relationships with athletic directors or conference commissioners, many of them say.

Last year, at a meeting of conference leaders, two high-profile commissioners called him out for failing to respond to their needs. According to one longtime commissioner who was there, the message was clear: The commissioners had lost confidence in Mr. Emmert’s leadership.
In response to the concerns, the president formed a small advisory committee of athletic directors and has played an active role in league meetings this year, say some college presidents. But athletics officials say he does not always follow through on what he promises.

During a meeting with athletics officials at this year's Final Four, one athletic director raised questions about the association’s public-relations approach. As the NCAA has taken heat for failing to respond to athletes’ needs, he said, its leaders have publicly endorsed changes that could give colleges more leeway to help players. But many colleges have already put into effect some of the changes the NCAA is promoting.

Mr. Emmert agreed that such a strategy did not make sense, said athletics officials who attended the meeting. But soon afterward, he went on television and talked about some of the same ideas.

‘Knife-Edge Balance’

The NCAA’s Executive Committee, which oversees the president’s performance, has publicly supported Mr. Emmert. But Lou Anna K. Simon, president of Michigan State University and chair of the committee, said the NCAA’s chief was in a difficult position.

"These jobs are a bit of a knife-edge balancing act in how you provide leadership and push issues and how you bring people along," she said in an interview with The Chronicle.

And NCAA presidents do not have as much authority as people think, she added. "You don’t have the power to make changes you’re advocating. There’s no way, by stroke of pen, you write a new governance structure for Division I. There’s no way, by stroke of pen, you can fix cost-of-attendance or change a rule that you find absurd."

When he was hired, Mr. Emmert was given the directive to take big swings. But Ms. Simon suggested that he needs to work more closely with a greater number of people:
"For change to occur, you have to rally members toward that change by vision and principle, not by saying, ‘This is what’s going to happen.’"

When asked whether the committee had ever voted to dismiss Mr. Emmert, Ms. Simon would not respond directly. But, she said, in August the presidents established a new set of evaluation criteria for the NCAA leader, stating specific expectations.

The committee wanted Mr. Emmert to continue to be a front person for the organization, she said. And it expected him to work with people throughout the game to develop a "more sustainable model" for big-time college sports.

That’s a tall order, especially if colleges haven’t made up their minds about where they want the association to go, Ms. Simon said.

"We’re in this disruptive period for intercollegiate athletics and what the collegiate model means, particularly for our high-profile sports," she said. "Mark is caught in a need to speak on behalf of the collective at the same time the collective is uncertain about what it wants."