



THE MORE THE MERRIER?

Don't look now, but NCAA tournament expansion may be coming faster than we all thought. A proposal to inflate the field from 65 teams to 96 seems to be picking up steam, meaning March Madness may soon be more crowded than

ever — possibly as early as 2011. With the NIT having lost its relevance and the NCAA potentially opting out of the final three seasons of its tournament television contract with CBS, the jack-hammers and sawhorses

may soon be set up to take apart the brackets as we know them. Here are four reasons tournament expansion makes sense, plus four arguments explaining why those four sensible reasons are totally asinine.

By Dan Wiederer ■ Staff writer

Why it makes sense

In the coaching ranks, the most vocal proponents of tournament expansion insist it's all about the kids. The NCAA tournament is an exhilarating and fun-filled experience, they argue. So why shouldn't we give more hard-working student-athletes the opportunity to experience that rush?

By adding 31 teams to the bracket, suddenly 400 more kids per season will have the chance to sample March Madness. Right now, the tournament is too exclusive with too many good teams and great players left out. Just look at Division I football. This year, 68 out of 120 teams played in a bowl game. That's 57 percent. Yet, in basketball we only allow 65 out of 334 teams (19 percent) into the Big Dance? That doesn't seem fair.

Nonsense

Anyone who argues that the near-perfect NCAA tournament setup needs to more closely mirror the flawed and cluttered football bowl system is certifiably insane. The 65-team NCAA tournament admirably uses success as a prerequisite for invitation. In football, the sixth-best team in Conference USA gets to play in a bowl. Rewarding mediocrity is plain silly.

Believe me, I'm sure the kids at Marshall loved the ambiance of Detroit in December and will never forget the thrill of playing in front of 30,000 fans at the Little Caesar's Pizza Bowl. But that's hardly a good enough reason to overhaul the NCAA tournament, which, at present, has exactly the right mix of competitiveness and exclusivity.

Why it makes sense

Stephen Curry. Remember how Curry captivated the national audience and splashed onto the scene in 2008, scoring 128 points in four NCAA tournament games and taking little Davidson within a whisker of the Final Four? That is exactly the type of unique underdog storyline the NCAA tournament is designed to celebrate. And you know how Curry spent the postseason in 2009? Playing NIT games at South Carolina and Saint Mary's.

Because Davidson wasn't able to follow up its regular-season Southern Conference title with a conference tournament championship, fans were deprived of the chance to see one of the best players in the country on college basketball's biggest stage.

Nonsense

Curry's '08 tourney explosion — which included a 30-point second half against Gonzaga in Round 1 and a 25-point second half against Georgetown two days later — will forever be legendary. But that season, he and Davidson earned their NCAA opportunity as the Wildcats were clearly one of the top 40 teams in the country. Last year? Well, Davidson did win 27 games but certainly wasn't as strong as it had been a year earlier. Had a 96-team field been in place, yes, Curry would have gotten a second chance to work his March magic in the NCAA brackets. But honestly, would last year's tournament have been that much more special if we had gotten to see Curry score 28 points in a first-round game against Penn State?

Why it makes sense

Let's say you play in a conference that typically only gets one bid to the Big Dance — the Big Sky or the Summit for example. For four full months, you prove your dominance over the rest of the league, winning the regular-season title. And then in a very narrow window of time at the conference tournament, you come up short and some undeserving underdog steals your conference's automatic bid to the Big Dance. Isn't that unfair? And wouldn't conference play become more meaningful if winning a regular-season championship meant an automatic NCAA tournament bid?

Nonsense

At present, that may be the only argument that even comes close to selling the positives of expansion. But understand the data. Last season, only five teams that won regular-season conference titles outright were left out of the NCAA tournament. In 2008, four outright regular-season conference champs didn't receive a bracket invitation.

And just to put a face on that crisis, last year we had to press on through the NCAA tournament without conference title teams like Jacksonville and Tennessee-Martin, Creighton and Weber State. Should we feel sorry for those teams? Maybe. But their presence wouldn't have enhanced the tournament very much.

Why it makes sense

What's one more round of games when there are boatloads of money to be made — by the NCAA, its member schools and also by the television networks? We'd only be adding 32 games, which could easily be spread out over two days. Then, quickly we'd be back to the 64-team extravaganza that everyone so loves. Meanwhile, the added money those 32 additional schools earned could go to help fund other non-revenue sports at those institutions. How could that be a bad thing?

Nonsense

Reality check: if a 96-team bracket were in place this season, we'd be looking at possible first round matchups like 15th-seeded Virginia Tech vs. 18th-seeded Kent State; or No. 9 Ole Miss vs. No. 24 Stony Brook. Are you really going to play hooky from work to see that?

Mediocre vs. mediocre just doesn't generate the same buzz.

The NCAA tournament has always been about a) crowning a national champion; and then b) dishing out a handful unique and intriguing matchups where mammoth underdogs have a chance to battle college basketball's storied powers. There's always a neat appeal to a Radford playing North Carolina or a Binghamton facing Duke.

Oakland vs. Wichita State? Not so much.

Plus, if the No. 1 priority of the NCAA tournament is to crown a national champion, it's easy to argue that in 25 years using the 64- or 65-team bracket, no potential champion has ever been snubbed.