



## Kevin McNamara



## There are the NCAAs, the NIT, and now the CBI

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Brown University, coached by Craig Robinson, could be in the mix for a postseason tournament berth with the debut of the 16-team College Basketball Invitational.

AP / STEW MILNE

If you think the idea that endless college football bowl games cheapens the sport, get ready to be disappointed. If you like the bowl glut and enjoy your hoops, too, you're in luck.

In two weeks, the NCAA will fill its 65-team bracket with the premier teams in the country and those fortunate enough to receive automatic bids from the nation's smaller conferences. Then the fun will begin.

The NCAA also owns the rights to the NIT and that historic tourney will again be played with a 32-team field. But there is a new challenger for the NCAA leftovers, an event called the College Basketball

Invitational that will throw the postseason life raft to 16 more teams. That means 113 college hoop teams — or 33 percent — will be playing ball into late March.

That may sound like heresy to the “purists” out there who insist that after the NCAA is done picking its field, everyone else is just plain no good. Rick Giles, for one, says you’re wrong.

“You hear that the best 65 teams are in the NCAAs. That’s not true,” said Giles, the president of the New Jersey-based Gazelle Group which will run the CBI. “It’s the best 34 teams, plus a lot of automatic bids. That leaves an awful lot of good teams that deserve to keep playing basketball.”

The CBI will not be a wallflower that sits and waits to see who the NIT picks before pouncing on the NCAA leftovers. Giles is a businessman, not an arbiter. He wants his 16 teams to be good and he can offer financial carrots (like multiple home games) that the NIT cannot. The first three rounds of the CBI will be single-elimination with games played on the home courts of higher seeds. The championship will be a best-of-three series with alternating sites.

“We might say to a team ahead of time, ‘Let’s commit to each other and we’ll put you as a top seed.’ That could get a school three to five home games,” said Giles.

Of course, the NIT has history on its side. It also has the prestige of being televised by ESPN (Giles said a TV package for the CBI is imminent; CSTV is the top contender) and ending at Madison Square Garden. Teams faced with invitations to two different tournaments late on Sunday, March 16, will have to make a choice and it would be a shocker if the CBI wins a lot of those battles right away.

“We hope to have some guarantees before that. The question is how many [teams] will we need from that pool,” Giles said.

A year ago, teams with gaudy records (Akron, 25-7; Vermont, 25-7) and showy reputations (UConn, Washington, LSU) all didn’t make the NIT cut. This year, another 16 schools will happily sign on. Rhode Island and Brown are on the CBI’s radar.

The NCAA is not happy with this new tournament. They aren’t saying so publicly but, then again, they can’t. Two years ago, the NIT filed an antitrust suit against the NCAA, alleging that the NCAA’s rule requiring schools invited to play in the NCAA Tournament to either play in that event or sit out all postseason tournaments wasn’t fair. Instead of fighting, the NCAA bought the NIT, shelling out \$56.5 million to the New York-based group that ran the NIT.

The NCAA won’t repeat that scenario. It can’t publicly tell schools to play in the NIT instead of the CBI, but you know that’s what it would prefer to see.

“We think we’re different [than the NIT],” said Giles. “We won’t play opposite any NCAA Tournament games like they do and we’ll be on campus sites all the way through. Our championship series is totally different, not traditional at all. We think fans will really enjoy it.”

Many coaches certainly will. They’ll boast to recruits [and gullible sportswriters] that “We’ve been to postseason four of the last five years,” even if the CBI counts for two of the four trips. Will fans come? Maybe not in Boston or Philadelphia, but why not if you cheer for the home team in Akron, Dayton, Omaha or Ames, Iowa? What else is there to do?

Last December and January there were 32 bowl games that gave a life to 64 teams of college football

players and their fans. That's 53 percent of all Division 1-A programs. With the CBI joining the NCAA and NIT, 33 percent of D-1 hoop teams will keep playing. That's called nirvana for couch potatoes everywhere.

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