



Howard: Going 96 is about money, not competition

NCAA's plan to expand tournament from 64 won't increase Cinderella factor

OPINION

By Johnette Howard

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Hey, Bracketology Nut — quit plotting how to win your office pool for a second and look over here.

No. Down farther.

Farther ...

Keep going all the way down to that rarely visited region of the RPI power rankings where the University of Buffalo Bulls reside. They would be sitting smack on the bubble for the last NCAA men's basketball tournament spot, hoping to edge out the likes of Harvard and IUPUI, if the NCAA already had expanded the field from 65 to 96 teams.

It's strange to think about, isn't it — some team rejoicing "We're Number 96!"?

Plenty of college basketball fans have no idea what the 95th or 100th best basketball team in America looks like, and, frankly, a lot of fans don't want to know. The tournament's consideration of 96 as its new magic number just happens to coincide with the NCAA's chance to opt out of the last three years of its \$8 billion TV contract this summer.

The expansion scheme has been smacked around by critics as a naked money grab, more proof of the NCAA's greed and hypocrisy, and an unnecessary meddling with one of the great spectacles in American sports.

I agree. Some things in life — Fenway Park, the best-of-5 format of a men's Grand Slam tennis match, the assurances that Roseanne Barr will never sing "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" again at Wrigley Field — are perfect as they are. College teams already play half a NBA season as it is.

But it's hard to blame a guy like Buffalo coach Reggie Witherspoon if he disagrees.

Witherspoon has no problem with having another way to get into the Big Dance other than winning his conference tournament. And if Buffalo was indeed sweating it out at No. 96 or 97 on the bubble this weekend, Witherspoon would have no shame about indulging in the same ritual that dozens of higher ranked teams do on Selection Sunday. He'd gather the Bulls before a TV, order up pizzas or platters of cold cuts, then wait and see where they would play in the tournament. Or if they got in at all.

"I am in favor of it because we have added so many teams to Division I since the last time we expanded (the tournament)," said Witherspoon, whose team is preparing for its second-round Mid-American Conference tournament game against Miami of Ohio on Thursday. "I think we need to have more postseason opportunities."

But what about the argument that letting in more teams would create more lousy matchups and diminish the overall quality of tournament play?

"No, it wouldn't dilute the quality of play or interest either," Witherspoon insisted. "If that's the case, the (popularity of) conference tournaments would've been diluted by now ... I think it would help recruiting because your season would run longer. And it would probably help a lot of teams with interest and increased attendance."

Would his answers be different if he were coaching at a perennial power such as Kentucky or Duke, both of whom probably wouldn't want to risk playing an extra tournament game or two? "No," Witherspoon said, "In fact, I have spoken with some of those coaches and they are in favor of expanding."

Syracuse's Jim Boeheim is among them. But the big shots probably know the numbers, too. For all the cooing about how the tournament is the place where Cinderella dreams come true, the truth is that since the field grew to 64 in 1985, no No. 16 seed has ever beaten a No. 1 seed.

And only four No. 15s have beaten a No. 2 in 25 years and 100 games. Even the No. 3 seeds have lost a first-round game only 15 times.

So if the 60th- or 63rd-best team in the field almost never beats a big dog, what are the chances of a No. 96 or even 85th- or 80th-seeded team pulling it off?

Making more money is the only reason to expand. This season, 347 teams played D-I and a look at the schools hovering with Buffalo near No. 100 in RPI rankings reveals a predictably mixed bag. Past tournament regulars such as North Carolina and Arizona are at No. 85 and 87, respectively — not far above No. 95 Harvard.

The idea that on any given day any team can beat any other team is a lovely little story to sell. But as the early round results show, most March Madness upsets aren't as epic as we think. What we're talking about when we say we love the tournament are the emotions of the games, and how the tournament becomes an engrossing drama meted out in perfectly sized portions over three weekends and just 11 nights.

So the NCAA needn't worry about teams 66 through 96. There's a place for them in the postseason, all right.

It's called the NIT.

Johnette Howard is a New York-based writer who has worked for Sports Illustrated, The Washington Post and Newsday. She is the author of "The Rivals: Chris Evert vs. Martina Navratilova" (Broadway Books).

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