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PENN STATE GAMES

Friday, Mar. 07, 2008

Traditional postseason eyes new challenger

By Jeff Rice- jrice@centredaily.com

Shortly after the respective fields for last season's NCAA Tournament and NIT had been selected last March, The Gazelle Group, a sports representation and consultation company that runs several early-season tournaments, did an informal survey of 16 teams left on the outside of both bubbles.

[Lady Lions end with 12-game losing streak](#)

"All of them were enthusiastic about wishing they could continue to play," said Gazelle Group president Rick Giles. "That caused us to believe there would be a market for an additional postseason event."

And thus was born the College Basketball Invitational, also known as the CBI. The newest arrival means that 113 Division I men's teams will play postseason ball this year and that Selection Sunday, if it's possible, could become even more chaotic.

The Princeton, N.J.-based Gazelle Group, which ran this season's College Hoops Classic (won by Memphis) and CBE Classic (won by UCLA) will compete with the NIT to help fill the CBI's 16-team field on March 16.

"Now that there is a little bit of competition, we think it will improve both events," Giles said. "We're not trying to replace or displace the NIT. We want both events to thrive and be successful."

Why should a team select the CBI over the NIT? Giles said the CBI offers a "better financial package" and allows teams more flexibility in scheduling games. None of the games will be played on NCAA Tournament dates, and all of them will be played at the home site of the higher seed. The four semifinalists will be re-seeded and a best-of-three championship series (the higher seed hosting two of the three games) will begin on March 31.

CBI organizers have been distributing tournament information to every Division I school for weeks, but

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phone calls from coaches, administrators and conference coordinators have rolled in from everywhere anyway. Their questions are numerous and varied.

“We’ve gotten calls from teams I’m pretty sure are going to make the NCAA Tournament. It’s like, ‘Why are you calling me?’” Giles said, laughing. “But we’ve also gotten calls from teams who have been left out of both tournaments in the past who say they’re not sure they want to be considered.”

The CBI, which reached a television deal with Fox College Sports and Fox Sports Net on Tuesday, hopes to get at least a few teams confirmed prior to Selection Sunday.

“We hope that after the field is announced, there will only be a few slots left we’ll have to fill,” Giles said.

The NIT requires teams to have at least a .500 record to be eligible. The CBI does not. Its selection criteria seems to be less about hard numbers and more about what sort of potential teams have displayed during the regular season.

“It’s, ‘Have you won good games? Have you beaten good teams?’” Giles said. “We’re not looking for upsets and bad losses as much as some collection of good play that evidences you are capable of playing at a high level.”

Which brings us to Penn State, sitting at 14-15 heading into Sunday’s regular-season finale against Indiana. The Nittany Lions would need to defeat the No. 18 Hoosiers and win at least one game in next week’s Big Ten Tournament to finish at .500 or better. Even with a 16-16 or a 17-16 finish, Penn State’s chances for an NIT berth would be very slim given its current RPI of 155.

A win over Eric Gordon and D.J. White and/or a second-round Big Ten Tournament defeat of either Wisconsin, Purdue or Indiana, however, coupled with the earlier upset of Michigan State, could make Penn State appealing to the CBI. So might its Big Ten affiliation — the CBI’s mock 2007 bracket included 11 teams from the nation’s top eight conferences.

The biggest factor could be a healthy Jamelle Cornley, who missed Wednesday’s trip to Madison because of his ailing left knee. Without Cornley, the term “high level” takes on a different meaning for the Nittany Lions.

Jeff Rice covers Penn State men’s basketball for the Centre Daily Times. He can be reached at 231-4609. Look for his column every Friday.

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