

WSU: CBI was well worth the effort

By [Tom Archdeacon](#)
Columnist

FAIRBORN — Bob Grant didn't mince words about Wright State playing in the College Basketball Invitational, the pay-as-you-go postseason competition that is a distant cousin of the much-trumpeted NCAA tournament.

“It's one of the best things we have ever done — absolutely,” the Wright State athletics director said. “This was the crowning moment to a great season and a really great month for us. The buzz around us now is as much as the buzz was in 2007 when we made the NCAA tournament.”

Grant was sharing his views just before midnight Wednesday as he stood courtside at the Nutter Center following WSU's 81-69 loss to Santa Clara in the televised semifinals of the CBI. The victorious Broncos now face George Mason in a best-of-three championship series next week.

The loss ended a year of overachievement for the young Raiders, a team that had no seniors and seven new players added this season. In a preseason poll of the league they had been picked to finish dead last in the conference, but instead went 23-13.

They made it to the finals of the Horizon League tournament and then won their first two games in the CBI, trouncing Tulsa by 20 points nine days ago and topping Richmond by six on Monday.

The debate about the CBI — and the similar College Insider Tournament — isn't just that it's a third-fiddle postseason soiree behind the NCAA and the NIT, but that you must pay five-figure fees for each game you play.

Wright State managed to work out deals for rounds two and three because the CBI ran into some serious scheduling issues, but the Raiders did have to pay \$35,000 for their first game against Tulsa.

“My commitment to the CBI was to pay for just the first game,” Grant said. “And we covered that. We had two donors who gave \$5,000 each. We got a sponsor for another \$5,000 and Dan Abrahamowicz of Student Affairs gave us \$10 for each student ticket and we had 500 students, so that was \$5,000.”

Although the Raiders hosted Tulsa on the same night that a pair of NCAA Tournament First Four games were being played at UD Arena, they drew a crowd of 2,507 and Grant said the gate receipts and the night's concession sales helped WSU break even.

“The CBI got themselves in a pickle from an availability standpoint after that,” Grant said. “A lot of the big boys who had offered to host the whole way got bounced out of the tournament — teams like Texas, Wyoming and Purdue.”

Other schools — like Richmond, the Raiders' second-round foe — found their own arenas were booked for other events so they had to play on the road.

The scheduling challenges this tournament often faces were never more evident than on Thursday afternoon when Santa Clara still didn't know when and where its games were next week.

After a visit to the Air Force Museum, the team boarded a bus for the airport and a flight back to California and during the ride, coach Kerry Keating was on the phone with CBI officials, same as he was after Wednesday's game, trying to get a firm commitment for his road-weary team.

"Our contract says we play at home Monday night, then play two on the road," he said by phone. "But now George Mason's arena is only available Monday. I know Wright State and us advancing when some of the big schools didn't throw a monkey wrench into their plans, but they have to find a way to work it out."

WSU faced similar issues when Richmond wasn't able to host their game. That's when Grant said CBI officials inquired: "Bob, could you guys host again?"

He told them: "We can, but we can't be financially hurt by it." He said they eventually came to an agreement: "We got some future considerations and agreed to share some of the gate with them. That protected our financial exposure."

Had the Raiders advanced to the championship, they would have had to pay \$75,000, Grant said.

In years past, WSU had the opportunity to play in this tournament and the CIT and for a variety of reasons — academic standing of players, injuries, the will of a team to keep playing, as well as the stiff financial commitment — opted out.

This year was different. The Raiders had an enthusiastic group that didn't want its season to end, a public that wanted to embrace the team and a coach and administrators who saw the benefits of giving a young, returning team teachable moments.

"We can't simulate — in the spring, summer or fall — these games against Tulsa, Richmond and Santa Clara," said coach Billy Donlon. "These last three games were more intense than the regular season. It'll be an incredible experience to draw on and you can't put a price on that."

Grant said it also gave WSU fans "a chance to love on this team a little more. They're a great bunch of kids ... the kind of young men you'd like your son to hang out with or your daughter to date.

"They did so much for us this year, but their run through the (Horizon League) tournament ended on the road at Valpo (Valparaiso,) so this was a way our fans could embrace them once more at home.

“Another cool thing has been the exposure. We had a Conference USA team here (Tulsa,) an A-10 team in Richmond and a West Coast Conference school in Santa Clara. They never would have come here any other way, but now Santa Clara knows where we are and what the school has to offer.”

WSU president Dave Hopkins agreed: “We want to show people we can compete, so this was great for Wright State. AXS (TV) has 39 million viewers and though I don’t know if they all were watching, I know some where.

“This is just another thing that gets us out there. We’re just so proud of the way we play — as a team. Any time we can get these young men in front of anybody, it speaks well for Wright State.”

And just as it helps the public know about the Raiders, a tournament like this can help players learn about the outside world, said Santa Clara’s Keating.

“This might not be the NCAA tournament and the games aren’t on CBS or TNT, but the kids can still fully embrace playing in March,” Keating said. “And in the process we hope to broaden their horizons.”

Two years ago in the run through the CIT, Santa Clara beat SMU in the semifinals and during an off day in Dallas he took them to the Texas School Book Depository and the grassy knoll to learn about the assassination of President John F. Kennedy.

When the team went on to New York City to meet Iona, he made sure they visited Ground Zero, Times Square, the Statue of Liberty, Rucker Park, Yankee Stadium and, through a friend, got them to practice in Madison Square Garden.

Last weekend the team flew into Chicago for Monday night’s CBI semifinal at Purdue and he had them eat at Ditka’s and practice at DePaul, where he tutored them on the legendary Demon, George Mikan. After the Broncos beat Purdue, they stopped in Knightstown, Indiana and shot around in the Hoosiers Gym which was featured in the 1986 movie Hoosiers.

“These kids don’t even know what a Bucket List is, but regardless they’re checking things off it,” Keating said. “They’ll have memories for a lifetime.”

Grant believes all the experiences that can come with the postseason can make the CBI worth the expenditure, especially when you consider how much schools pay to get teams to come into their arenas to play in the regular season:

“We’ve paid as much as \$55,000 to \$60,000 for buy games here at the Nutter Center. And there are programs all around the country — some nearby — that pay \$75,000 to \$90,000.

“If we would have made the championship series, that (coming up with \$75,000) would have been a nice problem to have. We’d have found a way.

“We treat men’s basketball very well here, whether it’s a summer trip to Italy a couple of years ago, the Setzer Pavilion/Mills Morgan Center facilities, the way we travel or the way we gear guys out.

“Basketball is going to lead us to new heights and we need it to. So we give them every tool we possibly can.”

And the CBI wasn’t just another tool. It was — as Grant said — “one of the best things we have ever done — absolutely.”